

‘It often is really unique and very individual to the setting’: Educational psychologists’ experiences of the implementation of the Emotional Literacy Support Assistant (ELSA) programme in one London borough.

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Abstract

The Emotional Literacy Support Assistant (ELSA) programme has grown in popularity since its inception in 2008; 214 educational psychology services across the country currently train Emotional Literacy Support Assistants (ELSAs). Since 2008, studies have increasingly explored the impact of the ELSA programme on children and young people. However, less knowledge has been generated about the implementation of the programme in schools. More insight is needed because intervention outcomes can only be properly understood and evaluated with knowledge about how an intervention is implemented. In addition, less knowledge has been generated about the views and experiences of educational psychologists (EPs), despite their fundamental role delivering ELSA training, providing supervision, and overseeing the programme. This thesis therefore explores, using reflexive thematic analysis, 5 educational psychologists' experiences of the implementation of the ELSA programme in schools within one inner London borough. The knowledge generated suggests that, from the perspective of EPs, implementation of the ELSA programme is varied and complex, and interacts with wider socioeconomic and political factors. EPs perceive successful implementation to be happening, but there are also implementation challenges. For example, some ELSAs may be increasingly supporting students with higher and more complex needs, and others don't have time or space to practice, which leads to potential benefits of the programme being lost. In addition, EPs perceive support from those with power and authority as foundational for successful implementation. Finally, this study aims to move away from a binary view of implementation and, instead, applies systems theory to consider how factors interact to create and maintain circular patterns in implementation.

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Abbreviations of key terms

Abbreviation	Meaning
SEL	Social and emotional learning
SEMH	Social, emotional and mental health
EPS	Educational psychology service
EP	Educational psychologist
rTA	Reflexive thematic analysis
CYP	Children and young people
SEND	Special educational needs and disability
SEN	Special educational needs
EHCP	Education, Health and Care Plan
LSA	Learning Support Assistant
LA	Local authority
SENDCo	Special Educational Needs and Disability Coordinator
EL	Emotional literacy
SDQ	Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire
ELSA	Emotional Literacy Support Assistant
TA	Teaching assistant
CPD	Continuing professional development
TEP	Trainee educational psychologist
EHCP	Education, Health and Care Plan

EBSNA	Emotionally based school non-attendance
PMLD	Profound and multiple learning difficulties

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Chapter Overview

This chapter aims to orient the reader to this research. It does this by exploring the research's origins, before setting the scene regarding the wider sociopolitical and research context relevant to this study. Specifically, it considers young people's social, emotional and mental wellbeing as a national and educational psychology priority and explores how social and emotional learning (SEL) programmes can improve these outcomes. It considers the evidence-base of SEL programmes with a particular focus on implementation, before homing in on the current study's focus; the ELSA programme (a popular SEL programme advocated for by educational psychologists). Finally, a brief overview of the ELSA programme's current evidence-base is presented, with a focus on implementation studies.

1.2 Research origins

This section describes the origin of the research idea, focusing on how the researcher's background led them to this area of study, and it is written in the first person.

An interest in both implementation science and the ELSA programme led to the development of this study. My interest in implementation science began after I received feedback from school staff that they felt less supported in implementing interventions that we'd agreed together than in other aspects of our work. I therefore became curious about implementation i.e., how educational psychologists (EPs) can ensure recommendations are implementable and how we, as a profession, support school staff with this. This led to me exploring the implementation science literature which I found interesting. Later, whilst on placement, I learnt about the ELSA

programme, and became interested in its implementation after attending ELSA working group meetings at my second- and third-year placement (the location for this study). I heard EPs speak anecdotally about how differently the ELSA intervention was implemented across schools and describe the creative ways they had supported implementation. I started to explore the evidence-base for the ELSA programme and realised implementation has received less attention than its impact. Implementation of the ELSA programme therefore became the basis of this study.

1.3 Setting the scene; the wider context

1.3.1 Young people's social and emotional wellbeing as a national priority

Young people's social and emotional wellbeing is a national priority across the UK, and this is reflected in government policy over the last 10 years. For example, in 2015, social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) was introduced as a category of need in the Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Code of Practice (Cracknell, 2023; Public Health England, 2021), and mental health difficulties are mentioned throughout the document (UK Government, 2015). More recently, the UK government's Child Health Action Plan aims to introduce 'specialist mental health support for children and young people in every school' (The Labour Party, 2024, p. n/a). Therefore, children and young people's SEMH has firmly been on the UK's national agenda for 10 years and continues to be prioritised by the UK government.

Children and young people's SEMH matters because higher SEMH in childhood is linked to higher academic engagement and attainment (Education Policy Institute, 2021; Goodman et al., 2015; Public Health England, 2021) and improved health and wellbeing outcomes in adulthood (Goodman et al., 2015; Public Health England, 2014). Furthermore, poor mental health has economic repercussions; in 2019, it was

estimated that mental health difficulties cost the UK economy £117.9 billion (McDaid & Park, 2022). It is therefore concerning that mental health difficulties for children and young people are increasing (Office for National Statistics, 2020). For example, in 2023 it was estimated that approximately 1 in 5 children and young people aged 8 to 25 years had a probable mental disorder (20.8% of 8-16 year olds, 23.3% of 17-19 years olds, and 21.7% of 20-25 year olds) (NHS, 2023). Therefore, there is a strong rationale for children and young people's SEMH to be a national priority, and for research to be undertaken in this area.

1.3.2 Young people's social and emotional wellbeing as an educational psychology priority

More locally, young people's social and emotional wellbeing is a priority for educational psychology services (EPSs). Not only is supporting children and young people's SEMH a core part of the EP role, (BPS, 2023; HCPC, 2023; Hulme, 2017; Weare, 2015), but EPs also increasingly work with children and young people who have SEMH needs. This is evidenced by the number of students registered as having SEMH as their primary special educational need (SEN) or primary need on their Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP); for two years running, the second highest primary need for children registered as having SEN was SEMH, and SEMH needs was the third highest primary need for children with an EHCP (UK Government, 2023, 2024). This is relevant for EPs as they primarily support children and young people with SEN and EHCPs e.g., via statutory assessments (UK Government, 2015). Therefore, children and young people's SEMH is a priority for educational psychology services. Furthermore, due to the high numbers of children and young people experiencing SEMH needs, effective interventions are required to better support them in this area.

1.3.3 Social and emotional learning (SEL) programmes

SEL programmes aim to develop young people's social and emotional skills (e.g., self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision making). They were developed in response to evidence that social and emotional skills in childhood are associated with outcomes in adulthood (CASEL, 2025; Greenberg, 2023), and now, many approaches and interventions fall under the 'SEL programme' umbrella; in their 2017 meta-analysis, Taylor et al. (2017) reviewed 82 different SEL programmes. SEL programmes can be universal and delivered to all students (e.g., the Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies, PATHS, programme) (Kusche & Greenberg, 2011) or targeted and delivered 1:1 or in small groups (e.g., the Pyramid Project) (University of West London, 2025). Additionally, some are designed for school settings and others for outside of school (Clarke et al., 2015).

A significant amount of research has explored the impact of SEL programmes and, overall, meta-analyses and systematic reviews have found significant positive effects for children and young people both in the short (Clarke et al., 2015; Education Policy Institute, 2021; Mahoney et al., 2018) and long-term (Taylor et al., 2017). In addition, characteristics of the most effective programmes have been identified e.g., using a structured delivery approach, explicitly teaching targeted skills, and focusing on programme implementation (Clarke et al., 2015; Education Policy Institute, 2021; Weare, 2017). However, criticisms of the evidence-base have also been raised, namely that:

- A wide range of approaches, applications and concepts fall under the SEL umbrella, making it difficult to compare, review and synthesise the evidence (Education Policy Institute, 2021; Wigelsworth et al., 2022).

- There need to be more studies exploring the long-term impacts of SEL programmes (Education Policy Institute, 2021).
- Research into SEL programmes has been undertaken predominantly within WEIRD (White, Educated, Industrialized, Rich and Democratic) (Henrich et al., 2010) countries. It is therefore difficult to establish how well SEL programmes work across diverse populations (Education Policy Institute, 2021; Taylor et al., 2017; Weare, 2017; Wigelsworth et al., 2022).
- There needs to be greater focus on how SEL programmes are implemented (Mahoney et al., 2018; Wigelsworth et al., 2022).

Therefore, SEL programmes offer a way of developing children and young people's social and emotional skills, but critiques of the evidence-base exist. Next, section 1.3.4 explores the relationship between SEL programmes and implementation in more depth.

1.3.4 SEL programmes and implementation

To fully evaluate a programme's effectiveness, it is essential to evaluate how it is implemented (Durlak, 2016; Durlak & DuPre, 2008; Greenberg et al., 2005; Lendrum et al., 2013). This is because implementation matters (Durlak, 2016; Durlak & DuPre, 2008). Durlak and DuPre (2008) found – looking across nearly 500 studies – that effective implementation is associated with better programme outcomes. Specifically, mean effect sizes were at least 2 to 3 times higher for programmes which had been implemented carefully without major challenges. Furthermore, outcomes of a programme cannot be accurately interpreted without understanding which 'aspects of the intervention were delivered and how they were conducted' (Durlak & DuPre, 2008, p. 328), i.e., we need to know whether a lack of outcomes is because of programme design or lack of proper implementation. Conversely, we need to know

whether positive outcomes are from the intervention or other unintended factors (Schultes, 2023).

Studying the implementation of SEL programmes involves exploring ‘the way a programme is put into practice and delivered to participants’ (Durlak, 2016, p. 334) in real-life settings (Greenberg et al., 2005). To do this, implementation is typically conceptualised and measured through 8 key outcomes, including fidelity, dosage, quality, and participant responsiveness (Durlak, 2016; Durlak & DuPre, 2008). For all 8 outcomes and their definitions, see Table 1. Therefore, studies comprehensively evaluating SEL programmes must explore their implementation as well as the impact on participants.

Table 1: Key implementation outcomes and their definitions

Implementation outcome	Definitions, taken from Durlak and DuPre (2008)
Fidelity	The extent to which a programme is delivered as originally designed.
Dosage	‘How much of the original programme has been delivered’ (Durlak & DuPre, 2008, p. 329).
Quality	The quality of programme delivery i.e., exploration of how well a programme was delivered.
Participant responsiveness	How engaged and interested the participants were in the programme.
Programme differentiation	The uniqueness of a programme i.e., how different a programme’s theory and practices are to other interventions.
Monitoring control / comparison groups	Describes any other services, provision or interventions participants in a control / comparison group had.

Programme reach	The extent to which the programme's intended participants took part.
Adaptation	The extent to which changes and adaptations were made to the original programme.

Despite the importance of measuring and evaluating how a programme is implemented, this is often not done, or done incompletely, for SEL programmes (Chidley & Stringer, 2020; Greenberg et al., 2005; Hassani et al., 2022; Humphrey et al., 2018). This may be due to of a lack of consensus regarding the operationalisation of key constructs and how they relate together and should be studied (Berkel et al., 2011; Greenberg et al., 2005), as well as the high cost and time involved in undertaking implementation research (Humphrey et al., 2018). However, only through evaluating implementation can a programme's effectiveness truly be understood (Durlak, 2016). Therefore, studying implementation is an essential part of evaluating an intervention, but this is often lacking for SEL programmes. Consequently, this is a key area for development (Durlak, 2016; Greenberg et al., 2005).

Next, the SEL programme which this study focuses on – the Emotional Literacy Support Assistant (ELSA) programme – is described, and current ELSA research is briefly explored.

1.4 The current study

1.4.1 The Emotional Literacy Support Assistant (ELSA) programme

The Emotional Literacy Support Assistant (ELSA) programme is a popular SEL intervention which is widely promoted by EPs and used within UK schools (ELSA

Network, 2017a; Osborne & Burton, 2014); at the time of writing, 214 EPSs (including independent services) currently provide ELSA training (ELSA Network, 2017d). The ELSA model involves EPs training Learning Support Assistants (LSAs) over 6 days on aspects of emotional literacy e.g., emotional awareness and regulation, self-esteem and resilience, social skills, loss and bereavement, and family break-up (ELSA Network, 2017a). Post-training, ELSAs can deliver tailored individual and group sessions to meet the specific needs of the children they are supporting, whilst receiving half-termly group supervision led by EPs. Interventions run by ELSAs usually last for at least a half term with flexibility to continue up to a term (Osborne & Burton, 2014). Therefore, the ELSA intervention is designed to be short-term and purposeful (ELSA Network, 2017). To achieve this, the ELSA Network recommend that people referring children for ELSA support e.g., ELSA line managers, do this with clear aims in mind (ELSA Network, 2017). ELSAs should then, alongside the young person and other key adults e.g., teachers and parents, set realistic and clear targets which are achievable within a school term (ELSA Network, 2017). Once targets are set, ELSAs design sessions which work towards the target(s) using the resources and tools they have been trained in. Overall, ELSA support intends to help develop a child's self-awareness and coping strategies so that they can come up with their own solutions to problems (ELSA Network, 2017).

The ELSA programme was created by Sheila Burton in 2001 within Southampton's EPS (ELSA Network, 2017c), and the ELSA Trainers' Manual was published in 2009 (Burton, 2009) which led to other EPSs offering ELSA training. The programme was borne out of an increased emphasis on the impact of children's SEMH on their academic attainment (ELSA Network, 2017a), and it aims to 'build the capacity of schools to support the emotional needs of their pupils from within their

own resources' (ELSA Network, 2017a). The ELSA model is based on psychological theory such as Maslow's (1970) theory of motivation, Gardner's (1983) theory of multiple intelligences, and Goleman's (1995) assertion that academic success is influenced by a child's social and emotional characteristics (Woodcock et al., 2019). ELSAs work predominantly in mainstream primary and secondary schools, but the intervention has been expanded to Early Years and Further Education settings (ELSA Network, 2017a), as well as specialist provision and Pupil Referral Units (Silver et al., 2024).

1.4.2 The ELSA programme; research overview

Most research exploring the ELSA programme to date has focused on the impact of the model i.e., how effective it is at improving SEL outcomes for children and young people. Overall, most studies conclude that the ELSA programme has a positive impact on SEL outcomes e.g., on ratings of emotional literacy (EL), self-efficacy, communication, relational and social skills, self-awareness, and confidence (Balampanidou, 2019; Grahamslaw, 2010; Hills, 2016; Purcell & Kelly, 2023; Russell & Mann, 2011; Silver et al., 2024; Wong et al., 2020). Published studies have increased over the last 5 years, but much of the evidence-base is made up of theses and local authority (LA) service evaluations (Hills, 2016; Woodcock et al., 2019). In addition, much of the research has focused on the ELSA programme in primary schools. Currently, less studies focus on the secondary school experience and no studies have yet explicitly explored the ELSA programme in Early Years or Post-16 settings.

Few studies have explicitly explored the implementation of the ELSA programme (following the trend of SEL programmes more broadly). Those which have, have found variation in how the ELSA programme is implemented in school settings

(Bradley, 2010; Fairall, 2020), as well as implementation challenges (Dalby, 2024). For example, in 2010, Bradley found wide variation in how the ELSA role was implemented in Hampshire schools, with regards to the time allocated for ELSAs to fulfil their role, ELSA-parent contact, and the number of sessions children accessed across the year (ranging from 1-200). 10 years later, Fairall (2020) similarly found that the ELSA programme was implemented differently in 2 primary schools. In addition, so far, a range of implementation facilitators (e.g., a school's mental health ethos, support from an EP, protected time and resources) and barriers (e.g., lack of school-wide understanding and support, blurring of the ELSA role boundaries) have been identified (Dalby, 2024; Fairall, 2020; Grahamslaw, 2010; Mann, 2014; Peters, 2020), but research into the implementation of the ELSA programme is still in its infancy (McEwen, 2019; Purcell, 2021; Rogers & Kelly, 2024b).

A range of stakeholders have been involved in ELSA research to date e.g., ELSAs, young people, teachers, parents, headteachers and Special Educational Needs and Disability Coordinators (SENDCos). However, the experience of EPs – a key stakeholder in the ELSA programme – is currently less researched (Rogers & Kelly, 2024b), as only a handful of studies have included the voice of EPs (Dalby, 2024), some to a limited degree (Fairall, 2020; Thomas, 2022). It is important to explore the experience of EPs because:

- EPs have a key role in the ELSA programme, delivering the training to LSAs and supervision to trained ELSAs.
- EPs offer a greater overview, and different perspective, of how the ELSA programme is being implemented across school settings.
- EPs may have developed creative solutions to implementation challenges which would be useful to identify and share more widely.

- EPs are well placed to explore, and support with, the implementation of interventions (Morrison et al., 2021).
- It is important to explore implementation outcomes through multiple groups of people at different levels (Schultes, 2023).

Therefore, a range of stakeholders have been involved in ELSA research to date, but the perspective of EPs could be further explored.

1.5 Chapter Summary

This chapter aimed to orient the reader to this research. To summarise, it was shown that:

Children and young people's SEMH is a UK government priority because mental health difficulties for children and young people have increased, and there is a relationship between childhood social and emotional skills and adult outcomes.

Children and young people's SEMH is a local EPS priority because supporting SEMH is a core part of the EP role, and EPs are increasingly working with children and young people who have SEMH needs.

Therefore, effective, evidence-based interventions are needed to support children and young people's SEMH and subsequent long-term outcomes.

SEL programmes have been found to develop SEL skills but often the programmes aren't comprehensively evaluated because implementation is not explored.

This is the case for the SEL programme at the heart of this study – the ELSA intervention. Research has found positive impacts of the ELSA programme but hasn't yet explored, in depth, how it is being implemented. In addition, the current evidence-base for the ELSA programme lacks EP voice – a key stakeholder in the ELSA intervention.

Therefore, this study aims to further explore the implementation of the ELSA programme by qualitatively exploring educational psychologists' experiences of its implementation in school settings.

The next chapter will explore current ELSA literature in more depth by both summarising and critically evaluating the knowledge which has already been generated.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Chapter Overview

This chapter explores, in more depth, the current evidence-base for the ELSA programme. Firstly, a description of the literature review process is given, including the literature review questions that are answered, how the search was undertaken, and how the literature was critically appraised. Then, the reader is provided with a synthesis and critical appraisal of the research findings. The synthesis is split into two sections to answer the two literature review questions. The research synthesis is organised by key findings (rather than type of research), as Rogers and Kelly (2024b) note that this has not yet been done for ELSA research, and the headings of each section were generated by identifying common themes in findings.

2.2 Literature Review using a systematic approach

2.2.1 Literature review purpose and questions

The purpose of this literature review is to explore the knowledge that has already been generated regarding the ELSA programme. It does this by focusing on 2 literature review questions:

- What knowledge has already been generated about the impact of the ELSA programme?
- What knowledge has already been generated about the implementation of the ELSA programme?

2.2.2 Database search strategy

2.2.2.1 Identification of papers

On the 6/12/24, a literature search using a systematic approach was undertaken.

Papers were retrieved via a 7-step search strategy which is detailed below.

Search 1: PsycINFO via EBSCO Host database (via University of Essex Library)

Two separate searches were made and then combined with AND. Search 1 used the terms 'emotional literacy support assistant' OR 'ELSA'. Search 2 used the term 'educational psycholog*'. Filters 'linked full text', publication year: 2008-2024, and English Language were applied. This generated 41 papers. The researcher screened the titles and found 9 relevant papers i.e., they explored the ELSA programme; some papers included the ELSA acronym but were not related to the ELSA programme, thus were discounted.

Search 2: Education Resources Information Centre (ERIC)

The search term 'emotional literacy support assistant' was used before the results were filtered using location: United Kingdom (England). This generated 47 papers. A second search using the term 'ELSA' and filtering by location: United Kingdom generated 17 papers. The researcher screened the titles of all generated papers. There were 4 relevant articles i.e., those looking explicitly at the ELSA programme, but all of them were previously identified via Search 1 using the PsycINFO database.

Search 3: EdPsy Thesis Directory

The search terms 'emotional literacy support assistant' and 'ELSA' were used. No papers were found.

Search 4: PsycINFO via EBSCO Host database (via Tavistock and Portman NHS Trust Library)

The same search terms and filters as Search 1 were applied. 33 papers were generated. After titles were screened for relevant research and duplicates from previous searches were removed, 1 new paper was found.

Search 5: EBSCO Discovery Service (via Tavistock and Portman NHS Trust Library)

The search term 'emotional literacy support assistant' was used. The filters 'date of publication: 2008-2025', 'full link text' and 'English language' were applied. This generated 761 papers. All titles were screened, and 25 new papers found.

Search 6: ELSA Network Website

The researcher used the ELSA Network website to identify 35 additional papers.

Search 7: Snowballing method

The researcher checked the references of all papers included in the final literature review; this identified 4 new articles.

2.2.3.2 Screening of papers

Next, the researcher used the inclusion and exclusion criteria detailed in Table 2 to screen the 74 papers identified. Table 3 details how many papers were excluded based on each exclusion criteria.

Table 2: Literature review inclusion and exclusion criteria

Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria	Rationale
1. Study focus Studies were included if they explored the impact and / or the implementation of the ELSA programme in schools.	Studies were excluded if they did not explore the impact or implementation of the ELSA programme in schools e.g., they focused solely on ELSA training or supervision. Where studies explored both the impact / implementation of the programme as well as feedback related to training and supervision, only the knowledge generated regarding the impact and implementation has been included in this literature review.	This criterion ensured that papers included in the literature review aligned with the literature review questions; reviewing all literature related to the ELSA programme was outside of the scope of this review.
2. Location Studies were included if they explored the ELSA programme in the UK.	Studies outside of the UK were excluded.	The ELSA programme was developed and subsequently rolled out in the UK; to the author's knowledge at the time of

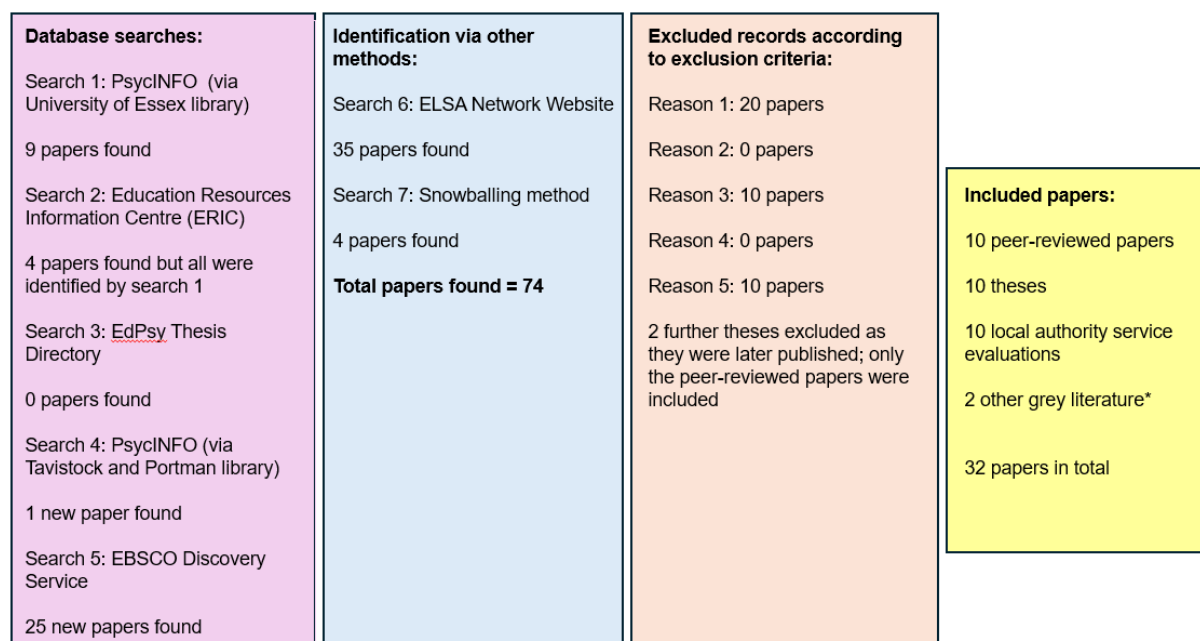
		writing, the ELSA programme is only being used in the UK.
3. Paper quality Aligned with Roger and Kelly's (2024b) inclusion / exclusion criteria, studies were included if they fulfilled 2 out of 3 of the following criteria: 1. The paper fully describes participants. 2. The paper fully describes data gathering methods. 3. The paper fully describes the methods of analysis. If a paper partially met the above criteria, the researcher looked at whether the paper describes the research aims and /	Studies were excluded if they did not meet the inclusion requirements detailed.	The quality of ELSA research varies as it involves LA service evaluations, theses and peer-reviewed articles. This criterion was used to ensure study quality and that there was sufficient information to synthesise and appraise.

or evaluates its method. If yes, the paper was included, if not, it was excluded.		
4. Publication date Studies were included if they were published between 2008 and the date of the literature search (6/12/24).	Studies were excluded if published outside of the dates specified.	In 2008, Burton wrote their first paper about the ELSA programme (Burton, 2008), and the ELSA manual was created in 2009 (Burton, 2009). Studies were included up until the date of the literature search to include most recent research. Studies published or made available after 6/12/24 are considered within the discussion chapter of this thesis.
5. Availability Studies were included if the researcher could access the full-text paper.	Studies were excluded if a full-text paper was not available.	Synthesis and appraisal of a study is not possible without reading the full-text original paper.

Table 3: Number of papers excluded according to each exclusion criteria

Exclusion criteria	Number of papers
Reason 1: Study focus	20
Reason 2: Location	0
Reason 3: Paper quality	10
Reason 4: Publication date	0
Reason 5: Availability	10

Additionally, two theses were excluded because they were later published, thus only the peer-reviewed paper was included. After applying inclusion and exclusion criteria, 32 papers were included in the critical appraisal stage of the literature review: 10 are peer-reviewed articles, 10 are theses, 10 are LA service evaluations and 2 are other grey literature. Figure 1 gives an overview of the literature process, and the papers generated.

Figure 1: Overview of the literature review process

* 'Other grey literature' comprised of one Year 1 Doctorate project/study and a Masters dissertation.

2.3 Framework for evaluating the literature

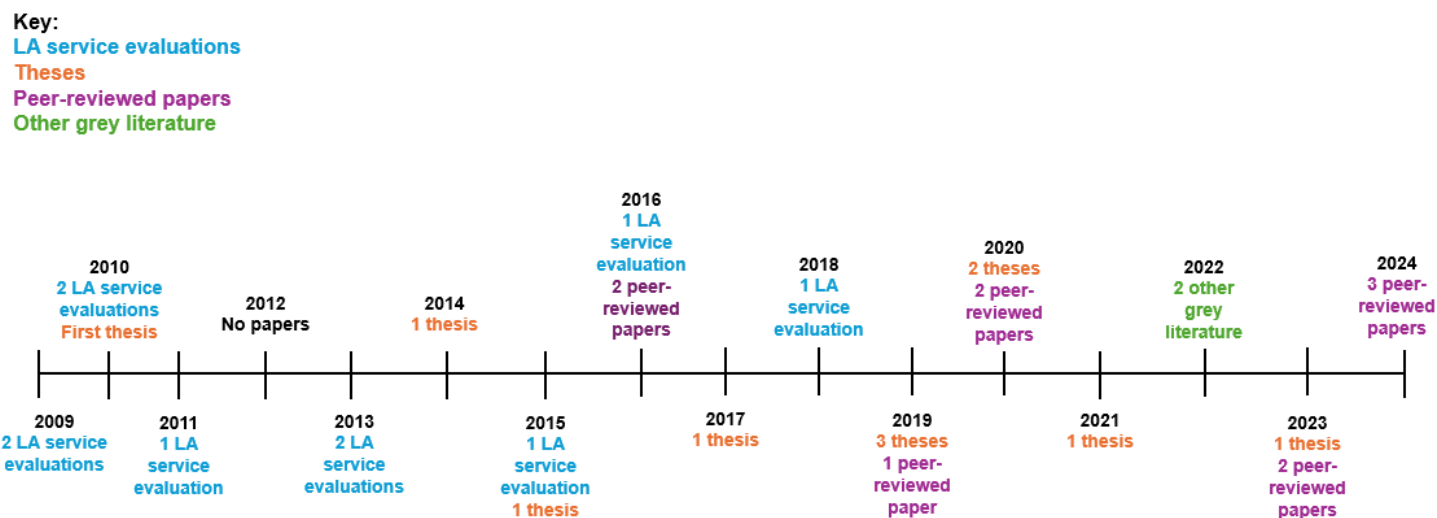
The researcher created a bespoke critical appraisal tool to evaluate the literature. This combined different questions and considerations highlighted on pre-existing critical appraisal tools for qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods research (CASP, 2025; Holland & Rees, 2010; Hong et al., 2018). Further, the bespoke critical appraisal tool included Braun and Clarke's framework for evaluating thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021a, pp. 345–346), and Yardley (2015) and Levitt et al.'s (2017) guidance for evaluating qualitative research. In addition, the PRISMA checklist was used to evaluate systematic literature reviews (PRISMA, 2020). Please see Appendix A for the proforma critical appraisal sheet and Appendix B for an example of a completed form. The researcher completed a critical appraisal sheet for all 32 papers, and theses and LA evaluations were appraised using the same tool. For theses, the researcher focused on the findings and discussion chapters and found key information (e.g., participants and paradigm) from the methodology chapter.

2.4 Literature review; synthesis and appraisal

2.4.1 Overview of the research's composition and key features

This section gives an overview of the composition and key features of the research included in this study's literature review. Figure 2 shows the type of ELSA research included and when it was completed. It shows how, over time, the type of ELSA research has evolved i.e., peer-reviewed papers have become more common over the last 5 years, and before this, LA services evaluations made up most of the evidence-base for the ELSA programme. For an overview of all research included in this study's literature review, please see Appendix C.

Figure 2: Literature review research timeline



Next, the research will be synthesised and evaluated to answer the two literature review questions.

2.4.2 What knowledge has already been generated about the impact of the ELSA programme?

2.4.2.1 What is the impact of the ELSA programme on emotional literacy?

There is evidence to suggest that the ELSA programme has a positive impact on young people's emotional literacy (EL) skills. For example, Silver et al. (2024) found a significant positive difference in EL measures for an ELSA intervention group ($n = 18$) at the end of the 6-week intervention, but not for the non-randomised wait-list control group ($n = 17$). They also found a statistically significant positive difference for the ELSA group from the perspective of pupils, ELSAs and class teachers 10-weeks post intervention, suggesting that the positive impact was maintained after the intervention finished. A strength of this study is that the children were from a range of settings (12 from primaries, 4 from secondaries, 1 from a specialist provision and 1 from a Pupil Referral Unit in Wales). However, it should be noted that data 10 weeks

post intervention was not collected for the control group, as the researchers didn't want to delay the start of the participants' ELSA support. In addition, analyses were not undertaken to explore any differences in impact between pupils (e.g., by age or setting), or who had completed the measure (i.e., pupil, class teacher or ELSA).

Findings from studies using qualitative measures also support the notion that the ELSA programme has a positive impact on children and young people's emotional literacy. For example, in a mixed methods study by Haigh (2019), positive improvements in EL skills e.g., emotional understanding, regulation and talking about emotions, were perceived by the ELSA, pupils and 1 parent for all 5 students. However, it should be noted that the quantitative results were less clear as a significant improvement post intervention was only found for 1 out of 5 children, although better results i.e., significant improvements for 2 children, were achieved by using alternative self-report measures (Haigh, 2019). In addition, young people themselves have shared a positive impact post intervention on their anxiety levels (Barker, 2017), ability to express feelings (Balampanidou, 2019; Purcell & Kelly, 2023; Purcell et al., 2023), regulate emotions (Purcell & Kelly, 2023; Purcell et al., 2023; Wong et al., 2020), and ability to reflect (Purcell & Kelly, 2023) and empathise with others (Balampanidou, 2019; Purcell et al., 2023). Parents have also perceived a positive impact on emotional development at home and school (Barker, 2017; Wilding & Claridge, 2016), although generally, across all ELSA literature, parent voice has been sought the least (Rogers & Kelly, 2024b).

Early LA service evaluations using quantitative measures e.g., the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) and EL checklists, report mixed results (Burton et al., 2010; Burton et al., 2009; Russell & Mann, 2011). For example, in this research, significant improvements in pre and post measures have been found from the

perspective of some stakeholders (e.g., teachers) but not others (e.g., parents and students) (Burton et al., 2010; Burton et al., 2009; Russell & Mann, 2011). However, results must be viewed cautiously as there are methodological issues with early LA evaluations. For example, some studies did not include a control group (Burton et al., 2009; Russell & Mann, 2011) and Burton et al. (2010) had to exclude much of their control group's data, because the control and ELSA group's initial pre scores were significantly different (Burton et al., 2010). Further, a later mixed methods study could not run statistical analyses on SDQ and EL checklist data due to a low sample size (Mann, 2014). Therefore, there is some evidence to suggest that the ELSA programme has a positive impact on children and young people's EL skills. However, studies using robust quantitative data and analysis, and research exploring the long-term impact of the programme on EL skills are in their infancy.

2.4.2.2 What is the impact of the ELSA programme on wellbeing?

Knowledge generated from ELSA research to date suggests a positive impact of the ELSA programme on aspects of wellbeing, although a few studies with small dataset sizes have reported some negative effects. For example, in 2020, Krause et al. (2020) interviewed 13 primary and secondary students and explored the findings (Braun & Clarke, 2006) against the PERMA (positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning and accomplishment) and the New Economics Foundation (NEF) models of wellbeing. They found that, from the perspective of students, the ELSA programme can have positive impacts on aspects of pupil wellbeing e.g., positive feelings and emotions, negative feelings, engagement, resilience, optimism, accomplishment and relationships. However, other components of wellbeing e.g., life satisfaction, vitality, autonomy and meaning and purpose, weren't evidenced in this study.

Other qualitative studies exploring students' views of the ELSA programme have reported young people feeling more calm, relaxed and comfortable post intervention (Balampanidou, 2019; Peters, 2020), as well as feeling happier (Peters, 2020; Purcell et al., 2023), less alone, empowered and having more hope that their wellbeing can improve (Peters, 2020; Purcell et al., 2023). In their 2023 systematic literature review, Purcell and Kelly conclude that all 12 papers reviewed demonstrate a positive impact on children and young people's general wellbeing i.e., they felt happier and calmer post intervention (Purcell & Kelly, 2023). Furthermore, studies also suggest a positive impact of the ELSA programme on confidence (Barker, 2017; Dodds et al., 2015; Edwards, 2016; Haigh, 2019; Hills, 2016; Peters, 2020), resilience (Hills, 2016), self-esteem (Dodds et al., 2015; Edwards, 2016) and developing coping strategies (Barker, 2017; Hills, 2016; Purcell et al., 2023).

A study by Grahamslaw (2010) used quantitative data from a questionnaire designed by ELSAs and children, to explore the impact of the ELSA training on LSAs' self-efficacy for working with children, and the subsequent impact on students' emotional self-efficacy beliefs. They found that children had higher self-efficacy scores when their ELSAs' scores were higher and vice versa. Thus, this study suggests that the ELSA programme can have a positive impact on students' self-efficacy beliefs, and this relates to the self-efficacy of their ELSA. However, it should be noted that, alongside positive effects on general wellbeing, a few studies with small dataset sizes have reported some negative effects. For example, a study exploring implementation of the ELSA programme in two secondary schools found that some pupils appeared dependent on ELSA support, and some students experienced paranoia and embarrassment within ELSA sessions (Nicholson-Roberts, 2019). In addition, pupils in another study felt discomfort when their peers

asked about their ELSA sessions (Balampanidou, 2019). Overall, however, current ELSA research suggests that the ELSA programme can have a positive impact on students' wellbeing.

2.4.2.3 What is the impact of the ELSA programme on communication skills?

Purcell and Kelly (2023) conclude, in their systematic review of 12 papers, that children and young people accessing ELSA support notice improvements in their communication skills. More specifically, young people learn how to talk about their feelings and experiences, ask for help and problem solve with others (Purcell & Kelly, 2023). Similarly, data generated from 7 secondary aged students suggests that pupils perceive the ELSA intervention to have developed their ability to communicate and recognise non-verbal gestures and indicators in others, and talk about their feelings (Purcell et al., 2023). Students also felt more 'open-minded' about who could support them in future, as they could better ask for help and share their views post intervention (Purcell et al., 2023). In addition, in a mixed methods study, 32% of 53 questionnaire respondents felt the ELSA programme helped with talking (Hills, 2016). Furthermore, in a study exploring the views of 8 parents, 7 parents perceived a positive impact of the ELSA programme on their child's communication, although 1 parent felt the programme had little impact apart from the child being calmer (Wilding & Claridge, 2016). Therefore, current ELSA literature suggests that the ELSA programme can have a positive impact on children and young people's communication skills.

2.4.2.4 What is the impact of the ELSA programme on relational and social skills?

In their systematic review, Purcell and Kelly (2023) conclude that children and young people notice improvements post ELSA intervention on their relational and social skills. For example, across the 12 studies reviewed, young people felt that relationships with peers and family were strengthened following the programme (Purcell & Kelly, 2023). In addition, individual studies have generated similar knowledge (Balampanidou, 2019; Barker, 2017; Edwards, 2016; Haigh, 2019; Hills, 2016; Krause et al., 2020; Peters, 2020; Purcell et al., 2023; Wilding & Claridge, 2016). For example, in a study by Purcell et al. (2023), 7 secondary aged students shared that post intervention they felt better able to understand reciprocal friendships and manage conflict. Therefore, there is some evidence to suggest that the ELSA programme has a positive impact on children and young people's relational and social skills.

2.4.2.5 What is the impact of the ELSA programme on school experience (e.g., attendance, participation, engagement and behaviour)?

Findings from some studies tentatively suggest that the ELSA programme has a positive impact on children and young people's attendance (Dodds et al., 2015; Krause et al., 2020; Purcell & Kelly, 2023; Purcell et al., 2023), number of exclusions (Dodds et al., 2015), engagement (Krause et al., 2020; Purcell & Kelly, 2023; Purcell et al., 2023) and participation (Purcell & Kelly, 2023; Purcell et al., 2023). For example, Purcell and Kelly (2023) suggest that young people engaged better in school post ELSA intervention because they felt more safe and secure. Regarding pupils' behaviour, a LA service evaluation aimed to explore the impact of the ELSA

programme on visible behaviours related to ELSA targets (Butcher et al., 2013).

Some positive change in students' visible behaviour e.g., time on task, was reported but this was not consistent. Furthermore, the results are difficult to interpret because the dataset was small (2 students), and statistical analysis was not undertaken to see whether the change pre and post intervention was significant. Some early LA service evaluations collected data from the conduct problem scale of the SDQ, however this is also difficult to interpret due to inconsistent findings and methodological issues (Burton et al., 2010; Burton et al., 2009). Therefore, there is some suggestion that the ELSA programme positively impacts some aspects of students' school experience, however this is an area which has been explored less than other key outcomes (e.g., emotional literacy and wellbeing), thus conclusions remain tentative.

2.4.2.6 What is the impact of the ELSA programme on wider systems?

Robertson (2021), in their thesis, explores how the ELSA intervention may support positive change in the wider school environment. Findings from two focus groups of 11 ELSAs suggest that ELSAs perceive the programme to have a positive impact on teachers' understanding of the relationship between EL, learning and academic attainment. In addition, ELSAs perceived school staff to increasingly consider the wider context around students and how this impacts their behaviour and presentation. There was also a perceived impact on wider policy (e.g., behaviour policies) and less reliance on external support after the ELSA programme was implemented. However, this is only one study exploring the views of 11 ELSAs from three different secondary schools, and no other staff members were consulted to triangulate the findings.

Other studies have included stand-alone questions in surveys or questionnaires about the wider impact of the ELSA programme (Bravery & Harris, 2009; Dodds et al., 2015; Edwards, 2016). For example, in their LA service evaluation, Dodds et al. (2015) found that 68% of 30 members of school staff agreed with a statement that ELSAs have a positive impact on the school environment in general. In addition, Edwards (2016) found, in a survey of 23 ELSA line managers, that there was less of a perceived impact on the whole school compared to individual children. However, there was a perceived impact on the ability to identify and support children with their emotional literacy and, to a lesser extent, line managers felt the ELSA programme impacted other children and staff in school (Edwards, 2016). Therefore, currently, there is some suggestion that the ELSA programme may positively impact wider school systems, albeit perhaps less than individual students. However, research in this area is in its infancy, and a conclusion cannot yet be made.

2.4.2.7 Who is the ELSA programme most impactful for?

It is currently difficult to ascertain who the ELSA programme is most impactful for. This is because many studies don't include key demographic information, and studies which do, tend to only include age and gender e.g., Butcher et al. (2013), Hills (2016) and Barker (2017). Only two studies have included information about ethnicity (Mbire-Chigumba, 2023; Peters, 2020) and few studies have used analysis to specifically explore differences in impact according to children's characteristics. In research, some variation has been found regarding the impact of ELSA support on primary and secondary aged pupils (Burton et al., 2010), whereas Hills (2016) found no difference in young peoples' perceived effectiveness of the ELSA programme based on gender. In a LA evaluation, children in care positively evaluated the programme, however little information is given about the data analysis process which

reduces confidence in the knowledge generated (Bowerman & Davies, 2018).

Therefore, research does not currently explore, in depth, who the ELSA programme is most impactful for, and whether the ELSA programme's impact is different for different groups of children and young people.

2.4.2.7 How is the impact of the ELSA programme transferred and maintained across contexts and time?

Currently, there is little research exploring the medium and long term impact of the ELSA programme on key outcomes. The only study to explicitly explore this is Silver et al. (2024). As described previously, positive impacts on emotional literacy were maintained 10 weeks post ELSA intervention (based on child, class teacher and ELSA rated measures). However, the researchers didn't collect wait-list control group data for 10 weeks post intervention and a randomised control group was not used (Silver et al., 2024). In addition, in a small qualitative study of four participants, parents shared that although they were worried about set-backs once the ELSA programme ended, they felt improvements had been sustained after 8 months (Barker, 2017). Therefore, there is a tentative suggestion that positive effects are maintained post intervention, but there is not enough research yet to draw conclusions.

There is some evidence that skills learnt in ELSA sessions are transferred across contexts. For example, a few studies involving parents suggest that impact has been noticed both at home and school (Barker, 2017; Wilding & Claridge, 2016), and pupils have spoken about applying their learning outside of ELSA sessions (Balampanidou, 2019; Purcell et al., 2023). However, quantitative studies have not always found consistent improvements in measures completed by different people e.g., parents, children and school staff (Burton et al., 2010; Burton et al., 2009;

Haigh, 2019), which may suggest improvements are not always perceived in different contexts by different people. On the other hand, research which suggests the ELSA programme has a positive impact on relationships, wellbeing and school experience, may imply that skills and improvements gained from ELSA sessions are transferred across contexts, although the main aim of these studies was not to explore application of skills across contexts. Thus, there is some evidence to suggest that the impact of the ELSA programme transfers across contexts, but more research in this area is needed before conclusions can be made.

2.4.2.8 What influences the impact of the ELSA programme and what change processes occur within the ELSA programme?

One key change mechanism highlighted in current ELSA literature is the importance of a positive relationship between the ELSA and young person. This has been highlighted in studies involving ELSAs (Fairall, 2020; Haigh, 2019; Hill et al., 2013; McEwen, 2019; Nicholson-Roberts, 2019; Peters, 2020), headteachers (Hill et al., 2013), other school staff (Fairall, 2020; Nicholson-Roberts, 2019), children and young people (Barker, 2017; Haigh, 2019; Hill et al., 2013; Hills, 2016; McEwen, 2019; Nicholson-Roberts, 2019; Peters, 2020; Wong et al., 2020), parents (Barker, 2017; Haigh, 2019; Wilding & Claridge, 2016), and EPs (Fairall, 2020). In research, the relationship between the ELSA and the young person seems related to characteristics of the ELSA e.g., being kind and showing unconditional positive regard (Fairall, 2020; Hills, 2016; McEwen, 2019; Nicholson-Roberts, 2019; Peters, 2020; Purcell et al., 2023; Wong et al., 2020), and the environment the ELSA creates e.g., a safe, confidential space where young people can talk about their feelings (Barker, 2017; Hills, 2016; Peters, 2020; Purcell et al., 2023; Wilding & Claridge,

2016). Therefore, positive ELSA-child relationships appear to be a prerequisite for positive change.

Two studies have concluded that the uniqueness of the ELSA role seems important to its success. For example, using grounded theory, Balampanidou (2019) created a theory suggesting that the 'uniqueness of the ELSA approach makes the difference in children's lives' (p. 14). Specifically, young people felt there was a difference between their ELSA and teachers which they found helpful (Balampanidou, 2019). Students also felt they had more control in their ELSA sessions and they recognised the task of the intervention as different to classroom learning (Balampanidou, 2019). Furthermore, Wong et al. (2020) found that 12 Key Stage 2 students described the ELSA role as 'distinctly different' from other roles in school. Specifically, ELSAs were viewed as supporting students' emotional wellbeing and development, whereas teachers were perceived as supporting their learning. However, Wong et al. (2020) highlight that it's currently unclear whether the ELSA programme's positive impact is from the ELSA-child relationship or from the intervention itself. Accordingly, they encourage future research to further explore the mechanisms for change. Therefore, there is some evidence to suggest that young people perceive the uniqueness of the ELSA role as a key part of the intervention, but further research is required.

2.4.3 What knowledge has already been generated about the implementation of the ELSA programme?

2.4.3.1 How is the ELSA programme being practically implemented i.e., time, and duration and frequency of sessions?

Knowledge generated thus far suggests that the ELSA programme is being practically implemented differently in different school settings. For example, research shows a wide variation in how much time ELSAs have to fulfil their role (Bradley, 2010; Dodds et al., 2015) e.g., from 30 minutes a day to being a full-time ELSA (Bradley, 2010). Furthermore, some ELSAs fulfil their role alongside other school-based roles and responsibilities (Bradley, 2010), and this impacts how effectively the ELSA programme can be implemented (Bowerman & Davies, 2018; Bradley, 2010; Edwards, 2016; Mann, 2014; Peters, 2020; Thomas, 2022). Therefore, in practice, ELSAs are given different amounts of time to undertake their role, and some have to juggle the intervention alongside other school-based roles and responsibilities.

The duration and frequency of ELSA sessions also appears to vary significantly. The ELSA intervention is designed to be 6-12 weeks long with weekly sessions for students (ELSA Network, 2017a). However, research consistently shows large deviations from this in practice (Bowerman & Davies, 2018; Fairall, 2020; Nicholson-Roberts, 2019; Russo, 2022; Thomas, 2022; Wong et al., 2020). Whilst some ELSA support adheres to the 6–12 week guidance (Balampanidou, 2019; Fairall, 2020), other ELSA support has lasted 1-2 years (Balampanidou, 2019; Nicholson-Roberts, 2019; Wong et al., 2020) or continues without a clear end at all (Bowerman & Davies, 2018; Fairall, 2020). Additionally, Peters (2020) found that some ELSA sessions were ad hoc, not working towards targets and, in some cases, described as ‘never ending’ (Peters, 2020). In contrast, less research mentions frequency of ELSA

sessions. For example, one study by Thomas (2022) found that sessions were usually once a week but some ELSAs had an 'open-door policy', and one child was being seen by an ELSA 2-3 times a day. Therefore, current evidence suggests that the ELSA programme is practically implemented differently regarding time for role, and duration and frequency of sessions.

2.4.3.2 What kind of ELSA work is being undertaken in schools?

Knowledge generated thus far suggests that a breadth of work is being undertaken by ELSAs, but not much is yet known about the most common ways of working.

ELSAs appear to be supporting children individually (Balampanidou, 2019; Bravery & Harris, 2009), in groups (Balampanidou, 2019; Bravery & Harris, 2009; Russo, 2022), in class (Bravery & Harris, 2009), at lunchtimes (Dodds et al., 2015), and via nurture groups (Dodds et al., 2015) and drop-in support (Russo, 2022). In a 2010 survey completed by 243 ELSAs (46.3% response rate), the three most common areas ELSAs supported students with were self-esteem, social skills and anger management (Bradley, 2010). Additionally, subsequent studies have suggested that ELSAs commonly support students with social skills development, anxiety management, loss and bereavement, emotional literacy and regulation, communication skills and self-esteem, (Balampanidou, 2019; Dodds et al., 2015; Purcell & Kelly, 2023; Purcell et al., 2023; Russo, 2022; Thomas, 2022). ELSAs appear to support students with these needs in a variety of ways, including using games, cooking, craft, and talking (Krause et al., 2020; Purcell et al., 2023; Wong et al., 2020). Therefore, ELSAs seem to work in different ways to support a range of SEMH needs, however it's not yet known what the most common areas of need are, and further exploration is needed to establish how ELSAs are most commonly working.

Russo (2022) explored whether there were any changes to ELSAs' ways of working post Covid-19 lockdown. Findings generated from questionnaires (n = 301 ELSAs) and interviews of 4 ELSAs, suggest that students referred to ELSA support post lockdown had similar SEMH needs to before, although more students were perceived to need support, and the complexity of student needs was thought to have increased. The impact of this on ELSAs varied. For example, for some, the duration of ELSA support had increased and for others it had decreased so more children could be seen. For example, some ELSAs were running more group sessions to cope with the number of referrals, and others more informal support e.g., lunchtime clubs and drop-ins. However, it should be noted that ELSAs were asked to retrospectively compare their experience pre and post lockdown, and some ELSAs who took part in the study only had ELSA experience post lockdown. Thus, currently little is known about how ELSA support may have changed over time in response to contextual factors e.g., the Covid-19 pandemic.

2.4.3.3 Who is being seen by ELSAs?

It is not currently clear who ELSAs are working with; no recent, published data explores this across the country or within specific LAs. There is some evidence to suggest that ELSAs are working with children with looked after experience and adopted children; for example, in 2010, 152 children with looked after experience and 53 adopted children received ELSA support in Hampshire (Bradley, 2010). In 2018, a service evaluation for Cheshire West and Chester suggested that 82% of 31 ELSAs in primary schools, and 57% of 8 ELSAs in secondary schools, worked with children in care (Bowerman & Davies, 2018). One study suggests that some secondary aged pupils taking part in the ELSA programme previously accessed the intervention at primary school (Peters, 2020), and others highlight that ELSAs

support autistic children and young people (Edwards, 2016; Thomas, 2022). Furthermore, there is suggestion that ELSAs increasingly work with students with complex needs (Fairall, 2020; Thomas, 2022), and that secondary ELSAs can receive inappropriate referrals (Peters, 2020). In a questionnaire, 93 (out of 301) ELSAs did not identify any groups most likely to be referred to ELSA support (Russo, 2022), however, those who did felt that KS2 pupils (26.7%), young people with SEND (23.8%), and those in receipt of Pupil Premium funding or Free School Meals (19.3%) were most likely to be referred. However, the purpose of the questionnaire was to explore any changes in ELSA support post pandemic, and estimates are based on ELSA perception rather than quantitative referral data. Therefore, little is currently known about how many students ELSAs support and what students' characteristics (e.g., their age, gender, ethnicity, SEND, EHCPs) and areas of need are.

2.4.3.4 How much fidelity to the ELSA programme is there?

There is currently limited formal exploration into the fidelity of the ELSA programme. As part of their study exploring the impact of the ELSA programme, Haigh (2019) observed one ELSA session for 4 out of 5 primary aged participants using a checklist to measure fidelity. Within this context, Haigh (2019) reports good fidelity i.e., that key features of ELSA support sessions e.g., a high quality relationship, working with focus, and a safe space, were present in the observed sessions. However, wider implementation of the programme e.g., referral pathways and programme reach, were not studied. In their dissertation for a Masters, Thomas (2022) aimed to explore the fidelity of the ELSA programme in Wales. Analysing survey data completed by 4 EPs and 2 ELSAs, and 3 service level reports, Thomas (2022) reports variation in the duration and frequency of support, measures used to evaluate progress, and the

types of needs ELSAs support students with. Thomas (2022) concludes good fidelity to the ELSA programme, however this should be viewed cautiously as only a small dataset was included, and the study relies on subjective measures. Therefore, little exploration of this area has been undertaken thus far, despite apparent variation in how the ELSA programme is being implemented in schools.

2.4.3.5 How is impact of ELSA work measured?

ELSAs seem to be using a wide range of tools to measure impact. Research exploring this area suggests that ELSAs use: pre and post checklists (Bravery & Harris, 2009), goal-based measures (Dodds et al., 2015), monitoring Individual Education Plan targets (Dodds et al., 2015), review meetings (Dodds et al., 2015), questionnaire feeling scales (Dodds et al., 2015), speaking with parents (Bowerman & Davies, 2018), standardised tools (e.g., the SDQ) (Bowerman & Davies, 2018; Peters, 2020), feelings diaries (Peters, 2020), student self-evaluation of targets (Peters, 2020), case studies (Thomas, 2022) and pupil feedback (Thomas, 2022). Therefore, a wide range of tools appear to be used to measure pupil outcomes, however, little is currently known about how much different measures are being used and which are most useful for measuring outcomes. This is important as some researchers have reported challenges using standardised tools to measure impact (Haigh, 2019; Rogers & Kelly, 2024a).

2.4.3.6 What is known about beginnings and endings?

Knowledge generated thus far suggests that sometimes parents and children are not sure why they have been referred to the ELSA programme, and would like more clarity and information at the start (Barker, 2017; Hills, 2016; Peters, 2020).

Accordingly, some students report feeling confused and worried about starting ELSA

sessions which can lead to an initial reluctance to engage (Peters, 2020). However, this is not always the case. For example, there is evidence to suggest that secondary aged pupils who accessed ELSA support at primary school felt clearer about the intervention than those who had not (Peters, 2020), and 8 primary aged students knew why they were referred to ELSA support and what they were working on (Balampanidou, 2019). Therefore, clarity for students and parents at the start of the programme can vary, although limited research has been undertaken in this area to date.

Current research suggests that sometimes ELSAs find facilitating clear, consistent endings difficult. This is evidenced in the varied length of ELSA support reported in studies i.e., from 6 weeks to 2 years or without a clear end (Balampanidou, 2019; Bowerman & Davies, 2018; Fairall, 2020; Nicholson-Roberts, 2019; Wong et al., 2020). Furthermore, even when ELSA sessions have formally finished, informal, ongoing support may be provided to students (Bradley, 2010; Peters, 2020). Having clear endings may matter because some studies have suggested that longer ELSA support leads to an overreliance and dependence on the ELSA (Fairall, 2020; Krause et al., 2020; Nicholson-Roberts, 2019; Wong et al., 2020). However, in contrast, Haigh (2019) suggests that ongoing support for young people once the ELSA intervention has finished is important for positive outcomes. From the perspective of students, there are varied experiences regarding endings. Some students want more clarity about the intervention's end (Hills, 2016), whereas others perceive there to be a clear ending (Balampanidou, 2019). Therefore, there are currently mixed findings relating to the end of ELSA interventions, but it should be noted that most studies exploring this involve small dataset sizes, thus further exploration is needed before conclusions can be made.

2.4.3.7 How are ELSAs working with parents?

Minimal knowledge about how ELSAs work with parents has thus far been generated. In 2010, questionnaire data suggested that most ELSAs (78.19% of 243 respondents) had some form of contact with parents, but the type of contact and how much this happened varied (Bradley, 2010). Two studies have reported little ELSA-parent communication in both a primary (Wilding & Claridge, 2016) and secondary setting (Nicholson-Roberts, 2019), and, in one, parents wanted better home-school communication to improve consistency (Wilding & Claridge, 2016). Furthermore, 8 parents who participated in a study by Wilding and Claridge (2016), felt uncertain about what the ELSA programme aims to do, and perceived the programme to support 'within child' difficulties rather than supporting wider systemic change (Wilding & Claridge, 2016). Parents also wondered about what happened once the programme finished, and didn't know much about the programme's outcomes and how they were measured (Wilding & Claridge, 2016). Therefore, there is some evidence to suggest that ELSA-parent communication could be improved. However, it should be noted that the voice of parents has been sought least in ELSA research to date (Rogers & Kelly, 2024b), thus more research is needed.

2.4.3.8 How are ELSAs supported?

There seems to be variation in how supported ELSAs feel in their role (Bradley, 2010; Bravery & Harris, 2009; Nicholson-Roberts, 2019; Russo, 2022). Some ELSAs report that unrealistic expectations are put on them and they experience a lack of support from colleagues and senior leadership (Mann, 2014), whilst others feel well supported (Bravery & Harris, 2009; Thomas, 2022). ELSAs seem to gain support from the ELSA community, colleagues in school, supervision or by reaching out to EPs (Mbire-Chigumba, 2023; McEwen, 2019; Robertson, 2021; Thomas, 2022). In

addition, Fairall (2020) found that line managers were key for supporting ELSAs as EPs can be more difficult to access. Similarly, Rogers and Kelly (2024a) found that ELSAs contact EPs when desperate rather than it being a secure, consistent system. Sometimes, ELSAs find it difficult to access supervision (Edwards, 2016; Thomas, 2022), despite it being viewed positively by ELSAs (Bradley, 2010; McEwen, 2019; Nicholson-Roberts, 2019) and a requirement of the ELSA role (ELSA Network, 2017g). Therefore, current evidence suggests variation in how well supported ELSAs feel, who provides ELSAs with support, and the extent to which ELSAs can attend supervision.

Some research suggests that ELSAs would like more support (Mann, 2014; Nicholson-Roberts, 2019). In research, ELSAs have asked for more opportunities to access peer support (Mann, 2014), network and share practice with other ELSAs (Mann, 2014), and attend additional training (Mann, 2014). For example, in a study exploring culturally responsive practice, ELSAs felt that cultural aspects of EL weren't explored in training, thus they wanted refresher training in this area (Mbire-Chigumba, 2023). Support may be valued because there is an emotional toll of the ELSA role (Fairall, 2020; Nicholson-Roberts, 2019). Therefore, in current research, ELSAs appear keen to access more support, both to develop knowledge and skills, and perhaps process difficult emotions associated with the role.

2.4.3.9 What is already known about the implementation barriers and facilitators of the ELSA programme?

A range of barriers and facilitators to successful implementation have been cited in literature to date. The most cited implementation factors are time, whether a dedicated space and resources are provided, the extent to which the ELSA programme sits within a whole school SEMH approach, clarity and understanding

across school staff regarding the ELSA role and remit, and support from senior leaders, peers, EPs and the ELSA community. Table 5 summarises implementation factors cited in current ELSA literature. Although, many implementation barriers and facilitators have been described, only five studies have explored implementation as their primary focus (Rogers & Kelly, 2024b), and often barriers and facilitators to implementation are covered by single questions in interviews or questionnaires (Rogers & Kelly, 2024b).

It is currently unclear how frequently ELSAs experience barriers to successful implementation. However, one survey of 47 ELSAs and 23 line managers, found that just over 50% of respondents reported barriers to implementation (Edwards, 2016). There is some suggestion that implementation barriers are more prevalent in the earlier stages of implementation, thus preparation before implementation starts is recommended (Fairall, 2020). Robertson (2021) suggests that some ELSAs have to overcome significant implementation challenges, whereas others find it easier to start the intervention. Furthermore, Robertson (2021) suggests that how easy it is to implement the programme intersects with school readiness and a school's ethos and culture, thus implementation factors may relate to each other. However, currently in ELSA literature, implementation factors are typically discussed in a binary way i.e., using separate lists of implementation barriers and facilitators, with little exploration of how they interact.

Table 4: Implementation factors cited in ELSA literature

Factor	Information	Reference(s)
Having sufficient time for planning and running sessions and attending supervision and any continuing professional development (CPD) sessions	Having more time for the ELSA role is associated with better implementation; ELSAs find it difficult when they have other roles and responsibilities in school as they have less time for the intervention.	(Bowerman & Davies, 2018; Edwards, 2016; Fairall, 2020; Grahamslaw, 2010; Haigh, 2019; Hill et al., 2013; Mann, 2014; McEwen, 2019; Peters, 2020; Robertson, 2021; Rogers & Kelly, 2024a; Russo, 2022; Thomas, 2022)
Having a dedicated ELSA space	Having a dedicated space or room is associated with more successful implementation; ELSAs find it difficult to fulfil the role without a protected space.	(Bowerman & Davies, 2018; Edwards, 2016; Fairall, 2020; Hill et al., 2013; Peters, 2020; Rogers & Kelly, 2024a; Thomas, 2022)

Embedding the ELSA programme within a whole school SEMH approach	ELSA implementation is thought to be more successful when it is embedded within a whole school SEMH approach; problems occur when the ELSA programme is viewed as stand-alone or ELSAs are perceived to hold all responsibility for students' SEMH.	(Fairall, 2020; Hill et al., 2013; Nicholson-Roberts, 2019; Robertson, 2021; Rogers & Kelly, 2024a)
Others' understanding and expectations of the programme	The programme is more successful when everyone has a clear, consistent and realistic understanding of what the ELSA role is, and how it sits alongside other forms of support; unrealistic or unclear expectations are challenging and can lead to ELSAs feeling solely responsible for students.	(Fairall, 2020; Mann, 2014; McEwen, 2019; Nicholson-Roberts, 2019; Russo, 2022)
Support from senior leadership	Higher support and backing from senior leadership is associated with better implementation; ELSAs find it challenging to implement the programme if senior leaders don't understand or aren't on board with its implementation or aims.	(Fairall, 2020; Mann, 2014; McEwen, 2019; Peters, 2020; Robertson, 2021; Rogers & Kelly, 2024a; Thomas, 2022)

Funding and availability of resources	Successful implementation requires funding to buy resources which ELSAs can use in their sessions.	(Edwards, 2016; McEwen, 2019; Robertson, 2021; Rogers & Kelly, 2024a; Russo, 2022)
Prioritisation of ELSA support	When ELSA support is prioritised, valued and respected, it makes it easier to implement and vice versa.	(Bowerman & Davies, 2018; McEwen, 2019; Nicholson-Roberts, 2019)
Group dynamics in group sessions	This has been mentioned as a barrier to successful implementation in one study.	(Bowerman & Davies, 2018)
Joined up support	Having joined up communication and responsibility with other members of staff and parents aids successful implementation.	(Bowerman & Davies, 2018; Fairall, 2020; Haigh, 2019; Mann, 2014; Rogers & Kelly, 2024a)
Engagement of young people	Lower engagement acts as a barrier to implementation; higher engagement acts as a facilitator.	(Bowerman & Davies, 2018)
Flexibility and adaptability of the programme	The flexibility and adaptability of the programme has been suggested to aid implementation of pupil-centred ELSA interventions.	(Haigh, 2019; McEwen, 2019; Nicholson-Roberts, 2019)

ELSA skills and / or personal attributes	More skilled and attuned ELSAs are thought to facilitate successful implementation, but ELSA skill alone isn't always sufficient i.e., other implementation facilitators must also be in place.	(Fairall, 2020; Nicholson-Roberts, 2019)
Number of ELSA cases and referrals	High referrals numbers / having high waiting list numbers make it challenging to successfully implement the programme; there is some suggestion ELSA caseloads are increasing.	(Fairall, 2020; McEwen, 2019; Peters, 2020)
Amount of support (e.g., from Link EPs, peers, line managers). This includes additional CPD and training.	ELSAs seem to find successful implementation easier when they have readily accessible and effective support.	(Fairall, 2020; Russo, 2022)
Emotional impact of the ELSA role	This has been mentioned as an implementation barrier i.e., the emotional toll of the role can be challenging for ELSAs.	(Fairall, 2020)

Identification and referral processes	Clear, consistent and equitable referral processes which involve the ELSA aid successful implementation; the programme works best when referrals are appropriate and within the ELSA remit.	(Fairall, 2020; McEwen, 2019; Rogers & Kelly, 2024a; Russo, 2022)
Clarity of endings and overdependence of pupils on ELSA support	There is some suggestion that successful implementation requires ELSAs to be practiced and confident in ending sessions; when ELSA sessions happen for a long time or indefinitely, young people may become overdependent on the ELSA and this makes it difficult to implement the programme as intended.	(Fairall, 2020)
Gaining parental consent	If gaining parental consent is difficult, this acts as a barrier to successful implementation.	(Edwards, 2016)
ELSA session content	Research with young people highlights the importance of fun and enjoyable sessions where young people are taught specific coping strategies and skills.	(Barker, 2017; Haigh, 2019; McEwen, 2019)

2.4.3.10 How does wider context (e.g., school and wider sociopolitical and economic context) interact with the ELSA programme?

Context seems to matter for the successful implementation of the ELSA programme.

For example, aspects of school context e.g., the extent to which the ELSA programme is embedded within a whole school SEMH approach, and school readiness and culture, are argued to influence implementation (Fairall, 2020; Hill et al., 2013; Nicholson-Roberts, 2019; Robertson, 2021; Rogers & Kelly, 2024a).

Specifically, there is a sense that implementation is more successful when the school has a culture, ethos and values aligned to the ELSA programme (Bowerman & Davies, 2018; Fairall, 2020; Hill et al., 2013; Mbire-Chigumba, 2023; Nicholson-Roberts, 2019). In addition, Rogers and Kelly (2024a) undertook research to explore the relationship between the ELSA programme and whole school approaches to wellbeing, and found that the ELSA programme can also influence school context. For example, the ELSA was seen as having a central role in implementing SEMH approaches across the school through 'upskilling staff, modelling and providing resources' (p. 8). Therefore, school context may influence the ELSA programme's implementation, and the programme may, in turn, influence school context.

Broader sociopolitical and economic context also influence the implementation of the ELSA programme. For example, the trading model EPSs use can influence how much EPs support with implementation (Fairall, 2020). Specifically, ELSAs can find it difficult to access EP support because school leaders may not want to use their limited EP time in this way (Fairall, 2020). In addition, some research has pointed out that ELSAs are functioning in an evolving context, thus the role may be changing (McEwen, 2019). For example, some differences in how the programme is implemented post Covid-19 lockdown have been reported (Russo, 2022), and

McEwen (2019) found that some ELSAs are providing students with support after the intervention has finished. Furthermore, Rogers and Kelly (2024a) consider how challenges accessing specialist support may impact the number of young people referred to the ELSA programme. Therefore, wider context appears to influence the implementation of the ELSA programme, however, more research is needed to unpick the different contexts ELSAs are working in and consider how implementation and wider context interact.

2.5 Chapter summary

In summary, this chapter has explored the current evidence-base for the ELSA programme. Specifically, it aimed to answer two literature review questions:

- What knowledge has already been generated about the impact of the ELSA programme?
- What knowledge has already been generated about the implementation of the ELSA programme?

It was shown that knowledge generated thus far suggests a positive impact of the ELSA programme for children and young people in a range of areas (e.g., emotional literacy, wellbeing and communication and relational skills). However, research exploring impact is currently mainly qualitative with small dataset sizes. Accordingly, there is a lack of quantitative research with large dataset sizes (Rogers & Kelly, 2024b), and there is a need for studies to explore the medium and long term maintenance of impact over time and contexts. Furthermore, research is required to better understand who the programme is most impactful for.

Currently, significantly more attention has focused on the impact of the ELSA programme rather than its implementation. Accordingly, there are currently no

published studies specifically looking at the ELSA programme's implementation, despite the programme existing for 15 years and being used so widely across the UK (ELSA Network, 2017d). Further, most research which reports implementation factors explores this via single questions within questionnaires or interviews (Rogers & Kelly, 2024b). This is problematic because it is not possible to comprehensively evaluate an intervention without studying implementation (Durlak, 2016; Durlak & DuPre, 2008; Greenberg et al., 2005; Lendrum et al., 2013), and implementation influences an intervention's impact (Durlak, 2016; Durlak & DuPre, 2008). Further, research which has explored implementation suggests that the ELSA programme is being implemented differently in different school contexts, thus emphasising the need to understand implementation better. Therefore, more research is needed to understand how the ELSA programme is being implemented in diverse school settings, how context interacts with the programme, and how implementation influences impact and outcomes.

Across ELSA research to date, there is a lack of parents', secondary aged students' and EPs' voice; in their scoping review of 53 papers, Rogers and Kelly (2024b) found that parent and EP voice have been sought the least. Regarding EP voice, they write that 'given the role of EPs in training and supervising ELSAs and supporting their linked schools to implement the intervention, their perspectives on topics including training, supervision and implementation are valuable' (p. 50). Therefore, this study aims to generate knowledge regarding the ELSA programme's implementation in schools from the perspective of EPs, as both areas require further exploration. The next chapter explores this in more detail, by outlining and explaining this study's research aims and purpose, as well as its methodology.

Finally, it should be noted that the way the literature review was conducted and appraised may have influenced its findings. For example, it is possible that by searching for literature using the search term 'educational psycholog*' and retrieving papers which had the full linked text, some research may not have been found. However, the researcher aimed to minimise this possibility via step 7 of the literature search (snowballing) which helped to identify 4 additional papers. It should also be noted that 10 papers were found but later excluded as the researcher was unable to access them; this may also have impacted the literature review findings, although no published, journal articles were excluded for this reason. The researcher decided to use their own bespoke critical appraisal tool to appraise the literature. This ensured that a wider range of factors were considered when appraising each paper e.g., studies using thematic analysis were further appraised using Braun and Clarke's evaluation framework (Braun & Clarke, 2021a, pp. 345–346), However, a score denoting a study's quality was not given for each study, which some readers may have found helpful.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Chapter Overview

This chapter explores each aspect of the research methodology; it describes *how* the research has been done (Denzin et al., 2023). It begins by stating the research aim, question and purpose. Then it explores the adopted ontological and epistemological stance, before delving into the research design and participants. The chosen method of data collection is explained followed by a transparent account of the data analysis process. The researcher then considers their own position in the research before the study's quality is explored. The actions taken regarding ethics are described, and the chapter ends with an overview of the software used and the research process and timeframes.

3.2 Research aim and question

As outlined in 'Chapter 2: Literature review', less knowledge has thus far been generated regarding the implementation of the ELSA programme in schools and EPs' perspectives about the programme. Therefore, this qualitative study aims to generate further knowledge about how the ELSA programme is implemented in school settings, by exploring the experiences of EPs. Accordingly, the research question this study aims to address is:

What are educational psychologists' experiences of the implementation of the ELSA programme in school settings?

In line with the chosen data analysis method, reflexive thematic analysis (rTA) (Braun & Clarke, 2022), which will be explored further in Section 3.8, the research question changed as the research progressed and data analysis began. It changed as data analysis progressed because the researcher realised that the themes being generated

weren't exclusively related to the support EPs were providing; instead, EPs had shared more generally their experiences of the implementation of the ELSA programme. Therefore, in line with this study's exploratory purpose, the researcher adapted the research question to ensure a wider range of insights and ideas could be considered within the data analysis process. For specific details of how the research question evolved, please see Appendix D.

3.3 Research purpose

Research purpose concerns what a study is trying to achieve (Creswell & Creswell, 2023; Robson & McCartan, 2016), and, typically, research can aim to either explore, describe or explain a phenomena (Robson & McCartan, 2016). This research has an exploratory purpose as it aims to explore EPs' experiences of the implementation of the ELSA programme in school settings. Exploratory studies are appropriate when not much is yet known about a research area (Saunders et al., 2012), and, accordingly, they are flexible and adaptable and incorporate all data participants provide even if it goes in a direction unexpected to the researcher (Saunders et al., 2012). The exploratory purpose of this study is appropriate as there is currently little research about the implementation of the ELSA programme from the perspective of EPs; in other words, the research is 'in relatively uncharted waters and the most useful thing...is to explore' (Robson & McCartan, 2016, p. 39). Therefore, this study will explore, in a flexible manner, the views of EPs regarding the implementation of the ELSA programme in schools.

3.4 Research paradigm

Research paradigm is defined as the 'basic belief system or worldview that guides the investigator, not only in choices of method but in ontologically and epistemologically

fundamental ways' (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 105). Therefore, it encompasses the researcher's epistemological, ontological and methodological decisions and rationale (Denzin et al., 2023). Researchers must clearly state which paradigm has guided their study (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Oliver, 2014), as different ontologies, epistemologies, research design and methods create different research being undertaken for different purposes (Fox et al., 2007). This section of the methodology chapter therefore explains the paradigm which guided this study. First, the concepts of ontology and epistemology are discussed before the approach taken for this research is described and explained.

3.4.1 Ontology and epistemology definitions

Definitions of ontology and epistemology vary (Crotty, 1998). Overall, ontology is concerned with the nature of reality (Crotty, 1998; Fox et al., 2007; Lee, 2012; Saunders et al., 2012), whereby different perspectives can be taken about the form and nature of reality which informs what can be known about it (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Epistemology is concerned with knowledge, both the nature of knowledge (e.g., the kind of knowledge which is possible and legitimate), and the relationship between an inquirer and what can be known (Crotty, 1998; Lee, 2012; Oliver, 2014; Saunders et al., 2012). The assumptions a researcher makes about the nature of reality and knowledge informs how they generate knowledge and insights (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014) (i.e., the research design and methods). Therefore, areas of interest can be explored and understood differently according to the ontological and epistemological perspective taken, akin to wearing different glasses to view, understand, and explore your surroundings (Fox et al., 2007).

For example, at one end of the ontological spectrum is realism. This ontological position views the world objectively (Fox et al., 2007), positing that there is a 'real'

objective world independent of human thought (Oliver, 2014; Saunders et al., 2012), 'driven by immutable natural laws and mechanisms' (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 109). Accordingly, a tree would be seen by realists as a tree 'with that same meaning, whether anyone knew of its existence or not' (Crotty, 1998, p. 43). Thus, it would objectively exist independent of human thought. On the other end of the ontological spectrum is relativism. This ontological position views the world more subjectively (Crotty, 1998), positing that reality is socially constructed in the mind (Crotty, 1998) by groups of people (Fox et al., 2007). Accordingly, relativists would argue that a tree has been ascribed its meaning, and given its name, by humans, and the meanings and associations differ between groups of people and cultures (Crotty, 1998).

Different perspectives regarding the nature of reality (ontology) impact a researcher's epistemological stance i.e., how they view the nature of knowledge (Fox et al., 2007). If a researcher studies an area of interest with a realist lens of reality, they believe a 'real' objective world independent of human thought exists and can be discovered (Oliver, 2014). This informs the type of knowledge which is regarded as valid and possible; in this case, valid knowledge is observable and can be objectively explored through scientific means to discover a pre-existing, natural law. Furthermore, 'the investigator and the investigated *object* are assumed to be independent entities' (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 110), thus the researcher can be 'objective' and study a phenomena without influencing it. This stance on the nature of knowledge is known as positivism. In turn, this informs the research methods. In this example, appropriate research methods would involve experiments to critically test hypotheses, whilst carefully controlling extraneous variables (Fox et al., 2007; Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

In summary, different views of the nature of reality (ontology), our relationship to it and subsequent ability and means to explore it (epistemology), necessitate different

research approaches and methods (Fox et al., 2007; Oliver, 2014). Next, in section 3.4.2, the ontological and epistemological stance adopted for this study will be described and explained.

3.4.2 This study's ontology and epistemology

This research adopts a relativist ontology. Therefore, reality is viewed as subjective (Crotty, 1998), and constructed in the mind (Crotty, 1998) by groups of people (Fox et al., 2007). Accordingly, multiple realities are thought to exist (Crotty, 1998; Denzin et al., 2023; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Lee, 2012), and these realities can be conflicting and changeable (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Furthermore, using this lens, no construction of reality is deemed 'more or less *true*, in any absolute sense, but simply more or less informed and / or sophisticated' (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 111). Therefore, this study adopts the stance that 'different people may well inhabit quite different worlds' (Crotty, 1998, p. 64), and different realities exist between individuals and groups of people. This ontological lens makes sense in relation to this study's research question, aim and purpose, as this study explores EPs' experiences of the implementation of the ELSA programme using a flexible, exploratory approach.

Aligned with its relativist ontology (Crotty, 1998), this study adopts a constructionist epistemology, as defined by Crotty (1998). Crotty (1998) defines constructionism as 'the view that all knowledge, and therefore, all meaningful reality...is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context' (p. 42). Accordingly, 'meaning is not discovered but constructed' (Crotty, 1998, p. 42) 'by human beings as they engage with the world they are interpreting' (Crotty, 1998, p. 43). Constructionism 'drives home unambiguously...that there is *no* true or valid

interpretation' (Crotty, 1998, p. 47) only those which are more useful than others. Thus, reinterpretation and dissenting and differing views are welcomed.

Crotty (1998) argues that constructionism is neither completely objective nor subjective; it straddles both, as humans construct meaning based on things which already exist i.e., objects in the world. Accordingly, Crotty (1998) rejects constructionists which 'espouse an out-and-out subjectivism' (p. 43) i.e., the idea that we create meaning and impose it upon reality. Crotty (1998)'s definition of constructionism emphasises the impact of culture and sociopolitical context on the meanings constructed by groups of people, acknowledging that 'we are all born into a world of meaning' (p. 54). Thus, even if a person is appraising a natural object e.g., a sunset or a tree, the 'generation of meaning is always social' (Crotty, 1998, p. 55) as we are embedded within culture and 'interactive human community' (Crotty, 1998, p. 55).

This study's constructionist epistemology should be distinguished from constructivism, despite the terms being similar and conflated in literature (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Crotty, 1998; Lee, 2012; Schwandt, 2015). Both constructivism and constructionism adhere to the principle that reality is constructed (Schwandt, 2015), however constructivism focuses more on an individual's interpretation of meaning, based on their individual cognitive structures and processes (Schwandt, 2015). In contrast, social constructionism places more emphasis on social processes in the construction of meaning. Accordingly, Crotty (1998) suggests that 'the term *constructivism* [should be reserved] for epistemological considerations focusing exclusively on "the meaning-making activity of the individual mind", and to use *constructionism* where the focus includes "the collective generation [and transmission] of meaning" '(p. 58). This differentiation is upheld by subsequent authors (Lee, 2012),

however, there are grey areas. For example, Fox et al. (2007) points out that ‘no knowledge is completely individually constructed. Usually there is some shared meaning between people and...in this way it is socially constructed’ (p. 16).

Constructionism – as defined by Crotty (1998) – was adopted for this research for a few reasons. Firstly, constructionism aligns with this study’s research question and purpose. This study explores EPs’ experiences, and this aligns with the notion that meaning is constructed and may differ between EPs. Furthermore, the EP role is social, thus participants’ experience of the implementation of the ELSA programme in schools will be mediated through their social interaction with others e.g., school staff, ELSAs, and other EPs. Constructionism also aligns with the methods chosen (which will be explored in more depth in sections 3.7 and 3.8). For example, reflexive thematic analysis (rTA) (Braun & Clarke, 2022) emphasises the importance of culture and practitioner self-reflexivity, and this is reflected in constructionism. Furthermore, adoption of a constructionist lens means that the co-construction of meaning between a researcher and participant during interviews (this study’s data collection method) can be embraced and reflected on. The choice of constructionism is also influenced by the researcher’s worldview, and this is explored in section 3.9.

In summary, this research adopts a relativist ontological and constructionist epistemological lens (as defined by Crotty, 1998). However, the researcher acknowledges that there are other viable epistemological positions (e.g., constructivism) which could have been used to explore the research question in a different way, using different methods (Lee, 2012; Oliver, 2014). Nevertheless, the ontological and epistemological perspectives adopted for this study inform the research design and methods chosen (Guba & Lincoln, 1994) and this will be explored next.

3.5 Research design

This study uses a flexible, qualitative research design. Qualitative research designs are now widely respected and accepted in areas of social research (Robson & McCartan, 2016). Defining qualitative research one way is challenging (Denzin et al., 2023; Silverman, 2021) because it ‘is imbued with a large body of methods and practices, and traverses several disciplines’ (Lee, 2012, p. 404). However, Denzin et al. (2023) suggest that qualitative research ‘consists of a set of interpretative, material practices that make the world visible...[and] involves an interpretative, naturalistic approach to the world’ (p. 88). Specifically, qualitative researchers ‘study things in their natural settings, which are socially constructed, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meaning people bring to them’ (Denzin et al., 2023, p. 88). Furthermore, Braun and Clarke (2013) argue that qualitative research ‘captures the complexity, mess and contradiction that characterises the real world, yet allows us to make sense of *patterns* of meaning’ (p.10). Patterns of meaning are generated using a qualitative framework (Braun & Clarke, 2013) which ensures that knowledge generated from qualitative studies is credible and rigorous (Silverman, 2021).

Braun and Clarke (2013) go further to distinguish between qualitative techniques and methods and qualitative paradigms. Specifically, research involving qualitative data collection methods and techniques without a qualitative paradigm is known as ‘small q qualitative research’. In contrast, research underpinned by ‘a broad cluster of [qualitative] features and assumptions’ (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 6) is called ‘Big Q qualitative research’. Figure 3 summarises the broad features of Big Q qualitative research. This study adopts a Big Q qualitative research approach and inductive design, whereby the ‘analysis is located within, and coding and theme development

are driven by, the data content' (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 10). Accordingly, this study explores the implementation of the ELSA programme in schools from the perspectives of EPs, by identifying themes and patterns and generating a conceptual framework; a bottom-up approach whereby any generated theory follows data (Saunders et al., 2012). This is different to a deductive design whereby 'analysis is shaped by existing theoretical constructs, which provide the 'lens' through which to read and code the data and develop themes' (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 10); a top-down approach where data follows theory (Saunders et al., 2012). However, Braun and Clarke (2022) are clear that as rTA is a 'subjective and embedded process [it] makes pure induction impossible' (p. 56), and this is why researcher reflexivity is key (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Therefore, whilst this study adopts a Big Q qualitative research approach and inductive design, the researcher understands that pure induction is impossible, and that their perspective and theoretical knowledge inevitably influences data analysis (as is encouraged and embraced in rTA) (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Figure 3: Broad features of Big Q qualitative research, taken from Braun and Clarke (2013, pp. 6-7).

Broad assumptions and features of Big Q qualitative research:	
	There are multiple realities; not one, true view of reality and knowledge.
	Context is key; knowledge should not be considered outside of the context it was generated in.
	Research which analyses words, not numbers (and does not reduce words to numbers).
	Uses more 'naturally' occurring data collection methods.
	Takes an inductive, theory-generating approach.
	Denounces the idea that a researcher can be objective and unbiased; researcher subjectivity is recognised, explored and seen as a strength of the research rather than a weakness.

3.6 Participants

3.6.1 Population and research setting

This section, firstly, considers the context within which this research took place. This is because 'analysis happens at the intersection of the dataset, the context of the research, and researcher skill and locatedness' (Braun & Clarke, 2022, pp. 10–11).

Furthermore, qualitative research must be 'richly contextualised in a way that allows the reader to make a judgment about whether, and to what extent, they can safely transfer the analysis to their own context or setting' (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 143).

This study interviewed qualified EPs about their experiences of the ELSA programme's implementation in school settings. The participants were recruited from one EPS within an inner London Borough (the service where the researcher was on placement in Years 2 and 3 of the EP doctorate). At the time of writing, it is a relatively well-funded and financially stable London Borough, and the EPS uses a partially traded model, whereby schools pay for ELSA training and supervision. At

the time of this research, the EPS-ELSA team (2023-24) was made up of a number of qualified, main-grade EPs and some trainee educational psychologists (TEPs). The researcher was part of the EPS-ELSA team during this study.

The EPS has been delivering ELSA training and supervision for approximately 8 years and has trained approximately 73 ELSAs across 40 settings since its inception. ELSAs have been trained across a range of settings including mainstream primary and secondary schools, independent schools and specialist provision. The EPS-ELSA team facilitates group supervision sessions half-termly across the academic year, and both the training and supervision have been delivered in a hybrid model since the Covid-19 pandemic i.e., some are face to face, and some are online. The EPS charges schools for training and supervision sessions, so the ELSA programme generates income for the service.

The researcher recruited participants from this EPS because the service's ELSA programme is well established. Furthermore, the EPs within the EPS have experience delivering the ELSA training and supervision for, and working with, ELSAs in a range of settings (e.g., mainstream, independent, and specialist) which the researcher thought could offer interesting insights into the implementation of the ELSA programme in diverse settings. Furthermore, the EPS-ELSA team were interested in taking part in the study and, as the researcher was on placement within the EPS, all interviews could be conducted face-to-face in a private space at a time convenient to the participants. The researcher recruited EPs from one EPS (rather than multiple) because the researcher decided, based on multiple, intersecting factors, that the dataset generated from interviewing the participants had sufficient information power (Malterud et al., 2016); this will be explored in greater depth in section 3.6.3 'Dataset size'.

3.6.2 Selection

This study used a non-probability, volunteer, self-selection sampling method. Non-probability sampling means that the probability of selecting a participant is unknown, thus statistical inferences cannot be made from the data collected (Saunders et al., 2012). Non-probability samples are common in qualitative research; they are usually smaller than probability samples but the data collected is more in-depth and detailed (Oliver, 2014). Volunteer, self-selection sampling is where participants put themselves forward to take part in a study (Saunders et al., 2012). This method of sampling was chosen because it is deemed appropriate for exploratory studies (Saunders et al., 2012), and made sense within the research setting as the researcher had access to EPs with experience of the ELSA programme.

The researcher advertised the study on the EPS's Microsoft Teams channel in May 2024 (please see Appendix E for the recruitment message). The recruitment message included information regarding the study's aim, the inclusion criteria and what the study would involve (i.e., a face-to-face, 45-minute interview at the LA offices). The researcher asked participants to contact them if they were interested in taking part; once the participants expressed interest, they were sent an information sheet and consent form (see Appendix F) via email. The inclusion and exclusion criteria for the study is detailed in Table 6.

Table 5: Inclusion and exclusion selection criteria

Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria	Rationale
Participants must be qualified EPs.	Participants cannot be TEPs.	Qualified EPs are more likely to have depth and

		breadth of ELSA experience.
Participants must have at least 1 years' experience with the ELSA programme in any of the following capacities: • Delivering the ELSA training • Supervising ELSAs • Being a Link EP to a school with an ELSA	Participants cannot have less than one years' experience with the ELSA programme.	To ensure sample specificity (Malterud et al., 2016) i.e., that participants have sufficient experience and knowledge specific to the research aim.
Participants must be able to take part in a face-to-face, 45-minute interview.	Participants who can only attend virtual or telephone interviews.	All participants regularly access the LA offices as part of their day-to-day role.

3.6.3 Dataset size

There was no fixed, pre-determined dataset size for this study. This is due to the methodological framework used. Firstly, for non-probability sampling 'the issue of [dataset] size is ambiguous and, unlike, probability sampling, there are no rules' (Saunders et al., 2012, p. 283). Dataset size for probability sampling is usually determined by how many participants are required to undertake statistical analysis of the data (Robson & McCartan, 2016), whereas dataset sizes for non-probability

sampling methods aren't fixed, and vary depending on a study's research question and purpose (Saunders et al., 2012). Secondly, this study adopts an exploratory, Big Q qualitative research approach within a constructionist epistemology, and rTA is the chosen data analysis method. Levitt et al. (2017) argue that the number of participants alone is 'not the criterion of [data] adequacy for most qualitative analyses' (p.12). Furthermore, Braun and Clarke (2022) clearly state that 'there's no easy answer to the question of dataset size' (p.28) for rTA. In the absence of fixed, pre-determined dataset sizes, different approaches can guide qualitative researchers regarding the size of their dataset.

Some authors cite data saturation as a necessary prerequisite for ending data collection (Robson & McCartan, 2016; Saunders et al., 2012). The concept of data saturation was borne out of theoretical saturation in grounded theory (Braun & Clarke, 2021b; Malterud et al., 2016). Theoretical saturation occurs when 'the properties of categories and the relationships between categories are comprehensively explained so that a theory can arise' (Braun & Clarke, 2021b, p. 202). However, now, within qualitative research, researchers cite data saturation as their rationale for ending data collection (Braun & Clarke, 2021b). Consequently, 'saturation' has become a hallmark of quality for qualitative research (Braun & Clarke, 2021b; Malterud et al., 2016), and is included in evaluative checklists (CASP, 2025).

However, using 'saturation' as a concept to determine dataset size and evaluate qualitative research is critiqued (Braun & Clarke, 2021b). For example, Braun and Clarke (2021b) argue that 'saturation' is often poorly defined and ambiguous, and the concept assumes there is a 'right' dataset size after which no new information can be generated. They argue this is a positivist assumption which is antithetical, and

therefore incompatible, with the assumptions and values of rTA (Braun & Clarke, 2021b, 2022). As 'saturation' is critiqued by Braun and Clarke (2021b) and not compatible with rTA, Big Q research, or the ontological and epistemological assumptions of this study, it was not used to determine dataset size.

Alternately, Braun and Clarke (2022) suggest that concepts like 'information power' can be used to reflect on when to end data collection. Information power is a model designed by Malterud et al. (2016) to help guide dataset sizes for qualitative studies. The model does this by considering the richness and depth of the dataset, and its alignment with the research question and aims (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Specifically, Malterud et al. (2016) argue that 'the more information the sample holds, relevant for the actual study, the lower amount of participants is needed' (Malterud et al., 2016, p. 1753). Therefore, different things are seen to impact information power (Malterud et al., 2016). These include the study's aim (whether it's broad or narrow), sample specificity (the extent to which participants have experience, knowledge and characteristics specific to the research aim), whether there is already established theory for the study area, the quality of interview dialogue, and the data analysis strategy (Malterud et al., 2016). However, Malterud et al. (2016) are clear that the model 'is not intended as a checklist to calculate *N* but is meant as a recommendation of what to consider systematically at different steps of the research process' (p. 1756).

This study gathered data from 5 self-selected participants who met the selection criteria. Participants had a breadth of experience with the ELSA programme (5 - 8 years' experience); most participants gained their experience via their EP role, whilst one participant also had experience of the ELSA programme from previous work in a school. The researcher used Malterud et al. (2016)'s concept of 'information power'

to guide the decision of when to end data collection. The researcher chose to end data collection after 5 interviews, because they deemed the data to be sufficiently rich as to 'reach below the surface...to gain a deep understanding of the topic of interest' (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 34). It should be noted that there is no one definition of rich data (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Braun and Clarke (2013) suggest that for data to be 'good', it must relate to, and allow for exploration of, the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Thus, the researcher decided, due to good sample specificity, quality of interviews and rich data relevant to the research aim, that data collection could end after 5 interviews, allowing enough time to analyse the data thoroughly within the given timeframe for the research.

3.7 Method of data collection

The chosen data collection method for this study is semi-structured interviews. Qualitative interviews are argued to provide 'access to social worlds, as evidence of both "what happens" within them and how individuals make sense of themselves, their experiences, and their place within these social worlds' (Miller & Glassner, 2021, p. 54). In qualitative interviews, the interviewer plays an active role as they co-construct meaning with the participant, and, in rTA, this is acknowledged, accepted and reflected on during analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Semi-structured interviews involve the researcher preparing an interview structure and open-ended questions beforehand, but being flexible within the interview i.e., not rigidly following the question wording or order, and following the participants' lead regarding what's spoken about and asked (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Additionally, semi-structured interviews allow for further exploration of a participant's answers e.g., if something needs clarifying (Saunders et al., 2012) and areas related to the research question which the researcher had not previously considered (Saunders et al., 2012).

Semi-structured, qualitative interviews were chosen as this study's method of data collection, because they generate data which can be analysed to address the research question (Oliver, 2014). Furthermore, interview transcripts are suitable data for rTA (Braun & Clarke, 2022), and 'interviews are ideally suited to experience-type research questions' (Braun & Clarke, 2013, pp. 80–81). Oliver (2014) states that 'the selection of one data collection method implies the rejection of other methods' (p. 31). Therefore, it is important to consider alternative research methods that could have been used. Focus groups were also considered, however, they weren't chosen for several reasons. Focus groups involve group dynamics which can add depth to the dataset but also lead to participants feeling unable to speak or disagree with others (Saunders et al., 2012). Accordingly, focus groups require a higher level of interviewer skill (Saunders et al., 2012), and difficulties facilitating the space can negatively impact the richness of data generated. Further, the EPS-ELSA team didn't have enough EPs to make focus groups viable, and the research question could be adequately addressed via semi-structured interviews. Therefore, on this occasion, semi-structured interviews were chosen as they aligned with the research purpose, aim, question and study context, however other methods were considered.

The semi-structured, qualitative interviews took place face-to-face. During face-to-face interviews, 'the researcher and participant have a spoken conversation, which is typically audio-recorded and the recording is transformed into written text, ready for analysis, through a process of transcription' (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 79). Typically, face-to-face interviews are recommended over virtual interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2013) for a few reasons. For example, face-to-face interviews are synchronous in both time and place, thus it's possible to take advantage of social cues e.g., body language and intonation (Opdenakker, 2006), and there are no time

delays which can occur in online interviews if there are connectivity issues (Opdenakker, 2006). However, there are advantages of undertaking interviews virtually (Braun & Clarke, 2013). For example, virtual interviews may be more convenient, accessible and/or empowering for participants (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

Face-to-face interviews were chosen for this study because this was possible within the research context; the researcher and participants regularly attended the same LA offices as part of their normal day-to-day role. In addition, the researcher felt face-to-face interviews allowed greater opportunity to build rapport, show genuine interest via body language, and avoid distractions, thus maximising the richness of data generated. Face-to-face interviews also allowed for more control regarding anonymity and confidentiality, as both researcher and participant knew that no-one else was in the room and were able to speak privately in a quiet, pre-booked space without distractions. The researcher developed an interview guide which involved 7 questions that could be flexibly asked (see Appendix G). The researcher aimed to create questions which were open-ended and broad but could prompt thought and reflection about different aspects of implementation if needed.

3.8 Data analysis

3.8.1 Reflexive thematic analysis (rTA)

The chosen data analysis method for this study is reflexive thematic analysis (rTA) as defined by Braun and Clarke (2022). Braun and Clarke (2022) define thematic analysis as ‘a method for developing, analysing and interpreting patterns across a qualitative data, which involves a systematic process of data coding to develop themes’ (p. 4). More recently, they added the adjective ‘reflexive’ to their thematic analysis approach, to emphasise the value of ‘a subjective, situated, aware and

questioning researcher' (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 5). Reflexive thematic analysis was chosen for this study because its core assumptions align with the research aim, question, paradigm and broader methodology. Specifically, this study adopts a Big Q qualitative approach, whereby knowledge is viewed as situated within a context and researcher subjectivity is recognised, explored and seen as a strength rather than weakness (Braun & Clarke, 2013). This aligns with rTA's emphasis on researcher reflexivity and the generation of knowledge through an interaction between data, the participants, the researcher and context (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Furthermore, not only does rTA offer an opportunity to consider context, but it also considers both semantic meanings i.e., overt meanings which stay close to participants' explicit language, and latent meanings i.e., those which are more implicit or conceptual (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The researcher felt this would be beneficial as current ELSA literature does not yet consider context in depth, and often stays at a semantic meaning level. Therefore, this study aimed to explore the implementation of the ELSA programme whilst emphasising the context in which the knowledge is generated, and generate both semantic and latent meanings. Accordingly, rTA was chosen as the data analysis method.

Braun and Clarke (2022) have oriented the analytic process of rTA into 6 phases but are clear that the phases aren't a 'must-be-precisely-followed recipe to produce an analysis' (p. xxvi). Instead, they encourage researchers to embrace the adventure and complexity of qualitative analysis, and use their textbook alongside 'scholarship, reflexivity, creativity, and theoretical engagement' (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. xxvi). Below, each phase of the analytic process specific to this research is described using the first person. First person is used to honour and centre the researcher's part

and influence on the data analysis process, as is emphasised in rTA (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

3.8.1.1 Data familiarisation

Data familiarisation began while I transcribed the data as I listened to and read back each interview at least twice to check the accuracy of the transcripts. Once all the interviews had been transcribed, I continued to familiarise myself with the data from October to November 2024 by reading each interview through and writing post it notes of ideas, themes and patterns I noticed (see Appendix H for an example). I also critically engaged with the data, asking questions and thinking about latent meaning as well as what was on the surface. I recorded voice notes of my reflections after immersion in each interview (see Appendix I for an example).

Once I had immersed myself in each dataset, I read every interview again and compiled all my post it notes to think about the dataset as a whole. At this stage, I was struck by how many ideas had come from data familiarisation alone and noticed that I was drawn more to ideas which felt novel. For example, I felt most interested in latent meaning around the power (or lack of power) ELSAs have and the context within which ELSA operates; for example, I considered the programme as something that schools pay for (and the EPS makes money from), and ELSA as a catch-all intervention at a time when CAMHS and other mental health services are increasingly inaccessible. I was interested in the high responsibility and accountability ELSAs had in contrast to the lack of power, autonomy, and authority. I also thought there were some interesting ideas about the long-term sustainability of the ELSA programme, as interviews mentioned some ELSAs being lost along the way. I left this phase feeling interested, excited and ready to begin coding as I had a

good sense of what I might notice in the interviews, and how I might begin to code the data (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

3.8.1.2 Coding

From November 2024 to February 2025, I undertook the coding phase of analysis. To do this, I systematically read line-by-line each interview transcript and coded all segments of text that related to my research question with a code label (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Additionally, I deliberately started with the transcript I'd read last in the data familiarisation process to change the order of my thinking. I did this on Microsoft Word using comments to highlight the text relevant to one or more code labels. I tried to remain close to the data at this stage, generating codes for each singular idea that I felt was present in the transcript. Some segments of text were coded with multiple code labels, and I kept a record of each code label in an Excel document so that I could re-use them when appropriate and easily see all the different codes that I'd generated. I generated codes both at the semantic and latent level, thus some code labels reflected 'explicitly-expressed meaning' (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 57) and others reflected a 'deeper, more implicit or conceptual level of meaning' (Braun & Clarke, 2022, pp. 57–58). For examples of the coding process, please see Appendices J and K.

Once I'd read and coded each interview transcript once, I refined the codes by going through each transcript again in a different order as recommended by Braun and Clarke (2022). Overlapping code labels were amalgamated together, and where I noticed different meanings within a code label, further codes were created. I both immersed myself in the data and had time away from it to allow ideas to settle and opportunities for new insight. After systematic coding had been done twice for each

transcript, I felt that the code labels reflected the diversity of meaning in the data, and decided to move onto the next phase, initial theme development.

3.8.1.3 Initial theme development

At this stage of analysis, I began to generate initial themes. Braun and Clarke (2022) define a theme in rTA as ‘a pattern of shared meaning organised around a central concept’ (p. 77). They warn against creating ‘topic summaries’ which capture ‘the range of responses around a particular issue’ (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 77) including contradictory ideas. To generate initial themes, I printed off all my code labels and began to physically organise them according to central organising concepts, trying to generate themes which captured ‘multiple facets of an idea or concept’ (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 80). Appendix L provides an example of early initial theme development. As I developed a number of initial theme ideas, I began drawing thematic maps to think about the individual themes, how they might relate together, and what story they might tell in addressing the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2022); Appendix N provides some examples of the thematic maps I created, demonstrating how my initial theme ideas were shaped and refined over time.

3.8.1.4 Theme development and review

After generating a number of initial theme ideas and thematic maps, I moved onto developing and reviewing my themes (see Appendix M). In this phase, I went back to the coded transcripts and looked at the original interview data for each code label surrounding each theme idea. In line with Braun and Clarke (2022), I considered whether the ‘candidate theme work[s] when it is read in relation to all the data that are supposed to evidence it’ (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 98). I also considered whether each theme idea was viable i.e., had a central organising concept, clear

boundaries, enough meaningful data to evidence it, and conveyed something important (Braun & Clarke, 2022). After this, I explored whether my themes made sense in relation to the whole dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2022) by reading through all the interviews again, and considering whether the themes represented the original data. At this stage, I continued using thematic maps to refine my themes. For example, I began trying out different theme and sub-theme ideas and ways of organising the themes together. When I felt that the theme ideas well represented the original data, I moved onto theme refinement.

3.8.1.5 Theme refinement

In this phase, I wrote a 'theme definition' for each theme idea i.e., an 'abstract' for the theme which outlines its 'scope, boundaries and core concept' (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 108). I also spent time thinking about theme names to ensure they captured the themes' meaning and analytic direction (Braun & Clarke, 2022). For example, initially I had a theme named 'the ELSA role is changing'. This developed over time to become 'increasingly high and complex CYP needs', as this felt more specific, meaningful and captured the analytic direction of the theme.

3.8.1.6 Writing up

Lastly, I moved onto writing up my findings, a key part of rTA (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Writing up the findings continued to crystallise and refine my generated themes e.g., I continued to change the theme names while I was writing. I was torn between combining the findings and discussion chapters which is recommended for Big Q research (Braun & Clarke, 2022), and separating them out in a typical thesis format. In the end, I decided to separate them as the thesis is a long document, and I thought it may be difficult to follow if the two were combined. Initially, I wrote the

findings chapter without any quotes, to ensure that my overall story addressing the research question made sense, and that my analytic interpretation felt robust. I hoped that by doing this, the data extracts would evidence my findings rather than falling into the trap of assuming that data speak for themselves (Braun & Clarke, 2022). After receiving feedback from my research supervisor, I was able to further refine the included data extracts and finalise the findings chapter.

3.9 Researcher reflexivity

Reflexivity is a central part of rTA (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Braun and Clarke (2022) define reflexivity as ‘the disciplined practice of critically interrogating what we do, how and why we do it, and the impacts and influences of this on our research’ (p. 5). Therefore, as well as attempting to embed reflexivity and transparency regarding the research process throughout this thesis, the researcher offers some reflections on the research process below, using the first person.

I think I was consciously drawn to study the ELSA programme because of my exposure to it on my first and second year EPS placements; it seemed to be almost synonymous with EPSs as most EPSs advertise and facilitate the ELSA programme. In addition, since starting the research, I have realised that my interest in this area also, less consciously, likely relates to a previous role I had. Before starting the Doctorate, I worked for a London-based charity whose model isn’t hugely dissimilar to the ELSA programme; the programme was bought in by schools to support the school community and facilitated by a Link Worker (employed by the charity). When I started this job, the programme was new to the school, so I had to implement it from scratch. Therefore, now, I wonder whether my experience of implementing a completely new programme in a school environment, less consciously, guided me to this area of study.

In terms of *how* I decided to study the implementation of the ELSA programme, my values have impacted the research I designed (Saunders et al., 2012). Since undertaking the Doctorate course, I believe I've developed a 'qualitative sensibility' (an alignment between my skills and beliefs and the values of Big Q qualitative research) (Braun & Clarke, 2022) which drew me towards Big Q qualitative research. For example, I have been fascinated by the social constructionist/tivist lenses for viewing the world and systemic psychological theories. Consequently, I have developed an interest in meanings (e.g., how they're made, how they change), the impact of sociopolitical and cultural context, and researcher and practitioner self-reflexivity. These interests align with the assumptions and features of Big Q qualitative research (Braun & Clarke, 2013), and thus guided my decision to study the implementation of the ELSA programme in this way.

It's also important to consider how I interacted with participants during interviews, and brought aspects of myself e.g., my beliefs, values, and culture, into the subsequent data analysis and write-up stages of the research. For example, in some ways, I was an insider researcher as I was a member of EPS-ELSA team participating in the study (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Further, I have co-delivered ELSA training and supervision thus have my own experiences of the programme. In other ways, I was an outsider researcher (Braun & Clarke, 2022), as I was not a qualified EP like the participants, and aspects of my identity were different to the participants (e.g., age, gender, ethnicity). Regarding how these dynamics may have impacted the interview data generated, having a pre-existing relationship with participants may have helped rapport and the flow of the interview, thus generating richer data. Simultaneously, I may have assumed to know and understand what participants meant because of our shared experience, thus hindering further avenues of enquiry.

Therefore, my beliefs, values, and experiences likely influenced data collection and analysis in the ways described.

In data analysis, I also considered how my own experiences and values might have impacted this phase of the research. For example, since undertaking this research, I have delivered more of the ELSA training and co-facilitated supervision with colleagues. I have noticed myself some of the themes generated in this study. For example, I have heard ELSAs describe and seek help for students with high and complex needs e.g., self-harm and suicidal ideation, and I have noticed how qualified EPs encourage ELSAs to push back on this type of referral, which relates to 'increasingly high and complex CYP needs.' In addition, I recently delivered the social skills training session and found myself adapting the slides as it felt misaligned with neuro-affirming approaches (like the subtheme 'EPs and ELSAs are reacting and adapting'). Over the next term, my supervisor and I are delivering the ELSA training to small group of TAs at a specialist provision supporting students with profound and multiple learning difficulties (PMLD). The knowledge generated from this study has prompted me to think about how much adaptation may be required, and the tension between this and fidelity to the programme. Therefore, my own experiences have inevitably influenced data analysis, and, in turn, the generated themes have influenced how I perceive and interact with the ELSA programme.

3.10 Quality considerations

Qualitative research must be appraised by standards which account for key differences between quantitative and qualitative studies e.g., using non-positivist epistemologies, and different approaches and techniques (Yardley, 2015). Further, it is argued that qualitative quality standards must flex to align with the ontology, epistemology and design of the research (Braun & Clarke, 2021a; Levitt et al., 2017;

Yardley, 2015). When designing and undertaking this research, Yardley's framework for considering the validity of qualitative research (Yardley, 2015) and Levitt et al.'s qualitative research standards (Levitt et al., 2017) were used to ensure the research was undertaken to a high standard. Therefore, this section outlines the ways in which the researcher considered and strived for high quality in this study.

3.10.1 Methodological integrity, coherence and transparency

Methodological integrity is 'the degree to which researchers and readers are convinced that a research study has captured a significant experience or process related to their topic' (Levitt et al., 2017, p. 9). It is similar to Yardley (2015)'s concept of 'coherence' which considers the degree to which the research makes sense as a whole and the clarity and power of argument made by the researcher. To try to achieve high methodological integrity, coherence and transparency, the researcher:

- Spent significant time on the research design and planning to ensure alignment between the research aim, question, paradigm and research methods.
- Made the research process as transparent as possible e.g., including sections about practitioner self-reflexivity and sharing detailed information about the data analysis process in section 3.8 and in appendices H – N.
- Named and embraced inconsistencies in findings, whilst exploring why this might be. For example, the researcher aims to capture the nuanced differences in implementation by focusing both on successful implementation and the challenging reality of implementation in the findings chapter.
- Aimed to tell a compelling and accessible story regarding how the knowledge generated addresses the research question, using diagrams and visuals to aid this (Levitt et al., 2017) e.g., Figure 4 on p. 92.

3.10.2 Sensitivity to context

This aspect of Yardley (2015)'s framework considers the researcher's sensitivity to context regarding existing and relevant theory and literature, the perspective and sociocultural context of participants and the researcher, and the data analysis process. To embed sensitivity to context, the researcher:

- Includes information about the research setting, whilst upholding confidentiality.
- Tried to follow the lead of participants in interviews by asking open-ended questions and asking clarifying questions to check the reliability of the researchers' understanding of what was being said (Levitt et al., 2017).
- Explores their influence on the research e.g., in section 3.9.
- Checked their data analysis against the whole dataset to ensure it represented participants' views.
- Considers the research findings against existing literature and theory in the discussion chapter.
- Recorded regular voice notes throughout the research process to actively engage in practitioner reflexivity (see Appendix I for an example).
- Reflected on the interaction between researcher, participant, data and context in supervision sessions.

3.10.3 Commitment and rigour

Yardley (2015) argues that 'commitment and rigour can be demonstrated by in-depth engagement with the topic, including thorough data collection, displaying expertise and skills in the methods employed, and undertaking a detailed, in-depth data

analysis' (p. 295). As well as the steps detailed above, to demonstrate commitment and rigour, the researcher also:

- Undertook systemic coding and deep engagement with the data over 5 months of data analysis to generate new insights.
- Uses participant quotes in the findings chapter to evidence the generated meaning and vivify 'the emotional/relational experience and [deepen] the contextual or historical understanding' (Levitt et al., 2017, p. 14).

3.10.4 Impact and importance

The researcher explains the rationale for this study in the introduction and literature review chapters, and the implications and impact of the study are discussed in the discussion chapter.

3.11 Ethics

This study adhered to research ethics outlined in The British Psychological Society's (BPS) 'Code of Ethics and Conduct' (BPS, 2021b) and The BPS's 'Code of Human Research Ethics' (BPS, 2021a). In Table 7, the actions taken to adhere to each principle are described.

Table 6: Ethical considerations

Principle from The BPS's 'Code of Human Research Ethics' (BPS, 2021a)	Actions taken
2.1 Respect for the autonomy, privacy and dignity of individuals, groups and communities	• Informed consent was gained as participants were given an information sheet and consent form to read before they agreed to take part. • As the researcher had a pre-existing relationship with the participants, they tried to ensure participants didn't feel pressured to take part (Braun & Clarke, 2013) by sending one recruitment advert only. • Participants were told via the consent form and information sheet, and at the start of interviews, about their right not to answer questions and to withdraw their data within 2 weeks of the interview. • Interviews took place face-to-face in a private, pre-booked room at the LA offices. • Interviews were organised at a time convenient for participants (Braun & Clarke, 2013) and there was flexibility to change the interview date.

	• Interview recordings and transcripts were held confidentially and anonymously on a password protected, encrypted laptop, and were individually password protected too. Interview recordings were deleted once transcription was complete within 7 days of the interview. • As the researcher knew participants, information disclosed in the interview which was new to the researcher was kept confidential, unless the participant mentioned it again outside of the interview (Braun & Clarke, 2013). • Due to the small dataset size, the researcher decided not to collect demographic data as this would have made it easier for participants to be identified. The researcher reflects on this decision in section 5.6.
2.2 Scientific integrity	• The researcher sought to undertake high quality research; please see section 3.10 for more information. • Research aims were clearly stated to participants in the information sheet and consent form.

2.3 Social responsibility	• The research is deemed impactful and worthwhile i.e., there is a clear rationale detailed in the introduction and literature review chapters, and implications for practice are discussed in section 5.5. • The researcher embedded practitioner self-reflexivity throughout the research e.g., section 3.9. • The researcher is clear about their active role in the generation of knowledge and that insights are situated within a context.
2.4 Maximising benefit and minimising harm	• The researcher engaged with and received approval ethical approval for their study. Please see Appendix O for evidence of this. • The researcher undertook a risk assessment for the study. Please see Appendix P for more information. • The researcher allowed space to debrief at the end of interviews and attended to participants' emotional wellbeing during interviews.

3.12 Software used

Microsoft Teams was used to record and transcribe the interviews. For more information regarding Microsoft Teams' and the Tavistock and Portman NHS Trust's data protection policy, please see the participant information sheet and consent form in Appendix F. A second, audio recorder was also used as a back-up. This was a password protected 'Homder Digital Voice Recorder'. The researcher used Microsoft Word and Excel to code the interviews.

3.13 Overview of the research process

Ethical approval was submitted on 11/3/24. Ethical approval was gained from the Tavistock Trust Research Ethics Committee (TREC) on 14/5/24. LA approval was gained on 6/3/24 from the Principal EPs and the Director of Education, Commissioning and Inclusion. The research was advertised in May 2024 via the EPS's Microsoft Teams channel. Interviews took place over 4 months from June to early September 2024, when data collection ended. The interviews all took place face-to-face in a booked room at the LA offices. A pilot study (whereby an interview is conducted to test the interview questions without collecting the data) (Braun & Clarke, 2013) was not undertaken because there was limited scope for this i.e., the number of participants eligible to take part within the EPS was finite; this is often the case for qualitative research with a smaller number of participants (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Instead, the researcher reviewed the interview questions after each interview to ensure the data collected related to the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2013). In the interviews, the researcher prepared the software before the participant arrived. As recommended by Braun and Clarke (2013), two audio-recorders were used so there was a back-up if one malfunctioned. When participants arrived, they were offered a drink and were given time to read through the consent form again and sign

it if they were happy to take part (via a Microsoft Form). The researcher reiterated the study's purpose and what the inclusion criteria was. Then, the researcher informed the participant about the recording equipment, and recapped information regarding the participant's right to withdraw and confidentiality and anonymity. The researcher made clear when the recording equipment was being turned on and off to check the participant was happy with this. For full details, please see Appendix G.

Transcription took place within 7 days of each interview. The researcher used the audio recordings to check the accuracy of the Microsoft Teams transcription. Once transcribed, the researcher listened to each interview all the way through alongside the transcription to ensure accuracy. Once accuracy was established, the researcher deleted the audio files so that only the interview transcription remained. Data analysis took place over a period of 5 months and ended in February 2025. The write-up of the study spanned from approximately March 2024 until April 2025. In addition, the researcher accessed monthly research supervision from December 2023 until June 2025.

3.14 Chapter summary

In summary, this exploratory study aims to address the research question 'what are educational psychologists' experiences of the implementation of the ELSA programme in school settings?' The research was conducted using a relativist ontological, and social constructionist (Crotty, 1998) epistemological paradigm and Big Q qualitative framework. Data was generated from semi-structured interviews with five EPs from one LA, and analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

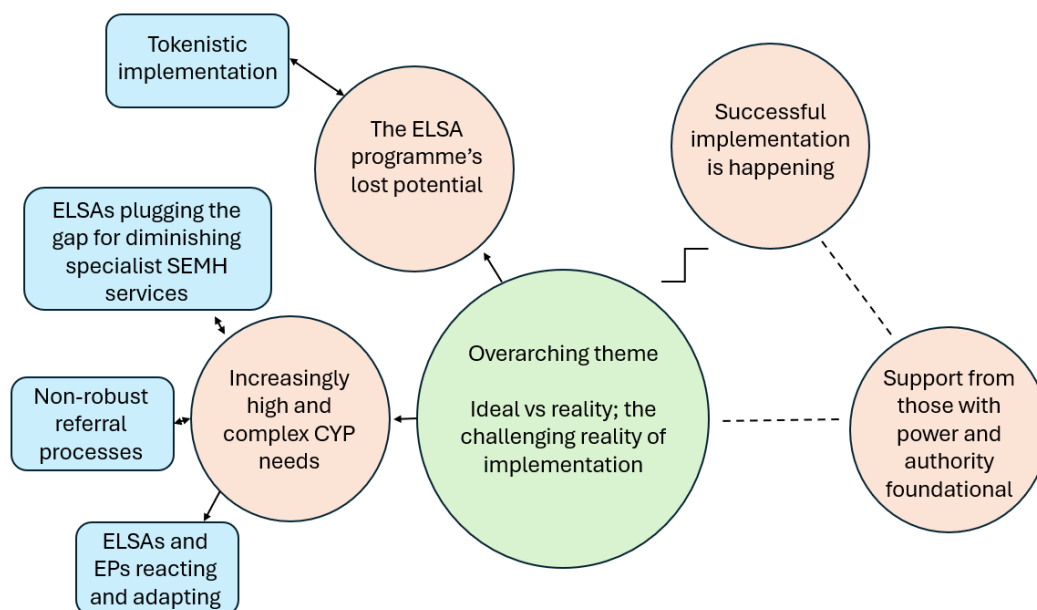
Chapter 4: Findings

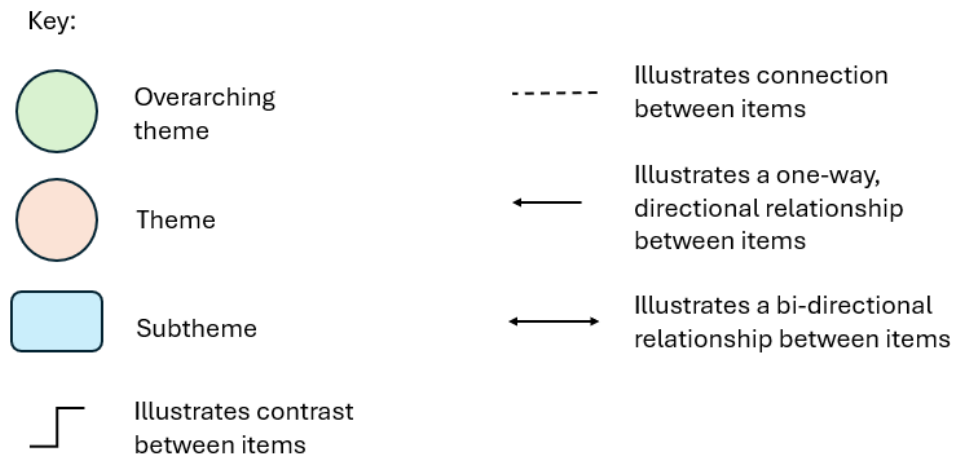
4.1 Chapter overview

This chapter explores the findings of this study which are presented in Figure 4.

Firstly, the overarching theme ‘ideal vs reality; the challenging reality of implementation’ is described and two aspects of the challenging reality of implementation are explored: ‘the ELSA programme’s lost potential’ and ‘increasingly high and complex CYP needs.’ Next, the theme ‘successful implementation is happening’ explores EPs’ experiences of effective implementation at different levels i.e., individual school and ELSA, EPS and across the LA. Finally, the theme ‘support from those with power and authority foundational’ considers the importance of having support from those with power and authority (both EPs and school senior leaders) to successfully implement the programme. Further, the extent to which ELSAs are perceived to have power and authority themselves is explored.

Figure 4: Thematic map of key findings





4.2 Overarching theme ‘ideal vs reality; the challenging reality of implementation’

The overarching theme ‘ideal vs reality; the challenging reality of implementation’, captures the idea that EPs perceive a difference between ‘ideal’ implementation of the ELSA programme, and how it is actually implemented in schools. This sentiment is captured here; after being asked about their experience of the ELSA programme and how it’s being put in place, participant D responded, “I’m very much, am very mindful of what people espouse and what happens in reality vary.” Not only is there a difference between ideal and actual practice, but this study suggests that the way the programme is implemented in some schools poses challenges for ELSAs, EPs and the long-term sustainability of the programme; these challenges are explored in the themes ‘the ELSA programme’s lost potential’ and ‘increasingly high and complex CYP needs.’

‘The ELSA programme’s lost potential’ suggests that how the ELSA programme is implemented in some schools prevents it from reaching its full potential (i.e., successful implementation and positive impact on students), and the subtheme ‘tokenistic implementation’ explores one way that potential benefits of the programme can be lost. ‘Increasingly high and complex CYP needs’ captures the

idea that some ELSAs are increasingly working with children and young people with higher and more complex needs, perhaps outside of the intended target audience for the programme. Subthemes ‘non-robust referral processes’ and ‘ELSAs plugging the gap for diminishing specialist SEMH services’ explore why this might be happening. The subtheme ‘ELSAs and EPs are reacting and adapting’ explores the, sometimes significant, adaptation ELSAs and EPs make to the programme in response to the needs of students.

4.2.1 Theme ‘the ELSA programme’s lost potential’

This theme explores a sense from participants that unhelpful or problematic implementation practices prevent ELSAs from working in a successful, impactful way. Consequently, the potential of the programme (i.e., successful implementation and any subsequent positive impact) is lost. Sometimes the potential of the programme is lost quickly i.e., implementation breaks down soon after ELSA training: “This one's [school's] three form entry and they invested in four ELSAs four – five years ago. All those ELSAs left within the year” (participant B). Quickly lost potential will be explored further in the subtheme ‘tokenistic implementation’. At other times, the potential of the programme is lost suddenly after a period of successful implementation. For example, participants described scenarios where ELSA programmes were functioning well, but changes within the school system e.g., the Covid-19 pandemic or changes to senior leadership, caused implementation to break down, as the ELSA was deployed to another role in school e.g., an LSA. The following quote from participant A captures this idea:

And it could be that it's been well established. And then - this is what happened with a few schools during the pandemic where it was really, you know, ELSA was great, they had a part time or a full time ELSA. And then when the pandemic hit,

they kind of had to go into different roles because of various things. And then the ELSA programme kind of stopped because everything had changed in the school, and then they just hadn't got back up and running. So now that ELSA is in the classroom or doing another role, which is a shame. (Participant A)

Accordingly, there is a sense from participants that successful implementation is fragile and can be lost without schools having an adequate contingency plan: "I think it's working so well, but it's just it feels like just a little kink or change to the system could knock it out completely..." (participant B).

Regardless of whether the potential of the programme is lost quickly or after a period of successful implementation, participants shared the view that once potential is lost, it is difficult to get it back i.e., it is difficult to re-implement the programme in a successful way. For example, participant E spoke about a school's difficulty maintaining the programme after their ELSA left the school:

...they haven't been able to replace that person due to financial constraints and it's so unfortunate. And that person's loss, I think, is still being felt actually, because they've, they've lost a colleague and a member of staff who did amazing work, but they haven't been able to kind of replace that role with anything else. (Participant E)

Therefore, 'the ELSA programme's lost potential' explores how potential benefits of the programme can be lost in different ways at different times throughout its implementation. Once lost, it can be difficult to get the programme back on track.

4.2.1.1 Subtheme 'tokenistic implementation'

'Tokenistic implementation' explores a specific, common way the potential of the programme is lost. Specifically, it captures a sense from participants that some

schools invest in ELSA training but fail to provide the right conditions and support to ensure its successful implementation, hence its implementation is tokenistic. This idea is illustrated here:

...sometimes it doesn't work as well. And I think...it's that from the seniors and the school that they are not committed, they may invest in paying for that person to go on the training, but not really in, beyond that. (Participant C)

All participants described tokenistic implementation happening in schools.

Furthermore, as well as noticing it, participants perceived it to be a common and widespread implementation challenge, which is commonly brought to ELSA supervision: "...for the first year [in supervision], there was a lot of this kind of co-rumination around the barriers that were in place in the schools" (participant B).

In interviews, a common manifestation of tokenistic implementation involves ELSAs not being given the time or space (both physical i.e., not having a room, and metaphorical i.e., not having thinking space) post training to practice. This is captured in this quote from participant B, who is talking about the implementation barriers ELSAs commonly bring to supervision:

[ELSA speak a lot about] not having any time to prepare, not having like that kind of PPA time, not having the support from the SENDCo around their role and then kind of having to kind of explain what it is, what they're supposed to be doing, what it does in other schools, what it looks like. Difficulties setting up a space, having a space that they can call their own to be an ELSA. Yeah, an ELSA room or an ELSA space where, children know about. A lot around just being brought to do teaching assistant work and not being able to practice ELSA at all. (Participant B)

Consequently, ELSAs are either unable to attend supervision or attend without young people to reflect on: “we’ve had a few who are still on our list of trained ELSAs, but who don’t attend supervision at the moment” (participant A).

Tokenistic implementation can be displayed by senior leadership both at the start and during the programme’s implementation. For example, senior leadership don’t always engage in sessions which aim to clarify expectations about supporting ELSAs and the boundary of the ELSA role; here, participant A speaks about the challenges engaging senior leaders in pre-training ‘lunch and learn’ sessions:

They [lunch and learn sessions] weren't that well attended, to be honest...we had - and it was virtual to make it easier so people didn't have to leave school - we've probably had about 10 people in total, so yeah, not as many as I'd have hoped, but at least some came. (Participant A)

Additionally, some members of senior leadership are perceived as not fully buying into the ELSA programme’s ethos, and to be training ELSAs because it makes the school look good: for example, participant D says that some schools train ELSAs “because it looks good on [their] website”. Furthermore, there’s a sense from participants that monetary investment in the programme does not guarantee successful implementation, as some schools train multiple ELSAs without providing the conditions and support needed:

...there are settings within our local authority which has like, I think about four or five ELSAs in one setting. And not one of those ELSAs, I, there's only one out of the six that I haven't supervised, and so I can't speak for that individual, but the others, not one of them have been given specific time to do their roles. So even though it's something that the school have, putting in the funding to train them, it's

then like, well, then that happens, because you're putting all this money into training these ELSAs...but then how - where is the time to do ELSA, where is the space to do ELSA? (Participant D)

Therefore, tokenistic implementation is a common and widespread challenge experienced by ELSAs which makes it difficult to practice effectively.

As well as a lack of meaningful investment from senior leadership, participants described other reasons for tokenistic implementation. For example, there is a sense that tokenistic implementation is an inevitable by-product of the “reality and constraints of a working school” (participant D). Specifically, participants cited a lack of school resource and staffing capacity as reasons ELSAs don’t have time or space to practice: “even if they [senior leadership] do see the importance [of the programme], they just don’t have the resources to be able to allow it to function how it should do” (participant D). Due to staffing constraints, ELSAs can be asked to fulfil other roles that are perceived as more essential e.g., being an LSA in class or attending school trips: here, participant A says an implementation challenge is “staff needing to be in other roles like pulled to the classroom or if there’s an emergency pulled there”. Thus, in this study, reasons for tokenistic implementation appear to be varied and complex, however it remains a current, pervasive implementation challenge which prohibits ELSAs from effectively stepping into their role; in this way, potential benefits of the programme can be lost.

This study suggests that tokenistic implementation can damage the long-term sustainability of the ELSA programme. Specifically, participants described a cycle whereby ELSAs complete the training but then can’t practice properly due to tokenistic implementation. This causes frustration and dissatisfaction and some

ELSAs choose to leave the school: “those ELSAs kind of felt like, well, we're having the supervision, but we're not able to do anything. So, they left the school”

(participant B). Not only are the potential benefits of the programme lost when ELSAs leave, but senior leadership can also feel aggrieved and decide not to re-invest in ELSA training. This is evidenced by participant C, who said:

...the school has felt really aggrieved by that [ELSAs leaving] because they think, just spent all this money, we were thinking we were getting this and then that person's left, we're not going to spend that again on somebody else...who may leave. (Participant C)

Thus, schools aren't sustaining the programme long-term and future benefits of the programme are also lost.

In summary, ‘the ELSA programme's lost potential’ explores one aspect of the challenging reality of implementation in schools. It describes participants' view that challenges implementing the ELSA programme can lead to loss of potential benefits of the programme i.e., successful implementation and any subsequent positive impact, as ELSAs can't effectively step into role. Potential of the programme is lost at different times; sometimes it is lost quickly due to ‘tokenistic implementation’, and sometimes it is lost after a period of successful implementation due to changes in the school system. Once potential is lost, it is difficult to get things back on track which impacts the long-term sustainability and impact of the ELSA programme.

4.2.2 Theme ‘increasingly high and complex CYP needs’

This theme captures the idea that EPs perceive some ELSAs to be increasingly working with students with higher and more complex needs, perhaps outside of the typical ELSA realm. In addition, there is a perception that children within the target

participant group are subsequently missed or pushed down waitlists. Subthemes 'ELSAs plugging the gap for diminishing specialist SEMH services' and 'non-robust referral processes' explore why ELSAs are increasingly working with students with higher and more complex needs. Subtheme 'ELSAs and EPs are reacting and adapting' explores the, sometimes significant, adaptation ELSAs and EPs make to the programme in response to the increasingly high and complex needs of students.

In interviews, participants described ELSAs as increasingly working with students with higher and more complex needs, including those with health needs, physical disability and "really concerning" externalising behaviours (participant E). Perhaps one reason for this is that ELSAs appear to work in a range of specialist provision e.g., Alternative Provision, hospital schools and specialist education settings for those with profound and multiple learning difficulties (PMLD), where the needs of students are higher and more complex. Here, participant A describes the settings ELSAs are working in across the borough:

...we also have specialist provision ELSAs in specialist provision. So...[the local authority]'s PMLD school we had an ELSA from there a few years ago, and there's another one this year training...and also from the PRU [pupil referral unit] and from the hospital school as well. (Participant A)

Consequently, in supervision, some ELSAs bring students with complex needs to reflect on and, at times, seek support because they don't feel "safe" or qualified to work with the young people referred to them. For example, participant E shared that "some people have kind of described situations where they haven't felt safe, not physically, but safe in the work that they were doing and the level of support they were receiving from within the school itself." Furthermore, sometimes EPs think a

student may be too complex for ELSA support: "...maybe sometimes the young people who are actually receiving the ELSA support are too complex" (participant E).

As ELSAs increasingly work with young people with higher and more complex needs, there is a sense from participants that students with less visible or externalising needs are missed or pushed down waitlists:

...maybe those young people who might benefit from ELSA intervention, might be some of those young people who are generally, let's say, quite passive, they might fly under the radar, they might never actually be considered for that type of help, as opposed to a young person who might be exhibiting externalising behaviours, who might be considered to be very high profile from the school's perspective.

(Participant E)

Participant B talked about children being pushed down waitlists: "for example girls as a whole range is just not seen at all. Because they're pushed further and further down [waitlists]." Therefore, 'increasingly high and complex CYP needs' captures a sense that some ELSAs are increasingly working with students with higher and more complex needs, which may be outside of the typical ELSA participant group. Further, other children who may also benefit from ELSA support can be subsequently missed or pushed down waitlists.

4.2.2.1 Subtheme 'ELSA's plugging the gap for diminishing specialist SEMH services'

This study suggests that that one reason ELSAs are increasingly working with students with higher and more complex needs is because specialist SEMH services e.g., CAMHS and EPSs, are diminishing and becoming harder for students to access. Consequently, the ELSA programme is being viewed by and implemented in

schools as an alternative to specialist SEMH support; the ELSA programme is plugging the gap. For example, participant B shared that:

I guess the kind of trends I have noticed more recently is ELSAs' role shifting a little bit. I think, what is ELSA being blurred a little bit from kind of children the they're holding, it's almost like a stopgate between that and CAMHS or other mental health resources. (Participant B)

Accordingly, participants described ELSAs as increasingly working with young people at crisis rather than providing early intervention support: "...their only individuals are being referred to them [ELSAs] at the point of crisis" (participant D). The extent to which ELSAs are acting as a specialist SEMH equivalent may depend on how successfully school staff can refer students to specialist SEMH support. Specifically, there is some suggestion by participants that it is harder for secondary school pupils to be successfully referred, thus ELSAs are plugging the gap more in secondary schools. For example, after speaking about differences in ELSA implementation between primary and secondary schools, participant E shared that:

...I also think one of the reasons for that [primary ELSAs being used in an early intervention capacity] is in terms of accessibility and availability [of CAMHS], I think primary schools are more able to access external agencies like CAMHS, more effectively than secondary schools. I think with some of the secondary schools that we speak to as EPs kind of outside of the ELSA side of things, they describe difficulties in kind of meeting threshold or getting support via CAMHS and even making referrals, so maybe ELSAs are almost like the alternative to that. (Participant E)

Therefore, it is possible that as thresholds increase for specialist SEMH services e.g., CAMHS, so does the threshold for ELSA intervention, as those students with higher and more complex needs still require support.

Participants shared contradictory views about whether ELSAs plugging the gap is a positive or negative thing. For example, there is a sense from participants that the ELSA programme is great because it builds capacity in schools at a time when specialist SEMH services are difficult to access: “I think building that team within the school is just such a fantastic resource when EPs and CAMHS are quite, quite full up” (participant A). Due to this belief, participants spoke about increasingly recommending ELSA support in reports and statutory advice:

EPs were putting the ELSA a lot in their reports were-that a lot of the children were receiving, like they need to be seeing the ELSA. And this waiting list for this one ELSA was getting bigger and bigger and bigger. (Participant B).

Further, participants were also grateful when ELSAs reduced their own EP-workload:

...there's been a few key individuals who have been doing ELSA, who were initially on my to s- to kind of like be referred to the EP. But then it's had an impact that actually they don't need my direct involvement... I would say I've enjoyed that aspect. (Participant D)

Furthermore, participant C suggests that the success of the ELSA programme over time may, in part, be due to the ELSA programme plugging the gap for diminishing specialist SEMH services:

...there's a bigger understanding of the need to have school, for schools to provide support for children and young people from an early age in terms of their social, emotional wellbeing... I feel like it's grown and so probably the need has

grown. So with that, ELSA is a perfect match for lots of...is the answer to a lot of those questions. (Participant C)

Therefore, plugging the gap may serve a purpose for the ELSA programme; it may keep the programme relevant so schools continue investing in it.

However, simultaneously, participants were clear that the ELSA programme should not be used as an alternative to specialist SEMH services, and that ELSAs should be protected from taking on this role. For example, participant E shared that, “we've always been very clear in training, not just with ELSAs themselves, but also with their line manager and staff, this is not a substitute for an external agency like CAMHS. It sits before CAMHS.” Further, participants highlighted challenges of ELSAs working in this way: “challenge wise, I guess a bit of the blurred lines, what is ELSA and what isn't ELSA, and what are the types of children they should be working with? How much responsibility should they hold for these children?” (participant B). Therefore, participants appeared torn between championing and recommending ELSA support and viewing it as a viable alternative to specialist services, and protecting ELSAs and the early intervention function of the ELSA programme. This lack of clarity may, to a degree, maintain the cycle of ELSAs plugging the gap, as EPs continue recommending the ELSA intervention in reports and statutory advice.

4.2.2.2 Subtheme ‘non-robust referral processes’

Participants also highlighted that problems with referral processes can contribute to ELSAs seeing students with higher and more complex needs, perhaps at the expense of those with less visible SEMH needs. Participants described three main challenges in referral systems that can lead to patterns in who accesses ELSA support: inequity, reactivity and not following processes properly. Specifically,

participants described referral systems which aren't fair or equitable due to children skipping the waitlist queue. For example, participants described things like "pushy parents" (participant B) and other pressures in schools leading to referral systems being circumvented: "...they [some children] just skip those first six steps...and go straight onto the waiting list and get slotted somewhere into the waiting list towards the top" (participant B). Further, there can be patterns or biases regarding who is referred for ELSA support in the first place. For example, participant B spoke about referral patterns that they've noticed:

...more vulnerable populations like looked after children they- I mean they've only got 6 in school but kind of drop off the radar altogether, but actually those should be the kids at the top and are just missed all together. (Participant B)

Thus, participants highlighted that young people with certain characteristics e.g., female, internalising behaviours, and looked after experience, aren't referred to ELSA support at all.

Participants also described reactive referral systems whereby students are supported by ELSAs at "the point of crisis" (participant D) rather than at an early intervention stage. Speaking about referral systems, participant D shared that:

...they're [the ELSA is] working in a system that doesn't necessarily see that impact [of ELSA support] and is very reactionary. So instead of being proactive, which is what, how I would see the ELSA role...their only individuals are being referred to them at the point of crisis. (Participant D)

Furthermore, participants highlight that some referral systems aren't well planned, advertised or followed by staff. This can lead to confusion about who should be referred to and supported by the ELSA programme:

...if you haven't sold yourself to the teachers in the right way, then what can happen is they could just refer somebody who at play time doesn't like to go outside. And that might not have anything to do with the SEMH needs. (Participant D)

Therefore, challenges implementing robust referral systems can contribute to the creation and maintenance of patterns in who works with ELSAs and who misses out.

4.2.2.3 Subtheme 'EPs and ELSAs are reacting and adapting'

Due to ELSAs working with students with higher and more complex needs (for the reasons described above), there is a discrepancy between the type of SEMH needs and resources ELSAs are trained in, and the needs of students they work with.

Consequently, there can be misalignment between training and practice. Accordingly, some EPs and ELSAs feel as though the training and supervision isn't keeping up with the times, and needs significant adaptation to remain relevant and useful for ELSAs:

...I was chatting to someone else in the ELSA team yesterday and we were saying how kind of outdated the training slides are... the programme was designed a very long time ago and...we would love it to be a bit more current. (Participant A)

Therefore, at an EP-facilitator level, EPs are updating and adapting the training and supervision, as well as offering additional CPD training in response to the needs of ELSAs. For example, participant C spoke about additional CPD the EPS has run:

...following the pandemic with the domestic abuse, its statistics and showing obviously it increased nationally, but in this borough as well and that we need, the ELSA programme needed to adapt slightly to, to make sure that we were we were

n-, we were....up to date with what was happening for the cohort you know...so then there was an additional bolt on module for that particular area so that, so the ELSAs had that knowledge because that was imp- that's important at the moment.

(Participant C)

In addition, participants spoke about organising an ELSA conference that focused on a topic tailored to the needs of ELSAs:

...we've got a theme this year [for the ELSA conference], which is kind of around building belonging in schools and we're linking that to EBSA [emotionally based school avoidance] because we've found that in ELSA supervision a lot of things that people are bringing a link to that anxiety, that emotionally based school avoidance.

(Participant A)

However, EPs notice a tension between fidelity to the ELSA network's stipulated training, and the need to adapt in response to differences in who's being trained each year, and the type of setting and young people ELSAs are working with: "...you can adapt things and you can update things, but essentially you have to keep within that ELSA framework otherwise it's not ELSA anymore..." (participant A). Therefore, at an EP-facilitator level, adaptations to training and supervision are made, and additional CPD is provided, to ensure that ELSAs have the necessary skills and training to support the needs of students. However, a tension is felt between adapting the programme and maintaining fidelity.

ELSAs also adjust their practice in response to higher and more complex student needs and the context of the setting they are working in. For example, ELSAs working in specialist provision ask EPs for resources more accessible to students:

...we have an ELSA in the hospital school and...she...that ELSA often shares that lots of the materials and the interventions that she trained in during the ELSA programme can't fully be implemented in her setting because children come in and out and aren't or are very ill. (Participant A)

In addition, ELSAs are sometimes having to implement the ELSA model differently to support the needs of the young people they're supporting. For example, participant D describes how an ELSA practices in a specialist setting:

...they [the ELSA and young person] have breakfast together every day, or they might be doing a PSHE activity, but then they might sit next to somebody and do a little piece of individual work, but within the classroom setting. (Participant D)

Therefore, some ELSAs, as well as EPs, are adapting the ELSA programme to ensure they can adequately support students with higher and more complex needs.

There was a sense across interviews that some adaptation EPs and ELSAs make is reactive rather than proactive i.e., it happens in response to the needs of ELSAs and students. For example, EPs consider the accessibility of ELSA resources and activities when ELSAs start working with non-speaking students, rather than the EPS or the ELSA network proactively considering and updating the programme to ensure it's accessible. Participant A speaks about this in their interview:

...thinking about the different kinds of pupils they [ELSAs] may be working with, especially the PMLD school because obviously lots of our resources might be based on language or you might have to sort of thinking about how we can adapt those to children with profound and multiple learning disabilities. (Participant A)

However, some adaptation to the training and supervision may be less reactive. For example, participant D spoke about their work embedding culturally responsive

practice within ELSA training and supervision: "...we have been doing, in the training, we've been adding questions in to kind of get the ELSAs to think about culturally responsive practice..." Therefore, adaptations EP and ELSAs make can often feel reactive to the changing context and needs of students, although there are some exceptions. Regardless of whether adaptation is reactive or proactive, there is a sense that EPs and ELSAs are reacting and adapting within their own LA, rather than being guided by the ELSA network or other LAs' ELSA programmes. Therefore, implementation of the ELSA programme in different settings across different LAs may look very different.

In summary, 'increasingly high and complex CYP needs' explores another aspect of the challenging reality of implementation in schools. It explores participants' reflections that some ELSAs are increasingly working with students with higher and more complex SEMH needs. Taken together, a picture is painted of the role shifting in response to the accessibility of specialist mental health services, the expansion of the ELSA programme into specialist provision, and the way referral pathways are implemented. Consequently, ELSAs are working with students with higher and more complex needs who may be different to the targeted participant group, and children who may also benefit are being missed, lost, or pushed down waitlists.

Consequently, there is misalignment between training and practice. EPs and ELSAs are, therefore, often having to reactively adapt the training, support and intervention to ensure it meets the higher and more complex needs of the young people receiving ELSA support.

4.3 Theme 'successful implementation is happening'

In contrast to the first two themes which explore the challenging reality of implementation, participants were also clear that successful ELSA implementation is happening in schools. All participants could think of at least one ELSA programme which was perceived to be thriving and having a positive impact on students. For example, at an individual school level, participants shared examples of “exceptional” and “exemplary” ELSA practice:

...we had an ELSA in one of our schools who was in the newspaper because it was going so well...so that was really, that's been, that's been really positive. And really and, and made a difference as well, hence it being in the newspaper. So she's definitely a shining light. (Participant C)

When describing successful implementation, most participants spoke about how the programme was initially set up. For example, participants shared scenarios where ELSAs have successfully engaged and promoted the programme to parents, children, and teaching staff by speaking at coffee mornings and INSET days and creating leaflets and ELSA webpages. In addition, in some schools, ELSAs are given suitable rooms to decorate and use, and clear referral pathways are set up and advertised across the school community. Below, participant A describes how a successful ELSA programme was initially set up:

...she [the ELSA] has really got that up and running in the school, so she runs parent coffee mornings, where she'll explain about the ELSA so parents are involved. She speaks at the staff team meetings in the school, so they all know the referral process. It's all really well set up. She has really strong links with the SENDCo, so they also helped to embed it, and she's produced, she's got like, an,

on the school website there's an ELSA page. She's got ELSA leaflets that she can give out to parents and there's a child version as well, so they know that she's the ELSA and what an ELSA is. And yeah, notices, a notice board up in the school.

(Participant A)

Participants shared that, for some ELSAs, successful implementation happens quickly, and, for others, it develops over time; there was a sense that, typically, ELSAs struggle to implement the programme initially but it gets easier and better over time. Participant E demonstrates that it is rare for successful implementation to happen quickly when they say:

...I remember having the first conversation with her [the ELSA] and some of the other ELSAs who had just finished the training, and everyone was talking about how difficult they were finding it just getting set up, getting started basically. But she was the exception, she almost kind of hit the ground running. (Participant E)

In addition, participant A highlights that, for some ELSAs, successful implementation takes time:

...schools that have had ELSA established for a number of years so that they've really, you know, ELSA has clearly gone on a journey in their schools and they've tried things and changed things, and now it's they've got to a place that's, you know, they feel happy. (Participant A)

Therefore, typically, EPs perceive it to take time for the ELSA programme to be implemented successfully, although there are exceptions.

As well as successful implementation at the start of the programme, participants also described ongoing successful implementation in schools. For example, in some schools, ELSAs have adequate time to practice e.g., some ELSAs are full-time, and

can therefore attend supervision consistently: "...she's full time ELSA, so she doesn't have to be dragged into the classroom as a TA or do anything else, like that's her role" (participant A). In addition, some ELSAs are successfully running targeted 1:1 and group interventions based on the needs of students they're supporting, with some flexibility to adapt and identify other students who may benefit from support:

...one thing that I would say the ELSA is very skilled at doing is...if the ELSA has done one thing for individual A and then she has noticed similar patterns occurring with individual B...she'll speak with the SENDCo and let the SENDCo know that she's also going to maybe start some work of a similar nature with person B, even though this isn't a person who has initially been referred to her by the SENDCo or their referral system. (Participant D)

Furthermore, there is a sense from participants that the programme is most successful when ELSAs are empowered, ambitious and autonomous: "...where I see it work is when the ELSAs kind of feel empowered..." (participant B). Therefore, participants notice that successful implementation in some schools is happening in an ongoing capacity.

Additionally, in some schools, referral pathways function well, and there is buy-in and understanding of the ELSA programme across the wider school community i.e., it is embedded and valued: "...one of my primary schools, they really value the E- the ELSA role and they really value the work that she does" (participant D). In addition, some ELSAs have strong support systems around them: "I've noticed that some schools have a really great ELSA set up in terms of they have...a strong team around that ELSA who can help them implement it" (participant A). Furthermore, some schools' senior leadership are proactively engaged in successful

implementation of the ELSA programme: “the ELSA and they [the SENDCo] have weekly meetings, which I think really helps...” (participant B), and others have a school-wide focus, understanding and prioritisation of students’ SEMH.

When successful implementation happens, participants perceive a subsequent positive impact on supervision. Specifically, not only can some ELSAs attend consistently, but they are also perceived to use supervision well i.e., to reflect on the young people they’re working with, rather than on implementation challenges: “...they [ELSA]s will come to our supervision sessions with case, and be unpicking cases” (participant D). Furthermore, ELSAs can positively support each other via sharing resources and advice: “...last year, we mixed up supervision groups and that was really helpful because it was other ELSAs saying this is what I did, this is what helped me...” (participant B). Therefore, participants perceive successful implementation to be happening in individual schools, and this enables ELSAs to fulfil their role and make best use of supervision.

Participants also described successful implementation at a borough-wide level. For example, participants spoke about how much the programme has expanded across the LA due to its positive reputation: “...there’s ELSAs who are doing brilliant work, and that becomes word of mouth...” (participant C). Accordingly, school senior leaders continue to send staff on the ELSA training, with some schools training teams of ELSAs:

...they [the school] invested in four more [ELSA]s. And so you've got the one ELSA who was trained 4-5 years ago who kind of leads the other ELSAs...And then you've got the other ELSAs who kind of take on slightly different roles within that. (Participant B)

Furthermore, participants described successfully facilitating the borough's first ELSA conference, which involved keynote speakers, sharing of practice and space for ELSAs to network. Participant E shared that the conference "went really well last year" and that "it gave an amazing opportunity for all the ELSAs across the borough to come together..." Therefore, participants perceive successful implementation to be happening at both an individual school and ELSA level, and a borough-wide level.

Across interviews, participants described positive consequences of successful implementation. For example, participants perceived ELSAs to enjoy their role: "...I think she [the ELSA] really enjoys her role..." (participant A). In addition, participants felt the programme has a positive impact on students and the wider school community. For example, participant E shared that they enjoy being part of the EPS-ELSA team because they "hear a bit of the fantastic, fantastic work that they're [ELSAs are] doing, to hear about the actual impact it's having, you know, real meaningful change." Furthermore, participants described scenarios where ELSAs are given additional responsibilities, promoted or employed specifically as full-time ELSAs due to the success of the programme:

...at one stage she shifted her role to being employed as an ELSA in the school...it was very much a recognition by her school that this is something that they valued, they saw the really positive effect that it was having on the children in the school, and they really wanted to kind of promote that as much as possible. (Participant E)

Thus, participants perceived there to be positive effects of successful implementation on ELSAs' enjoyment of role, positive change for students, and further career opportunities for ELSAs.

In summary, participants perceived successful implementation to be happening in schools, and some ELSAs are perceived as “exceptional” and “exemplary”. This study suggests that successful implementation is happening both at the start of the programme and in an ongoing capacity, and is facilitated by ELSAs having sufficient time to practice and support from senior leadership, the wider school community and other ELSAs. In addition, this study suggests that ELSA implementation happens at different levels, and successful borough-wide implementation is also happening, evidenced by the numbers of ELSAs being trained, and the recent facilitation of an ELSA conference. Furthermore, in this study, successful implementation is perceived to be associated with positive impacts for students and the wider school community, and for ELSAs themselves as their hard work is rewarded with further career opportunities.

4.4 Theme ‘support from those with power and authority foundational’

There’s a sense from all participants that an integral influence on whether the programme is implemented successfully or not, is the extent to which ELSAs have support from those with power and authority. For example, speaking about what facilitated a successful ELSA programme, participant E shared that “...there was investment from the people who needed to be invested, who kind of held the power basically.” Within schools, participants conceptualised those with power and authority as senior leadership and ELSA line managers. Most of the time, participants perceived successful implementation to depend on whether senior leaders understand, value, and buy-in to the ELSA programme; even where participants highlighted other factors related to success e.g., personal characteristics of an ELSA, there is a sense that, ultimately, support from those with power and authority is needed: “...but I think that

even though she's [the ELSA's] incredible, she's always also had the backing from the school, from SLT [senior leadership team], from the SENDCo" (participant A).

However, some exceptions are mentioned. For example, participant B suggests that ELSAs should "get that buy-in, if you're not getting the buy-in from your senior leadership team and SENDCo, get that buy-in from everyone else around you." This may suggest that other stakeholders e.g., parents, also have some power in the implementation of the ELSA programme. Furthermore, bigger socioeconomic and political challenges e.g., financial constraints and staffing of a school, are perceived, at times, to have more influence on the programme's implementation than senior leaders' buy-in. For example, participant E shared that some schools can't afford to train ELSAs: "...the financial climate for a lot of schools have meant that they've had to say no [to the programme] when they've really, really wanted it." Therefore, most of the time, support from those with power and authority, namely school senior leaders and ELSA line managers, is perceived as foundational for successful implementation. However, this can interact with wider sociopolitical and economic context, and other stakeholders in the ELSA programme may also influence implementation.

Participants also describe their own power, authority and influence, as EPs, on the success of the programme's implementation. The power and authority EPs hold is less explicitly referenced than that of senior leaders, however it is still present across interviews. For example, in this quote, participant A responds to a question about whether EPs can support implementation: "I think the EP has a really key role there. Often ELSAs might not feel like they have the authority to ask for more time or more resources...EPs in schools can, can support that maybe." In this example, the power and authority EPs hold is implicitly referenced in the EP's ability to step in to support ELSAs who lack authority.

Furthermore, participants described EPs using their power and authority in different ways at different stages in the ELSA programme's implementation. For example, initially, EPs use their power and authority to set up the programme by actively promoting ELSA training to schools: "...every year, I, I won't use the word like bully, I strongly encourage them [the school] to send a member of staff on [the ELSA] training..." (participant A). In addition, EPs try to communicate to school senior leaders expectations about what ELSAs need e.g., access to supervision and time and space to practice, and the boundaries of the ELSA role e.g., as an early intervention programme:

...they've [the EPS-ELSA team] put in particular meetings for SLT in schools where they give the time to them and, and say 'OK do you have questions, this is what the expectations are and the commitment' and really try to solidify that prior to the training. (Participant C).

Once the ELSA programme is set up in schools, link EPs use their power and authority to keep it on the agenda and explore how it's being used. For example, participants described talking about the ELSA programme in planning meetings: "...so I carve out time with the SENDCo to talk about ELSA. And then following that I will have a planning meeting with my school ELSA" (participant D). Some EPs also suggest and plan interventions with ELSAs:

...so at one stage we had a three-way conversation, me as link EP, the ELSA who I was also supervising, and then the SENDCo as well.... what we ended up doing together was...a group-based intervention for a group of Year 10s. But rather than I doing it or the ELSA doing it, we ended up co-facilitating, which I thought was like a really nice example of my being a link EP, being that person's ELSA supervisor

and being able to, I was kind of embedded within the school system and I was able to have those conversations and get that work set up. (Participant E)

Additionally, some EPs are part of the ELSA referral process: "...in that school, children only work with the ELSA if they've been referred to work with her from me or from another professional" (participant B). Participants also described their role in protecting, upskilling and empowering ELSAs. For example, EPs may protect ELSAs by supporting them to push back on inappropriate referrals, upskill them by co-delivering and modelling interventions, and empower them by exploring their own resources and capabilities in supervision: "I think there's that bit in supervision, where you've kind of gotta like, give them a bit of a pep talk, push them a little bit, give them permission and kind of go, OK, do that" (participant B). EPs also have a regulatory role whereby they track which ELSAs attend supervision (a requirement to practice as an ELSA):

...if they [ELSA]s don't turn up to supervision...that's something EPs have to keep an eye on, so they keep, you know they keep a list and if somebody's not turned up a couple of times then that becomes an issue. (Participant C)

Therefore, EPs, alongside school senior leaders, also have power and authority which they use in different ways, at different stages of the ELSA programme, to influence how it is implemented in schools. However, the power and authority EPs hold is more implicitly referenced compared to that of school senior leaders.

EPs and school senior leaders do not influence the implementation of the ELSA programme in silo; there is a sense from participants that they must work together collaboratively to ensure the programme's success: "...what we've [the EPS-ELSA team have] been focusing on this year...is trying to get SENDCos and the senior

leadership in schools involved in the ELSA programme...” (participant A). EPs try to work with school senior leaders in different ways. For example, last academic year, the EPS-ELSA team offered senior leaders regular, online sessions about the programme and what’s needed to ensure its success: “...we’ve also offered kind of lunch and learn drop-in sessions for SENDCos just to explain more about the ELSA programme and how they can support, and some examples of good practice” (participant A).

Additionally, participants described scenarios where senior leaders have contacted the school’s link EP, to ask them to support their ELSA to develop a particular intervention for students:

...the SENDCo is asking me [the school’s link EP] to, they've got a child who's recently diagnosed with ADHD, would you be able to work with our ELSA to help them think about what she could do to support that understanding of ADHD, what's, what this means for their identity. (Participant B)

Furthermore, the support required and given by EPs is mediated by the support of senior leaders i.e., participants shared that when senior leadership buy-in is higher, EP support reduces and vice versa:

...in some schools, I do less of that [bringing ELSA to planning meetings] one of my primary schools, they really value the E-the ELSA role and they really value the work that she does. And because of that they protect her time anyway. So therefore I don't, I don't have planning meetings with the SENDCo about what she's doing. (Participant D)

Therefore, not only do EPs and school senior leaders have power and authority to influence implementation, but there is also a perception that they must work together to facilitate its success.

Aligned with the notion that successful implementation depends on support from those with power and authority, there is a perception that ELSAs lack power and authority to implement the programme successfully (hence needing support from those who do). For example, ELSAs can feel under pressure to take on inappropriate referrals: "...people will bring that kind of issue [inappropriate referrals] to the supervision space. They don't feel for whatever reason that this [referral] is appropriate, but they feel almost kind of under pressure to take it on basically" (participant E). When this happens, ELSAs sometimes look to EPs to have difficult conversations with their line managers: "... [there is] a little bit of, wanting us as EPs to step in and have the conversations with the school" (participant B). ELSAs' lack of power and authority can also contribute to ELSAs becoming stuck in tokenistic implementation cycles; consequently, as described in 'the ELSA programme's lost potential', some ELSAs use the power they do have, to leave the school: "...those ELSAs, from my understanding, left because they weren't able to do the ELSA role..." (participant B). Therefore, there is a sense, in interviews, that ELSAs lack sufficient power and authority to successfully implement the ELSA programme, hence needing support from those who do.

However, there are also confusing, sometimes contradictory messages regarding ELSAs' power and authority across interviews. For example, as explored previously, participants held the view that successful implementation happens when ELSAs are empowered, ambitious and autonomous: "I think when it works well, it's where the ELSA feels really confident in knowing what the needs the child might have, what

their strengths are and holding a very holistic view from the outset” (participant E). At the same time, however, participants also suggested that ELSAs require permission from those with power and authority to feel empowered in role:

...where I see it work is when the ELSAs kind of feel empowered and know, almost given permission, I think sometimes in supervision to go make it what you want to do. What do you want from the ELSA role? Make it that. (Participant B)

In addition, participants argued that ELSAs need to have difficult conversations with school senior leaders themselves:

...I don't think it's particularly helpful [EPs talking to senior leaders on an ELSA's behalf]. Maybe it's not very empowering and actually giving the resource to do it themselves...where I've seen it works...[is] when the ELSAs push what their role is. (Participant B)

In contrast, participants also suggested that ELSAs need those with power and authority to step in and have difficult conversations for them:

...I feel like, that they [ELSA]s can only do so much and at some point it needs to be taken over by somebody in a position of authority that can make those executive decisions...because I just think otherwise, bless them, they'll burn out if it's all them just advertising what they can do and no, yeah, it definitely needs to be a shared responsibility. (Participant D)

Therefore, perceptions of ELSAs' power and authority are not always clear; in reality, perceptions are nuanced and can be confusing and contradictory at times.

In summary, 'support from those with power and authority foundational' explores the idea that an integral influence on implementation is the extent to which ELSAs

have support from those with power and authority. Those with power and authority are conceptualised in interviews as school senior leaders and, more implicitly, EPs, and there is a sense that successful implementation is more likely when EPs and school senior leaders work together. In addition, there is a sense that ELSAs lack sufficient power and authority to implement the ELSA programme successfully, hence them needing support from people who do. The lack of power and authority ELSAs hold may be in stark contrast to their increasing responsibility to support students with higher and more complex needs, sometimes as an alternative to specialist SEMH services. Additionally, confusing and contradictory messages regarding how much power and authority ELSAs should have and exert, may be at odds with the hierarchy operating in schools, and lead to ELSAs (and EPs) feeling unsure about what's within the ELSA remit.

4.5 Chapter summary

This chapter has outlined the knowledge generated from the data analysis process. A visual representation of the themes was provided in Figure 4 on p. 92, before each idea was explored in more depth alongside interview quotes. Overall, this study suggests that the implementation of the ELSA programme is complex and varied. For example, there's a sense of both successful and less successful implementation practices happening in schools. In some schools, there are "exceptional" ELSAs and school systems which implement the programme well. Subsequently, there is a perceived positive impact on students and the wider school community. On the other hand, in other schools, potential benefits of the ELSA programme are lost, sometimes quickly, as ELSAs aren't given time and space to practice. Benefits of the programme can also be lost after a period of successful implementation, as changes within the school system can knock successful implementation off course. This study

suggests that, regardless of how it happens, when implementation breaks down, it can be difficult to get things back on track.

Findings suggest that the ELSA role may be shifting, as some ELSAs increasingly work with children and young people with higher and more complex needs, perhaps outside of the typical ELSA realm. Accordingly, there is a sense that children who would benefit from the programme are being missed or pushed down wait lists. There may be different reasons for this. For example, ELSAs increasingly work in diverse school settings, including specialist provision where the needs of students are higher. Furthermore, some ELSAs are perceived to plug the gap for diminishing or less accessible specialist SEMH services e.g., EPSs and CAMHS. Therefore, rather than functioning in an early intervention capacity (as intended), some ELSAs may be increasingly working with children and young people in crisis who can't access more specialist support. In addition, non-robust referral processes can lead to inequities and patterns in ELSA referrals, which may also contribute to ELSAs supporting students with higher and more complex needs. Due to the changing needs of students, some EPs and ELSAs are reactively adapting the training, supervision and intervention to ensure it remains fit for purpose, whilst trying to maintain fidelity.

In contrast, the need for ELSAs and the ELSA programme to have support from those with power and authority (both EPs and senior leaders in schools) remains constant. In this study, support from those with power and authority is perceived to determine how successfully the ELSA programme is implemented, above most other factors. In line with this view, ELSAs aren't perceived to have sufficient power and authority to implement the programme successfully without support. However, this study highlights that ELSAs' perceived lack of power and authority is at odds with the

high responsibility they have to support students with higher and more complex needs, sometimes as an alternative to specialist SEMH support. In addition, there can be confusing, contradictory messages about the level of power and authority ELSAs should have and exert, which leads to a lack of clarity about what is and isn't within the boundary of the ELSA role.

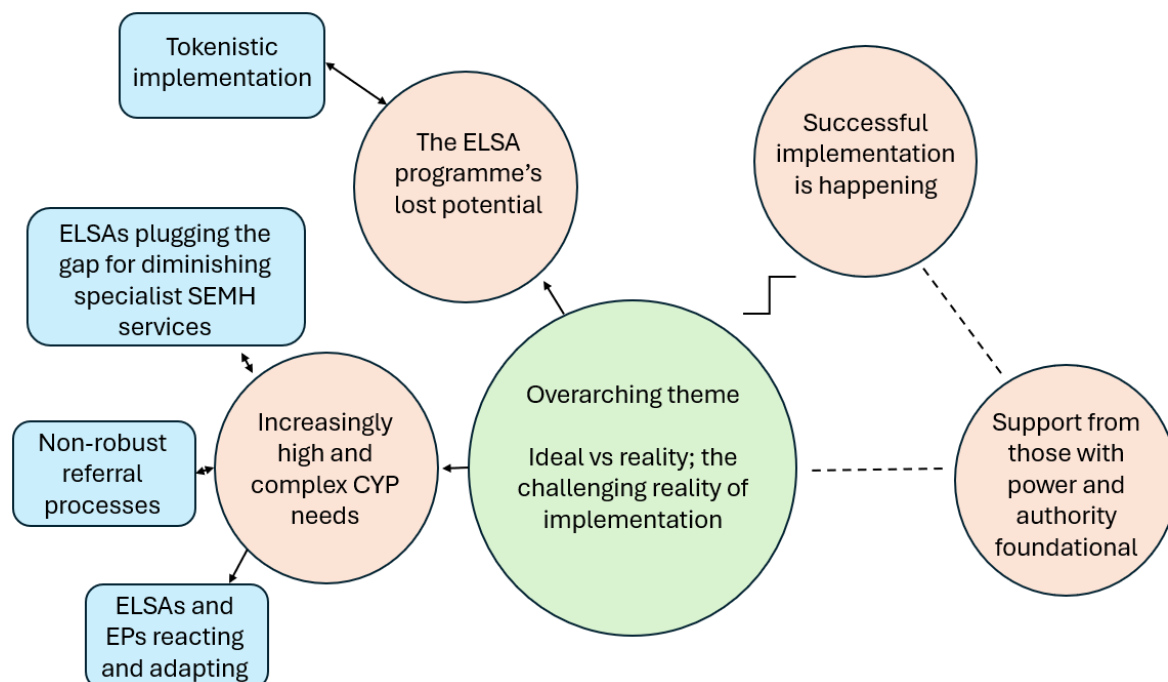
Chapter 5: Discussion

5.1 Chapter overview

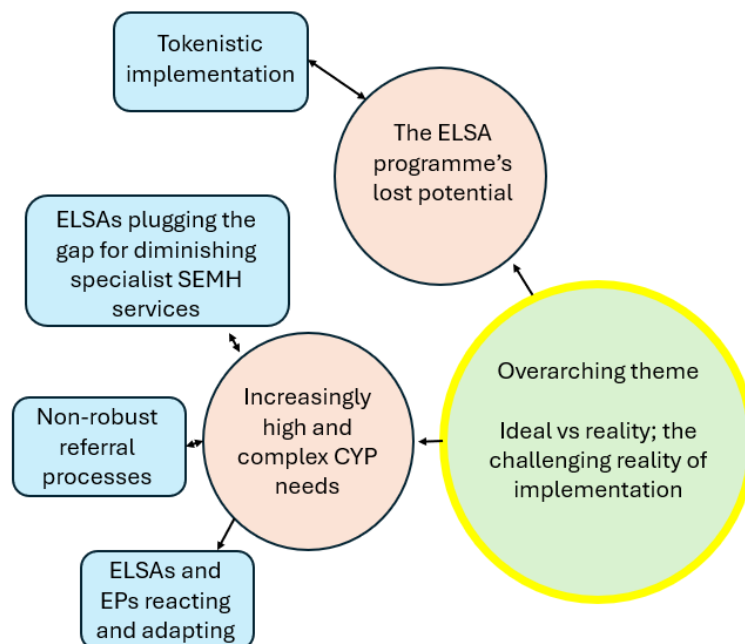
This study aimed to address the following research question: What are educational psychologists' experiences of the implementation of the ELSA programme in school settings? To do this, 5 EPs within one inner London borough were interviewed, and the data was analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022);

Figure 5 provides an overview of the findings. In this chapter, the findings from this study are summarised and considered within the context of existing knowledge and research. Furthermore, possible explanations of the findings and links to theory are explored. In addition, implications for practice are described and opportunities for future research are highlighted before strengths and limitations of this research are outlined. Finally, the research dissemination strategy is described, and a conclusion is offered.

Figure 5: Thematic map of key findings



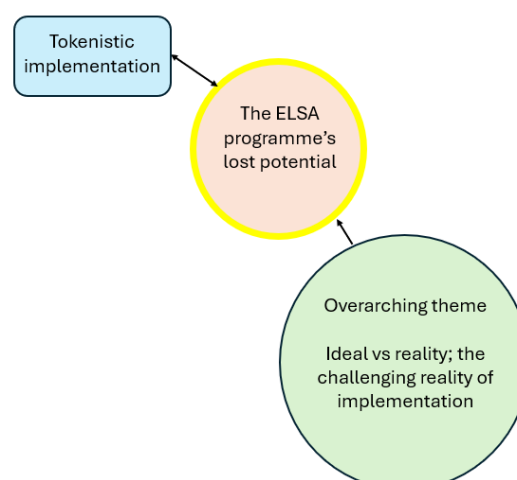
5.2 Overarching theme 'ideal vs reality; the challenging reality of implementation'



This study suggests that EPs perceive a difference between 'ideal' implementation of the ELSA programme, and its actual implementation in schools. Furthermore, not only is there a difference, but how the programme is implemented in some schools poses challenges for ELSAs, EPs and the long-term sustainability of the programme. Specific examples of the difference between ideal and actual implementation include some ELSAs not being given time, a room, or resources to practice, whilst others increasingly support students with higher and more complex needs, perhaps outside of the typical ELSA realm. These examples are further explored in sections 5.2.1 and 5.2.2. Therefore, this study suggests that EPs perceive the ELSA programme to be implemented differently in different schools, and that, sometimes, the programme is implemented in a way that creates challenges for EPs and ELSAs, and the long-term sustainability of the programme.

In existing ELSA literature, differences in implementation, and a discrepancy between ideal and actual practice is described. For example, differences in how much time ELSAs have for their role (Bradley, 2010; Dodds et al., 2015), how supported ELSAs feel (Bradley, 2010; Bravery & Harris, 2009), and how the intervention is being undertaken (e.g., group, 1:1, and intervention length) (Balampanidou, 2019; Bradley, 2010; Dodds et al., 2015; Fairall, 2020; Nicholson-Roberts, 2019; Peters, 2020; Thomas, 2022; Wong et al., 2020) are well evidenced. Furthermore, some practices in schools are very different from what's recommended. For example, studies have found that some ELSA interventions have lasted for 1-2 years (Balampanidou, 2019; Nicholson-Roberts, 2019; Wong et al., 2020), compared to the recommended 6-12 weeks (ELSA Network, 2017a). However, this not a challenge unique to the ELSA programme; evidence-based interventions are often not implemented as intended (Bronstein, 2019; Chidley & Stringer, 2020; Greenberg et al., 2005; Jennings, 2023), and this is known as the implementation gap. Therefore, in line with existing ELSA literature, this study suggests that actual ELSA practice can look different to what's intended. Furthermore, this challenge aligns with a broader implementation gap noted within implementation science literature.

5.2.1 Theme 'the ELSA programme's lost potential'



In this study, EPs perceived that, due to implementation challenges, potential benefits of the programme e.g., positive impacts on students and the wider school community, can be lost in different ways at different stages of implementation. Sometimes, potential benefits of the ELSA programme are lost quickly e.g., within the first year of implementation. At other times, potential benefits are lost suddenly after a period of successful implementation. For example, implementation can be knocked off course by changes within a school system e.g., the Covid-19 pandemic or changes to senior leadership. When this happens, it is difficult to get the programme back on track. Accordingly, even well-functioning ELSA programmes can be derailed without contingency plans and monitoring.

Within current ELSA literature, there is some support for the notion that implementation challenges can occur quickly i.e., in initial implementation phases (Fairall, 2020). Further, there is some suggestion that long-term implementation needs to be considered. For example, Dalby (2024) considers how funding cuts to schools might negatively impact the long-term sustainability of the programme, and Nicholson-Roberts (2019) recommends that schools have contingency plans. Attending to long-term implementation is also emphasised in implementation science literature (Blase et al., 2012). For example, Blase et al. (2012) argue that the sustainability of a programme needs to be monitored at every implementation phase even after 'full implementation' (integration of a programme into a school system). Further, they recommend that when big changes occur e.g., staff turnover or a change in leadership, stakeholders return to earlier implementation phases, to ensure the programme stays on track. Therefore, there is some support in ELSA and implementation science literature that ELSA stakeholders must attend to implementation challenges both at early phases of implementation and in an ongoing

capacity, to avoid potential benefits of the programme being lost. However, little is yet known about complete implementation breakdown of the ELSA programme, as most research studying implementation has recruited schools where ELSA support is functioning (Fairall, 2020; Nicholson-Roberts, 2019). Therefore, it will be helpful for future research to explicitly study ELSA programmes whose implementation has broken down, exploring, for example, how often this occurs, at what phase of implementation, why, and whether implementation is later restored.

This study highlights that tokenistic implementation is one way that potential benefits of the ELSA programme can be lost, sometimes quickly in early stages of implementation. Tokenistic implementation describes schools investing in ELSA training but subsequently failing to provide the right conditions and support to ensure its successful implementation, hence its implementation is tokenistic. Common manifestations of tokenistic implementation include ELSAs not being given time or space to practice, and ELSAs holding additional school roles which pull them in different, sometimes conflicting, directions. Consequently, ELSAs' ability to practice effectively and attend supervision is negatively impacted. In this study, tokenistic implementation is perceived to be a common and widespread challenge often brought to supervision. Therefore, EPs perceive tokenistic implementation to be a common implementation challenge which negatively impacts ELSA practice, thus, in this way, potential benefits of the programme are lost.

The notion of tokenistic implementation i.e., not having the right conditions or support to implement the programme effectively, is supported in ELSA literature. Previous studies have similarly found that some ELSAs experience a lack of time and space to practice, and are pulled in different directions by competing role demands; furthermore, when this happens, it acts as a barrier to effective

implementation (Bowerman & Davies, 2018; Bradley, 2010; Dalby, 2024; Edwards, 2016; Mann, 2014; Peters, 2020; Thomas, 2022). For example, Dalby (2024) found that additional roles ELSAs hold reduces time spent undertaking ELSA work, and sometimes ELSAs have to cancel sessions last minute due to unexpected changes to their role. Further, existing ELSA literature highlights that not all ELSAs are given time to attend supervision (Thomas, 2022); Edwards (2016) found that only 10% of line managers planned to purchase supervision sessions for their ELSA(s).

Therefore, there is evidence of tokenistic implementation in existing ELSA literature, supporting the notion that it is likely a common and widespread challenge impacting how successfully the ELSA programme can be implemented.

In this study, EPs perceived there to be different reasons for unhelpful and tokenistic implementation practices. For example, a lack of meaningful investment from school senior leaders, and a lack of school resource and staffing capacity were perceived to contribute to this. The need for meaningful investment from school leaders is well documented both within ELSA (Fairall, 2020; Mann, 2014; McEwen, 2019; Peters, 2020; Robertson, 2021; Rogers & Kelly, 2024a; Thomas, 2022) and wider implementation science literature (Blase et al., 2012). For example, Blase et al. (2012) argue that a foundational implementation driver is having support, buy-in and active engagement from leadership. Accordingly, it perhaps makes sense that a lack of leadership support can lead to tokenistic implementation.

Some ELSA studies have started to consider how the wider sociopolitical and economic context impacts the ELSA programme, although this research is still in its infancy. For example, Dalby (2024) explores the negative impact of reduced funding, high workloads and staff retention issues on the implementation of the ELSA programme. Within wider UK discourse, the challenges currently facing schools are

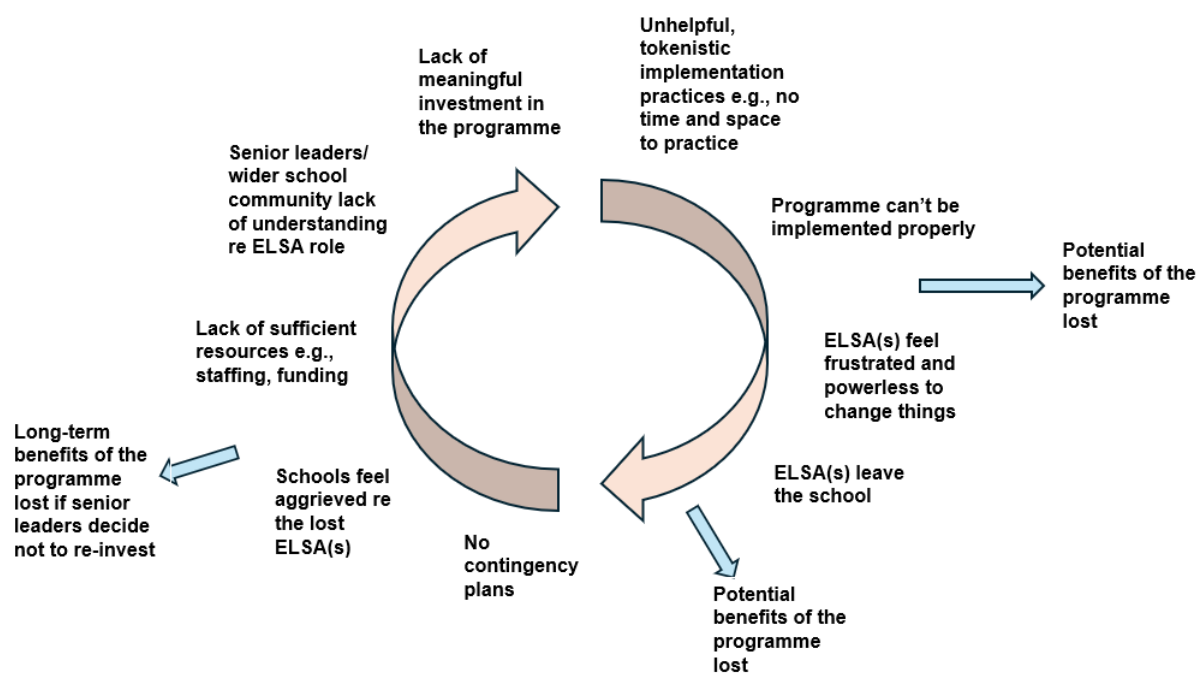
well documented. For example, schools face financial pressures and teacher recruitment and retention challenges (Fearon & Henson, 2022) at a time when the needs of pupils are getting higher (UK Government, 2024; UK Parliament, 2025; Unicef, 2024). Therefore, it likely makes sense that contextual challenges and pressures on schools influence how meaningfully the ELSA programme can be implemented. Thus, when schools are under pressure and senior leaders aren't meaningfully engaged, tokenistic implementation can occur.

Regardless of how it comes about, this study suggests that tokenistic implementation impacts the long-term sustainability of the ELSA programme. This study illuminates a cycle whereby ELSAs leave school settings due to frustration and dissatisfaction after experiencing tokenistic implementation. Not only are potential benefits of the programme lost at this stage, but, sometimes, senior leaders can feel aggrieved by this and decide not to re-invest in training another ELSA. Thus, any future benefits of the ELSA programme are also lost. Little is currently known about ELSAs leaving their role due to implementation challenges, however it is noted that the ELSA role can produce difficult feelings which ELSAs must navigate (Fairall, 2020; Nicholson-Roberts, 2019). Therefore, this study suggests that tokenistic implementation can impact the long-term sustainability of the ELSA programme and lead to potential benefits of the programme being lost.

Applying a systems theory lens can offer insight into how possible patterns like the one described above are created and maintained. Within systems theory, a system can be described as 'a set of parts that communicate with and influence each other in a circular way, such that the system is organised in response to the demands of the environment, and adapts and develops over time' (Garven & White, 2009, p. 197). In addition, a key concept of systemic thinking is to consider a whole

pattern or system, rather than individual parts, as the whole is thought to be greater than the sum of its parts (Von Bertalanffy, 1968). Applying a systemic lens, Figure 6 offers an illustration of how the factors described above may interact and feed into one another regarding 'the ELSA programme's lost potential'. This representation hypothesises a potential cycle whereby unhelpful and tokenistic implementation practices, loss of ELSAs, lack of contingency plans, contextual challenges in schools, lack of understanding and engagement from senior leaders, and loss of potential, feed into each other in a circular fashion. Thus, one thing alone does not cause the other in a linear way; they all interact to create and then maintain an implementation cycle. Therefore, a systemic lens can be used to gain insight into potential patterns in how the ELSA programme is implemented in schools; this lens is used throughout this chapter to explore both the 'parts' of this study's findings i.e., the themes, and the 'whole' i.e., consolidating the themes to generate an overall picture of EPs' experiences of the ELSA programme's implementation.

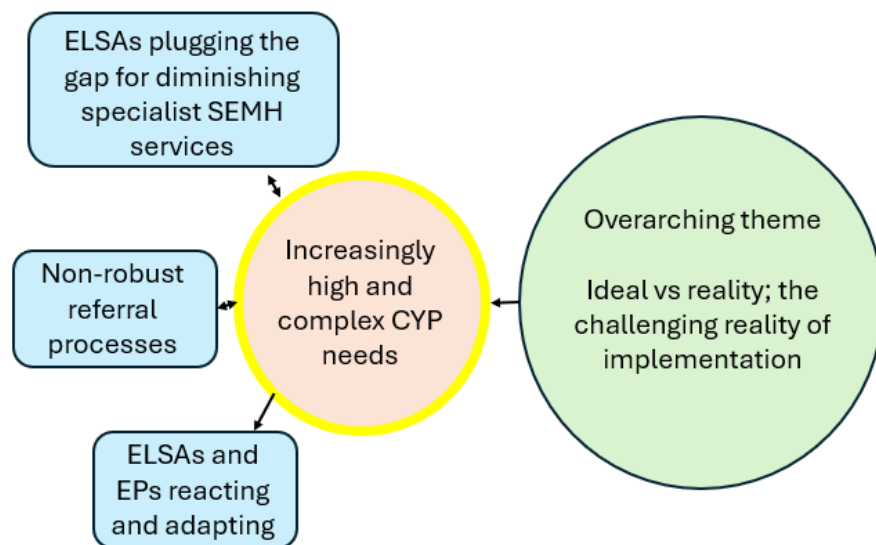
Figure 6: Implementation cycle 'the ELSA programme's lost potential'



Not only can the application of systems theory explore patterns in implementation, it also has implications for developing interventions to improve ELSA implementation. If EPs, ELSAs and school leaders are aware of circular patterns in implementation, different options become available regarding where to target an intervention and what an intervention may look like. For example, using the cycle depicted in Figure 6, an EP may decide that more needs to be done to gain meaningful engagement from school leaders at the start of the programme, or a senior leader may decide to create a contingency plan in case their ELSA leaves. Accordingly, applying a systems theory lens offers insights into how the 'parts' interact, facilitate and maintain each other to create a 'whole' system. This offers both an understanding of what might be happening and options for intervening to create positive change.

In summary, 'the ELSA programme's lost potential' explores one aspect of EPs' experience of how the ELSA programme is implemented in schools. It considers how potential benefits of the programme e.g., positive impacts for students and the wider school community, can be lost quickly via tokenistic implementation practices, or suddenly after a period of successful implementation. Currently, when implementation breaks down, EPs perceive it to be difficult to get things back on track, and some ELSAs are leaving their roles due to difficulties practicing properly. Applying a systemic lens offers a new perspective on what ELSA implementation cycles can look like, as well as how factors interact, and patterns are maintained over time.

5.2.2 Theme ‘increasingly high and complex CYP needs’



This study suggests that some ELSAs are increasingly working with children and young people with higher and more complex SEMH needs, sometimes alongside medical needs, special educational needs and physical disability. Consequently, some ELSAs share in supervision that they feel out of their depth and ‘unsafe’ in their work due to the complexity of students’ needs. In addition, there is a perception that as ELSAs work with students with higher and more complex needs, other young people who would benefit from ELSA support e.g., those with less externalising behaviours, are missed or pushed down waitlists.

In ELSA guidance, the target participant group for ELSA support is broad and somewhat unclear, which may contribute to some ELSAs working with students with higher and more complex needs. Burton and Shotton (2018) explain that ELSAs are trained to develop interventions in the areas of emotional awareness, anger management, self-esteem, social and communication skills and friendship skills. However, Burton (2018) is clear that ELSAs should not work with ‘children and young people on issues beyond what might be considered an appropriate professional

remit for an ELSA' (p. 19), and stipulates some examples of issues outside of this e.g., eating disorders, self-harm and post-traumatic stress disorders. Role boundaries aren't clear, however, as Burton (2018) also writes that 'this is not to say that ELSAs are redundant in relation to children exhibiting this level of need', and that 'there may nevertheless be a wholly legitimate role for an ELSA in supporting a young person experiencing such difficulties' (p. 19). Therefore, there is a lack of clarity about the level of need ELSAs should be supporting, which may contribute to some ELSAs increasingly working with students with higher and more complex needs.

This study therefore argues that it would be beneficial for the ELSA role boundary to be more clearly defined; this argument is supported by ELSA literature and psychological theory. Within ELSA literature, there is a strong sense that more clarity regarding the boundary of the ELSA role is supportive of and necessary for successful implementation (Fairall, 2020; Mann, 2014; McEwen, 2019; Nicholson-Roberts, 2019; Russo, 2022). In addition, sometimes, key stakeholders of the ELSA programme e.g., young people, parents, and school staff, lack clarity regarding the boundary of the ELSA role (Barker, 2017; Edwards, 2016; Hills, 2016; Wilding & Claridge, 2016). The importance of role boundaries is also emphasised in psychological theory. The BART model is an acronym which stands for boundary, authority, role and task (Green & Molenkamp, 2005), and it can be used to analyse and explore group dynamics and processes (Green & Molenkamp, 2005). This model emphasises the need for boundaries which are clearly specified, agreed upon and adhered to (Green & Molenkamp, 2005). Boundaries matter because they 'can be seen as the container that 'holds' the task. If the container is inadequate or has holes in it, it will not support the task' (Green & Molenkamp, 2005, p. 3). Thus, it is

difficult to effectively complete a task without clear boundaries. Therefore, it would be beneficial for the ELSA role boundary to be more clearly defined, especially as permeable boundaries may facilitate ELSAs to work with increasingly high and more complex student needs.

There is some suggestion in recent literature that ELSAs are working with students with higher and more complex needs. For example, Fairall (2020), in their exploration of how the programme is implemented in two primary schools, found that in one school, only students with complex externalising behaviours were put forward for ELSA support (although in the other, a range of SEMH needs were referred). Further, Thomas (2022) found that EPs spoke of the 'ever-increasing complexity of needs of the children that [ELSAs] are working with' (p. 34), and this was an issue frequently brought to supervision. Overall, however, there is very little research exploring who ELSAs are working with. There is some evidence to suggest ELSAs are working with children with looked after experience and adopted children (Bowerman & Davies, 2018; Bradley, 2010), and one study found that some secondary aged pupils accessing the programme had already taken part at primary school (Peters, 2020). However, this is an understudied aspect of the ELSA programme's implementation, thus not much is known about the 'programme reach' (the extent to which the programme's intended participants take part in the intervention) (Durlak & DuPre, 2008). Therefore, this study suggests that some ELSAs are increasingly working with students with higher and more complex needs, but more research in this area is required.

This study highlights that, as ELSA training and implementation has expanded, ELSAs are working in a diverse range of settings; this may also contribute to the higher and more complex needs of students accessing ELSA support. For example,

participants mentioned ELSAs working in Alternative Provision, hospital schools and specialist educational settings for those with PMLD. Consequently, the needs of students in these settings are likely to be higher and more complex. To date, ELSA research has mainly explored the experience of primary and secondary aged pupils. Some research has included ELSAs and students from specialist provision, but this hasn't been the main focus of the study and dataset sizes are small (Edwards, 2016; Russo, 2022; Silver et al., 2024). Therefore, the higher and more complex needs of students may, in part, reflect the type of settings ELSAs are delivering the programme in. However, as little is yet known about this, it will be useful for future research to explore who ELSAs are working with, in which settings, and whether the impact and implementation looks different for ELSAs working in this way i.e., does the positive impact of the programme extend to children and young people with multiple, complex and high needs?

This study also highlights that the accessibility of specialist SEMH services e.g., CAMHS and EPSs, may influence the implementation of the ELSA programme. Specifically, as it becomes harder for schools to successfully refer students to specialist SEMH services, the ELSA programme may be viewed by and implemented in schools as an alternative to specialist SEMH support, thus it plugs the gap. Nationally, young people's mental health needs are increasing (Care Quality Commission, 2025; Mind, 2024) whilst, simultaneously, it is harder to access specialist mental health services (Care Quality Commission, 2025; Mind, 2024). For example, only a third of children and young people with a mental health difficulty were able to access treatment last year (Mind, 2024), and there are reported to be 28,663 vacancies in England's total mental health workforce (Mind, 2024). Furthermore, in schools, senior leaders recognise that 'overwhelmed external

support services are having a detrimental impact on providing support for pupil mental health and wellbeing' (Fearon & Henson, 2022, p. 5). Therefore, this study posits that as thresholds increase for specialist SEMH services e.g., CAMHS, so too may the threshold for the ELSA intervention, as those students with higher and more complex needs still require support. However, it will be useful for future studies to explore this relationship further, as well as exploring, in more depth, the influence of wider sociopolitical and economic context on the ELSA programme.

It may make sense that ELSAs are the ones plugging the gap for more specialist SEMH services, because teaching assistants (who are primarily trained to become ELSAs) already have a high level of responsibility in schools. Ravalier et al. (2021) argue that teaching assistants (TAs) 'work with some of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children who, arguably, require the most specialist and high-level care' (Ravalier et al., 2021, p. 788). Further, Sharples et al. (2016) note that 'a key reason for increasing the numbers of TAs was to help deal with problems with teacher workloads' (p. 5). Thus, TAs, and subsequently ELSAs, are already positioned in school systems as people who reduce workloads and support students with the highest and most complex needs. Accordingly, it may make sense that ELSAs are plugging the gap for specialist SEMH services because of how TAs are already positioned and utilised in UK schools.

Non-robust referral systems may also contribute to ELSAs increasingly working with students with higher and more complex needs. This study suggests that, sometimes, referral processes can be inequitable, reactive, and not followed properly. This can impact who ELSAs work with and create patterns or biases in who is referred to ELSA support in the first place. Furthermore, non-robust referral systems can lead to ELSAs working with students at a point of crisis rather than in

an early intervention capacity, and cause confusion about who is best referred to ELSA support. Existing ELSA literature reports differences in how referral systems are implemented. For example, Peters (2020) found that secondary school ELSAs receive inappropriate referrals, and studies note that sometimes ELSA support can be used reactively (Fairall, 2020; Rogers & Kelly, 2024a). Referral pathways for the ELSA programme are important to implement correctly (Burton, 2018) and can be viewed as part of the infrastructure that needs to be thoughtfully set up during the installation phase of implementation (Blase et al., 2012). Therefore, there is some evidence that, despite the importance of referral systems, ELSA referral pathways aren't always well implemented, and this can contribute to ELSAs working with students with increasingly high and complex needs. However, little research currently explores how referral pathways are used within the ELSA programme (Bowerman & Davies, 2018; Fairall, 2020), thus this is an area requiring further study.

Due to the higher and more complex needs of some students accessing ELSAs support, there appears to be a misalignment between training and practice developing. For example, ELSAs are trained to support particular needs using a particular set of resources and interventions e.g., comic strip conversations and the Ideal Self Task (Burton, 2009; Moran, 2020). However, for some ELSAs, the training isn't covering the range of needs they're supporting, and the resources and interventions aren't suitable or accessible for the students taking part. Therefore, EPs and ELSAs are having to reactively adapt the training, supervision, and the intervention to ensure it remains relevant, accessible and useful for ELSAs and students. For example, EPs both update the training and provide extra CPD sessions in response to the needs of ELSAs e.g., covering domestic abuse, and emotionally based school non-attendance (EBSNA). Furthermore, some ELSAs

must adapt or ask for new resources because those given in training aren't accessible for some pupils, as well as adapting the ELSA model, sometimes quite differently, to their school setting.

Consequently, EPs interviewed experienced a tension between fidelity to the ELSA network's stipulated training, and the need to adapt in response to differences in who's being trained each year, and the type of setting and students ELSAs are working in and with. In addition, in this study, there is a sense that some adaptations are made reactively in response to a challenge e.g., non-speaking children being unable to access ELSA resources, rather than EPSs or the ELSA Network pre-emptively and proactively updating the programme before challenges occur. Regardless of whether adaptations are made reactively or proactively, there is a sense that EPs and ELSAs are adapting the programme within individual schools or LAs, rather than being guided by the ELSA Network or other LAs' ELSA programmes. Therefore, as the training becomes older, and the needs of some students become higher and more complex, this study suggests a misalignment between training and practice is developing, thus EPs and ELSAs are adapting the programme to ensure it remains relevant and useful.

This may mean that ELSA programmes across the country (i.e., the training, supervision, and implementation of the programme in schools) look very different to each other, and this has implications for the subsequent impact of the ELSA programme. Although flexibility and autonomy are highlighted as a key part of the ELSA programme (Burton, 2018), there is a well-established tension between the flexibility to adapt interventions and programme fidelity (the extent to which a programme is delivered as originally designed) (Durlak & DuPre, 2008). Whilst it is acknowledged that some adaptation is required to embed a programme in a setting

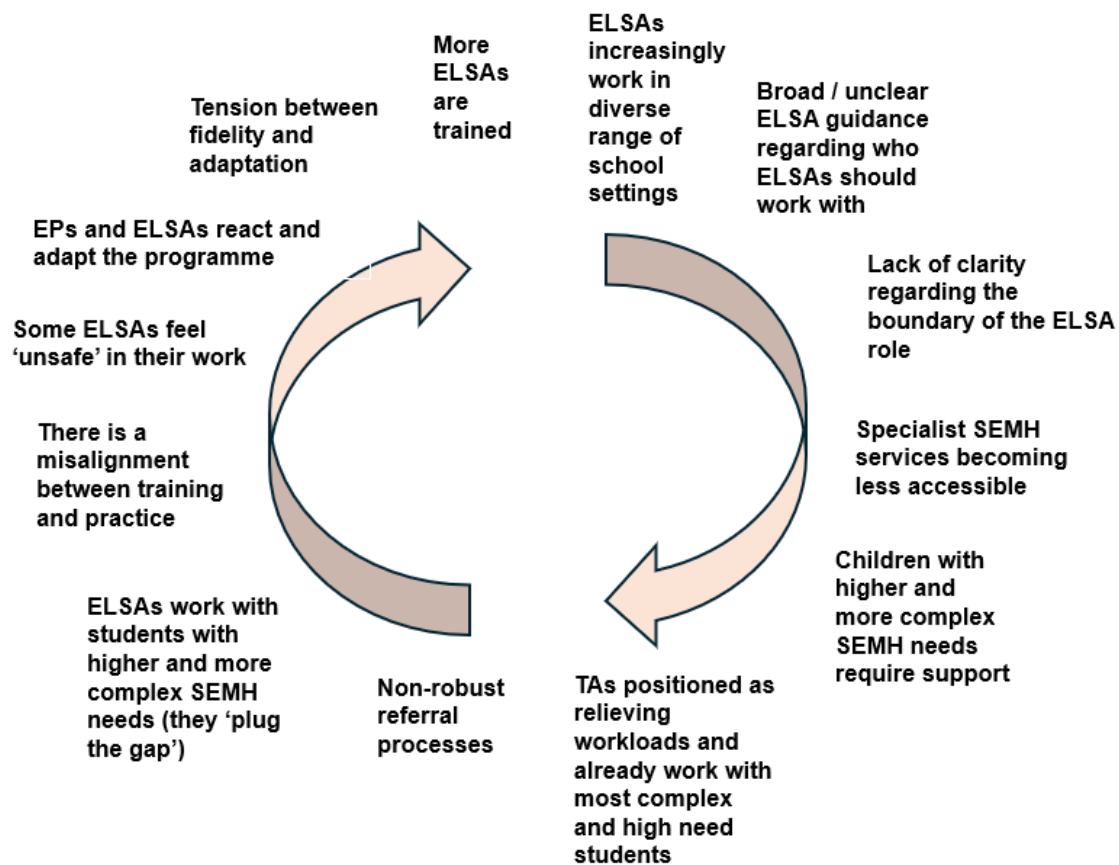
(Damschroder et al., 2009), the core, indispensable components of a programme must be implemented as intended, to avoid a negative impact on outcomes (Blase et al., 2012). Thus, only the ‘adaptable periphery’ (the parts of a programme which are less essential) should be changed (Damschroder et al., 2009). Further, any changes to evidence-based programmes must be evaluated to ensure they add value and don’t compromise the impact of the programme (Blase et al., 2012; Durlak & DuPre, 2008). Therefore, it is important that adaptations made to the ELSA programme are understood, so that research can assess how adaptations mediate the impact of the programme for children and young people.

However, this is an understudied area of the ELSA programme’s implementation. Some aspects of the ELSA programme are highlighted as being key for its success. For example, positive ELSA-child relationships have been highlighted as a key mechanism for creating positive change (Barker, 2017; Fairall, 2020; Haigh, 2019; Hill et al., 2013; Hills, 2016; McEwen, 2019; Nicholson-Roberts, 2019; Peters, 2020; Wong et al., 2020). However, research has not yet explicitly explored how implementation of the ELSA programme mediates its impact on students e.g., it is not yet known whether the strength of ELSA-child relationship mediates outcomes. This is an area requiring further study as wider literature demonstrates a relationship between implementation and impact; Durlak and DuPre (2008) found, looking across nearly 500 studies, that effective implementation is associated with better programme outcomes; mean effect sizes were at least 2 to 3 times higher for programmes which had been implemented effectively. Therefore, this study highlights that EPs and ELSAs are sometimes significantly adapting the programme in response to higher and more complex student needs. Although, to an extent, this is encouraged (Burton, 2018), further research needs to explore how the programme

is being adapted, and whether this compromises the core elements of the programme and its subsequent positive impact.

Applying a systems theory lens can help to illuminate how the 'parts' described within the theme 'increasingly high and complex CYP needs,' may interact to create a pattern in implementation. This is visually represented in Figure 7. Again, this cycle suggests that there is not a linear relationship between the factors described, whereby one causes the other. Instead, each factor both contributes to and is a by-product of the cycle. For example, lack of clarity regarding the ELSA role boundary may contribute to ELSAs working with students with higher and more complex needs. At the same time, the role boundary may become less clear as ELSAs increasingly work in a diverse range of settings, with students with varying levels of need. Therefore, factors such as clarity of role boundary, less accessible specialist SEMH support, and the positioning of TAs and subsequently ELSAs, likely all interact to create the pattern of implementation described.

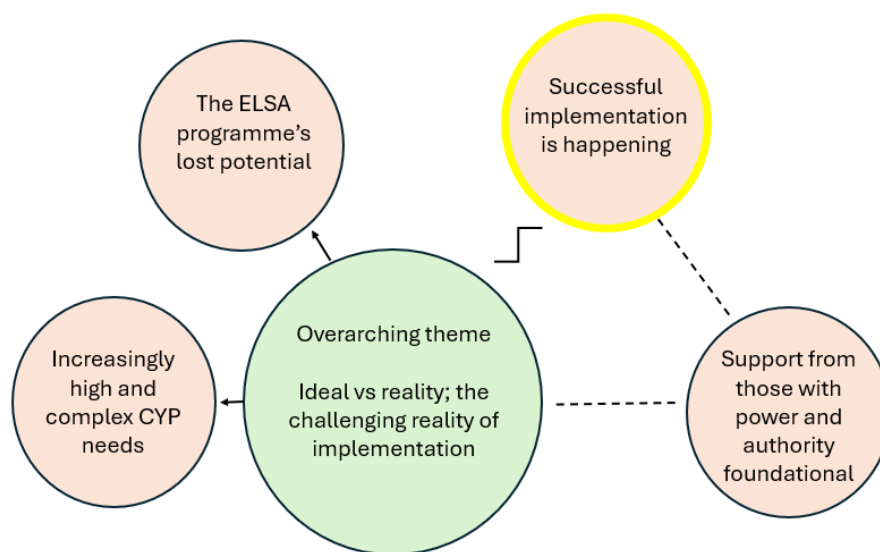
Figure 7: Implementation cycle 'increasingly high and more complex CYP needs'



In summary, this study suggests that some ELSAs are increasingly working with students with higher and more complex needs, and sometimes this is brought to supervision as a concern. Furthermore, there is a sense that some students who may benefit from ELSA support are missed or pushed down waitlists. Multiple, interacting factors may contribute to ELSAs working in this way. For example, lack of clarity regarding the ELSA role boundary, ELSAs increasingly working in a diverse range of educational settings, accessibility of specialist SEMH services, positioning of TAs (who typically become ELSAs) within UK schools, and non-robust referral systems may all contribute to this implementation cycle. As the needs of some students receiving ELSA support become higher and more complex, there is a sense that, for some ELSAs, there is a misalignment between training and practice,

whereby the resources, interventions and needs covered in training do not adequately prepare ELSAs for their role. Consequently, some EPs and ELSAs are reacting and adapting the programme, which may lead to ELSA programmes being implemented very differently. This requires further study as implementation has been shown to influence an intervention's impact.

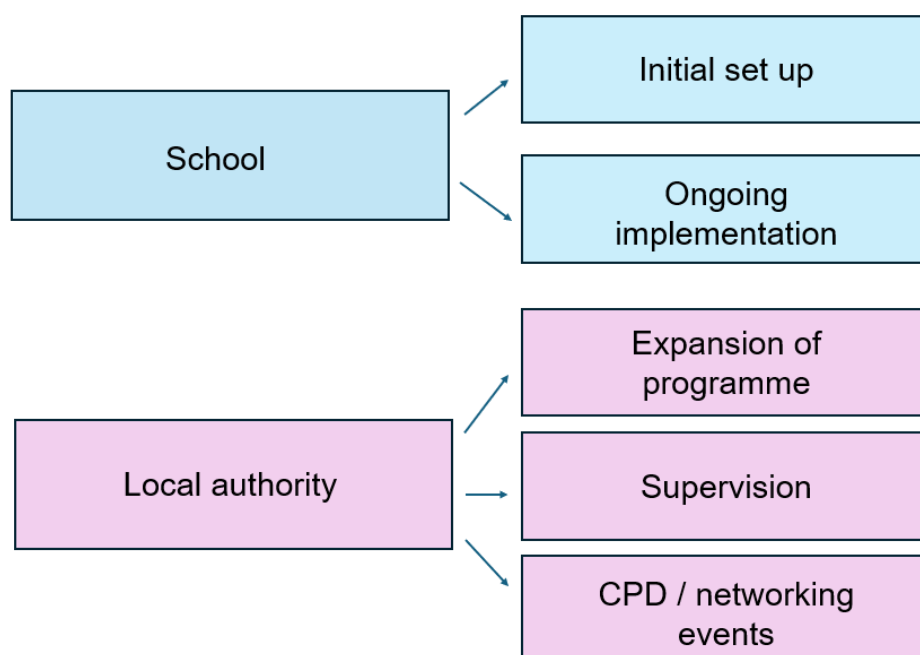
5.3 Theme 'successful implementation is happening'



As well as highlighting the challenging reality of ELSA implementation, this study also suggests that EPs perceive successful implementation to be happening in schools. In this study, successful implementation was described at two main levels: at an individual school level and at a LA level. At an individual school level, all participants shared at least one example of successful ELSA implementation. In their examples, participants described successful implementation regarding how ELSA programmes are initially set up and how they continue to be implemented in an ongoing capacity (see Figure 8 for a visual representation). For example, some ELSAs are successfully engaging key stakeholders in the set-up of the programme e.g., parents, children and teaching staff, and they achieve this in different ways e.g.,

by running coffee mornings or presenting at INSET days. In addition, some ELSAs are given appropriate rooms to use and decorate, and clear, well-functioning referral pathways are developed. Further, in an ongoing capacity, some ELSAs are given adequate time to practice, with some ELSAs fulfilling the role full time. Some ELSAs are therefore delivering tailored and planned 1:1 and group interventions and consistently attending supervision.

Figure 8: Successful implementation perceived by EPs



Sometimes, successful implementation happens quickly for ELSAs, whilst, for others, it takes time. In this study, there's a sense that, typically, implementation is initially hard, but it gets easier and better as the programme becomes more embedded. This notion is supported by ELSA literature. For example, Fairall (2020) similarly found implementation barriers to be more prominent in the earlier stages of implementation. In addition, Robertson (2021) highlights that some ELSAs have to overcome significant implementation challenges, whereas, for others, the school is more prepared to start the intervention. Furthermore, within implementation science

literature, the importance of the planning and initial implementation phases is emphasised, as challenges can often arise at this stage (Blase et al., 2012; Greenberg et al., 2005). Therefore, there is evidence to suggest that successful implementation of the ELSA programme can happen quickly, but it often takes time, thus perseverance is required.

In this study, different factors are perceived to contribute to successful ELSA implementation. For example, EPs perceived successful implementation to relate to buy-in from the wider school community, such that well implemented ELSA programmes are embedded, valued and understood by a range of key stakeholders e.g., teachers, parents, school leaders and children. In addition, this study suggests that successful implementation typically involves proactive and engaged school senior leaders, and an alignment between the ELSA programme's values and a school-wide focus on understanding and prioritising students' wellbeing. Furthermore, participants shared a sense that the programme works best when ELSAs feel empowered and can practice with some autonomy. Therefore, this study suggests that school context matters, and successful implementation is often associated with support from the wider school community, as well as school senior leaders.

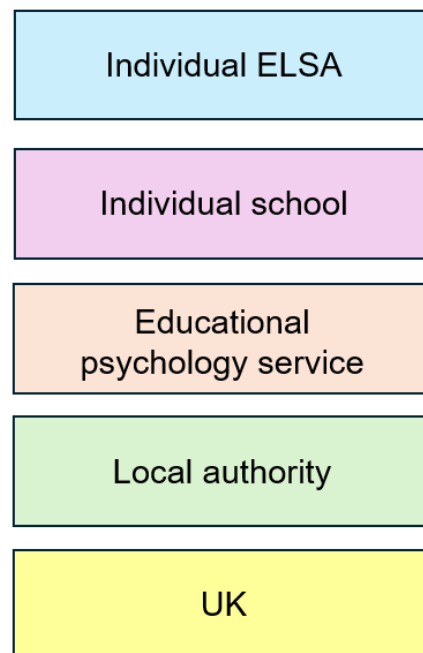
Successful implementation of the ELSA programme is also described in existing ELSA literature. For example, other research has highlighted successful implementation regarding work with parents (Bradley, 2010), ELSAs having protected time and space to practice (Bowerman & Davies, 2018; Dodds et al., 2015; Fairall, 2020), and ELSAs using a tailored, pupil-centred approach to intervention sessions (Mbire-Chigumba, 2023). Furthermore, similar facilitatory factors have been described. For example, research has found a connection between successful

implementation and the programme being understood by the wider school community (Edwards, 2016; Fairall, 2020) and aligned with a wider whole school focus on students' SEMH (Bowerman & Davies, 2018; Fairall, 2020). In addition, the importance of proactive engagement from senior leadership is mirrored in previous ELSA research (Fairall, 2020; Mann, 2014; McEwen, 2019; Peters, 2020; Robertson, 2021; Rogers & Kelly, 2024a; Thomas, 2022). Therefore, existing literature supports the idea that, in some schools, the ELSA programme is being successfully implemented, and there is some consistency regarding factors that support this e.g., alignment with whole school approaches, and buy-in from school senior leadership and the wider school community.

This study suggests that, at a LA level, successful ELSA implementation is also happening. EPs shared that, within their LA, the ELSA programme has grown and expanded across the borough, and, each year, more ELSAs are trained due to the positive reputation of the programme. Furthermore, some schools are choosing to invest in a team of ELSAs. EPs perceived that events for ELSAs across the borough have also been successfully implemented, for example, the EPS-ELSA team had recently organised an ELSA conference. EPs also perceived supervision sessions across the borough to be going well, as some ELSAs are providing support, sharing practice with each other, and reflecting deeply on the children and young people they support. In current ELSA literature, there is some evidence, from the perspective of ELSAs, that supervision and training is implemented successfully (France & Billington, 2020; Gaffney et al., 2020; Osborne & Burton, 2014). For example, ELSAs typically find the quantity, duration and group size of ELSA supervision to work well (Osborne & Burton, 2014), although some ELSAs feel there is not enough time in ELSA supervision (France & Billington, 2020; Osborne & Burton, 2014), and that the

resources and advice shared isn't relevant to all e.g., ELSAs working with different age groups (France & Billington, 2020). Therefore, there is some evidence to suggest that, at a LA level, the ELSA programme is being implemented successfully.

However, studies have not yet explored implementation within or across LAs in terms of implementation outcomes such as fidelity, programme reach, quality, adaptation, and participant responsiveness (Durlak & DuPre, 2008). For example, it is not yet known how much fidelity to the training is upheld and, in contrast, how much adaptation is made in different LAs. Like the ELSA programme's implementation at an individual school level, little is yet known about the core components of ELSA training and supervision which must be implemented with fidelity, and what the 'adaptable periphery' is (Damschroder et al., 2009). Further, little is yet known about how adaptations made to ELSA training and supervision mediate the impact for ELSAs and their subsequent work with young people. Exploration of implementation at a LA authority level is required because different levels of implementation exist, and implementation outcomes at different levels must be explored (Schultes, 2023). Therefore, this study highlights that implementation of the ELSA programme happens at different levels (see Figure 9) i.e., individual school, EPS, LA, and UK. To fully evaluate how successfully the ELSA programme is implemented, research must explore these different levels and how they influence each other e.g., whether better implementation at a LA level translates to better implementation at a school level.

Figure 9: Levels of ELSA implementation

In this study, participants perceived there to be positive impacts of successful implementation. For example, ELSAs were perceived to enjoy their role, and there was a perceived positive impact for students and the wider school community when successful implementation occurs. This aligns with previous research which has shown that positive impacts of the programme are also perceived by other key stakeholders e.g., young people, ELSAs, and parents (Balampanidou, 2019; Barker, 2017; Haigh, 2019; Purcell & Kelly, 2023; Silver et al., 2024; Wilding & Claridge, 2016). However, most research to date explores the ELSA programme's impact and implementation separately, thus further research is needed to explore the interaction between the two i.e., whether better implementation leads to better outcomes. Furthermore, in this study, facilitating a successful ELSA programme has led to some ELSAs being given additional responsibilities, promoted or employed specifically as full-time ELSAs. Little research to date has explored the long-term implementation of

the ELSA programme, thus, it will be helpful, in future, to explore how the ELSA role develops over time.

Implementation science literature offers guidance for achieving successful implementation of evidence-based programmes. For example, Blase et al. (2012) argue that there are three main implementation drivers i.e., 'core components that leverage and sustain change at an individual and organisational level' (Blase et al., 2012, p. 22). These are competency, organisation and leadership drivers. Competency drivers involve actions taken to improve someone's competence and confidence to implement a programme successfully. For the ELSA programme, this may involve selecting carefully who completes ELSA training, the ELSA training itself, and supervision once trained. Organisation drivers involve measures to create and sustain an environment the programme can thrive in. For the ELSA programme, this may involve setting up referral pathways, providing ELSAs with a room and resources, and deciding where it sits in relation to other SEMH support in the school. Finally, leadership drivers are argued to be foundational and involve how leaders support and deal with challenges in implementation (Blase et al., 2012). For the ELSA programme, this may relate to line manager arrangements and how leaders advertise and position the programme within school.

The examples of successful ELSA implementation in this study can be mapped onto the three implementation drivers posited by Blase et al. (2012); Table 7 demonstrates this. Thus, it can perhaps be argued that, in line with implementation science theory, successful ELSA implementation is related to having sufficient, sustained implementation drivers. Considering the ELSA programme's implementation drivers can support EPs and other key stakeholders to understand what facilitates successful implementation and be used to guide implementation in

schools. However, there are other potential implementation drivers related to the ELSA programme which have not yet been explored (see the third column of Table 7, titled ‘what else might be at play?’). Thus, further research exploring other factors which drive successful ELSA implementation will be useful in future.

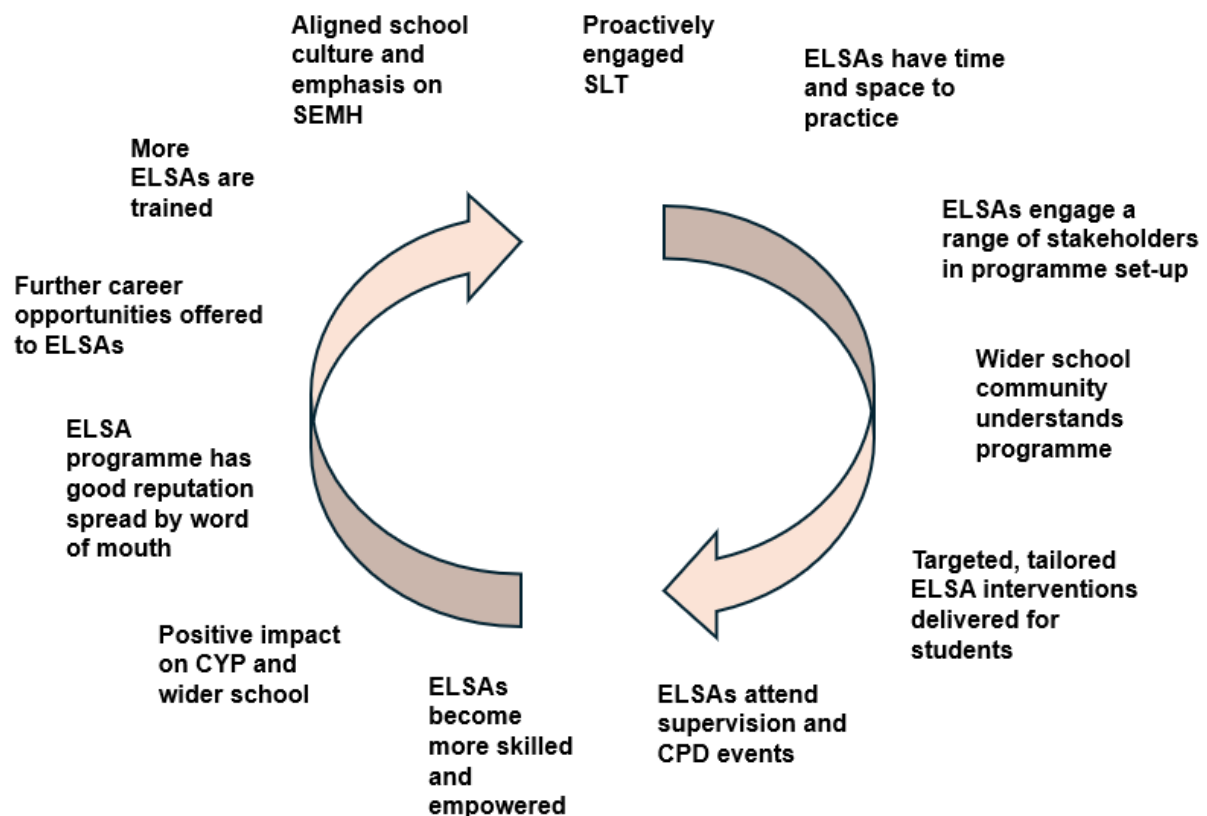
Table 7: ELSA programme implementation drivers

Implementation driver	Examples in this study	What else might be at play?
Competency drivers	• Skilled, empowered and autonomous ELSAs. • Borough-wide ELSA conference to further develop skills. • Active engagement and deep reflection in supervision.	• Staff selection: are schools who successfully implement the programme sending TAs with particular characteristics on the training? • Training quality.
Organisation drivers	• Referral pathways successfully set up and functioning well. • ELSAs have time, a room and resources to practice.	• School policies. • Long-term funding of the programme. • How ELSA is positioned alongside other

	• School culture and emphasis on SEMH aligns with ELSA programme. • Positive reputation of the ELSA programme across the borough.	SEMH support in schools.
Leadership drivers	• Proactively engaged school senior leaders.	• How leaders are responding to challenges in implementation.

Alternatively, Figure 10 brings the parts of ‘successful implementation is happening’ together to create a whole cycle of implementation, using a systems theory lens. Therefore, applying both implementation science and systems theory can offer insights into how and why successful ELSA implementation is happening.

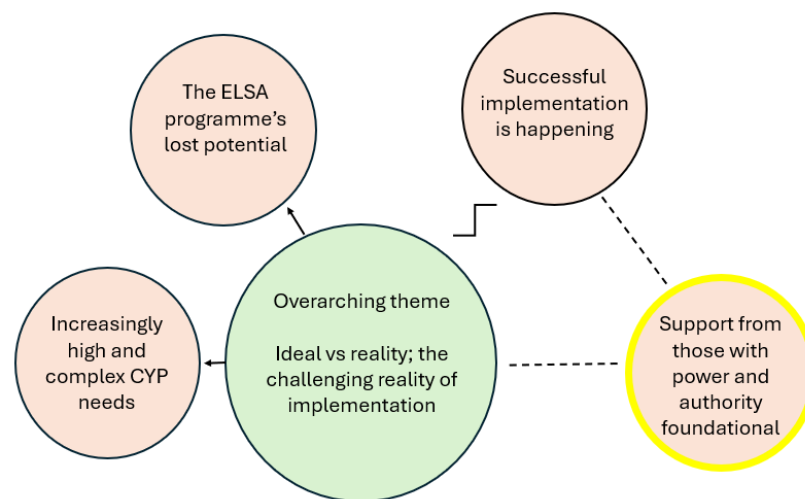
Figure 10: Implementation cycle 'successful implementation is happening'



In summary, 'successful implementation is happening' suggests that, as well as the challenging reality of implementation, EPs also perceive successful implementation of the ELSA programme to be happening in schools, and this occurs at both an individual school and LA level. Sometimes, successful implementation can happen quickly, but often it takes time. In this study, EPs perceived different factors to be related to successful implementation e.g., wider school community buy-in and understanding, leadership support, and empowered, autonomous ELSAs. Furthermore, in this study, EPs perceived a positive impact of the ELSA programme on students and the wider school community when implemented well, and successful implementation appears to offer some ELSAs further career opportunities. This study highlights different levels to ELSA implementation i.e., individual school, LA, and across the UK, and suggests that further research is required to explore the different

levels of implementation and how they influence each other. Finally, implementation science and systems theory offer insights into how and why some ELSA programmes are successfully implemented in schools.

5.4 Theme ‘support from those with power and authority foundational’



This study found that, from the perspective of EPs, an integral influence on the implementation of the ELSA programme is the extent to which ELSAs have support from those with power and authority. Within schools, senior leadership and ELSA line managers are conceptualised to hold power and authority, and their understanding of and belief in the ELSA programme is perceived to strongly influence implementation. Furthermore, even where other factors are perceived to influence implementation e.g., personal characteristics of the ELSA, there is a strong sense that, ultimately, the support from those with power and authority is what matters. In this study, the only things perceived to have a stronger influence than support from those with power and authority are wider socioeconomic and political challenges, namely the financial constraints and staffing of a school. In addition, there is some reference to other stakeholders e.g., parents, having power and authority, however this was mentioned less in interviews. Therefore, in this study, how much school senior

leaders support the ELSA programme is perceived to strongly influence its implementation, over and above most other factors.

The importance of leadership support is highlighted in existing ELSA and wider implementation science research. In existing ELSA research, the importance of school senior leaders' support is frequently mentioned (Dalby, 2024; Fairall, 2020; Haigh, 2019; Robertson, 2021), and Rogers and Kelly (2024b), in their scoping review, conclude that organisational and leadership support is the foundation for successfully implementing the ELSA programme. Further, a lack of understanding from senior leadership is highlighted as a barrier to implementation (Peters, 2020; Thomas, 2022), and recommendations for practice often involve senior leaders (Edwards, 2016; Fairall, 2020). Leadership support is also perceived to be integral in implementation science research, and is the foundational implementation driver in Blase et al. (2012)'s implementation model. Therefore, existing ELSA research and implementation science literature support the notion that leadership support is integral to implementation success.

EPs are also conceptualised, albeit more implicitly, as holding power and authority which influences the implementation of the ELSA programme. In this study, EPs were perceived to use their power and authority in different ways at different stages in the ELSA programme's implementation. Initially, EPs use their power and authority to set up the programme, by actively promoting the ELSA training to schools, and trying to communicate to schools' senior leadership what ELSAs will need and boundaries of the role. In addition, once the ELSA programme is set up, link EPs keep it on the agenda and explore how it's being used; some EPs speak about the programme in planning meetings, suggest and plan ELSA interventions, and are part of the ELSA referral process. Furthermore, EPs perceive themselves to

have a role in protecting, upskilling and empowering ELSAs. Protection is provided by supporting ELSAs to push back on inappropriate referrals, upskilling by co-delivering and modelling interventions, and empowering them by exploring their own resources and capabilities in supervision. EPs also have a regulatory role whereby they track which ELSAs attend supervision. Therefore, this study suggests that, alongside leaders in schools, EPs are also a key stakeholder with power, authority and influence regarding how the ELSA programme is implemented.

Some existing ELSA literature highlights EPs' role in supporting the ELSA programme (Dalby, 2024; Robertson, 2021; Thomas, 2022). For example, Nicholson-Roberts (2019) found that supervision with EPs was one source of support for ELSAs. In addition, Fairall (2020) found that EPs provide some systemic support for the programme's implementation through their relationships with key stakeholders in schools. However, Fairall (2020) also found that support from EPs wasn't consistent, as there were issues accessing this support due to traded EP services i.e., not all schools want to use their traded EP time in this way. Fairall (2020) also points out that, typically, not all EPs have an in-depth understanding of the ELSA programme, as usually a small team facilitate it at a LA level. Thus, the amount of influence EPs have on implementation may depend on their time to work with ELSAs, and their knowledge and understanding of the programme and its implementation.

This study suggests that school leaders and EPs do not operate in silo; there is a sense that they must work together to improve the chances of successful implementation. For example, this study found that EPs actively try to engage school leaders, especially during the programme's set-up, to clarify expectations around implementation. In addition, sometimes school leaders contact EPs to ask them to support their ELSA to develop a particular intervention for students. Furthermore, the

support required from and given by EPs is mediated by the support of senior leadership i.e., participants shared that when senior leadership's buy-in is higher, EP support reduces and vice versa. Therefore, this study suggests that the success of the ELSA programme is mediated by two key actors with power and authority (EPs and school senior leaders) and those with power and authority working together positively influences implementation.

In current ELSA research, there is some suggestion that EPs and school senior leaders must work together to ensure successful implementation. For example, Edwards (2016) recommends that EPs offer SENDCos sessions regarding what the ELSA programme is, and Fairall (2020) recommends that a meeting between SENDCos and link EPs happens at the installation or early implementation phase. In addition, implementation science literature is clear that multiple, engaged stakeholders are required to implement a programme successfully (Blase et al., 2012; Greenberg et al., 2005). For example, Blase et al. (2012) emphasise the importance of implementation teams, whereby a core group of people who have sufficient skills and knowledge and represent the 'system' have the task of guiding implementation. Therefore, existing literature supports that notion that key stakeholders in a programme i.e., those with power and authority, must work together to implement the ELSA programme successfully.

Finally, in contrast, this study suggests that ELSAs themselves do not have enough power and authority to ensure successful implementation (hence needing support from those who do). This is evidenced by some ELSAs experiencing high workloads and feeling under pressure to take on inappropriate referrals from senior leaders. Furthermore, some ELSAs become stuck in tokenistic implementation cycles which they cannot change without leaving the school. This study also

suggests that ELSAs can face confusing, sometimes contradictory, messages regarding the power and authority they have and should hold. For example, in this study, a perception that the programme works best when ELSAs are empowered, existed alongside the idea that ELSAs require permission from those with power and authority to feel empowered in role. Additionally, it was simultaneously argued that ELSAs need to have difficult conversations with senior leaders themselves, and that ELSAs need those with power and authority to step in and have difficult conversations for them. Therefore, this study suggests that ELSAs are perceived to lack sufficient power and authority to implement the ELSA programme successfully, thus support from EPs and senior leadership is integral, although perceptions around this can be confusing and, at times, contradictory.

The lack of power and authority ELSAs have, is indirectly supported by the existing emphasis, in current ELSA literature, on support from senior leaders in schools (Dalby, 2024; Fairall, 2020; Haigh, 2019; Robertson, 2021; Rogers & Kelly, 2024b). In addition, some research highlights that senior leaders have the ultimate power and authority regarding aspects of implementation. For example, Fairall (2020) found that, in some schools, senior leaders make the ultimate decision regarding referrals to ELSA support, despite this being at odds with ELSA guidance (Fairall, 2020). However, existing ELSA literature may suggest a more nuanced view of the power and authority ELSAs hold. Specifically, there is some evidence to suggest that ELSAs have some power, authority and control over the impact of the ELSA programme on students, and on the ELSA-child relationship (which is viewed as essential for positive change) (Fairall, 2020; Grahamslaw, 2010; Hills, 2016; McEwen, 2019; Nicholson-Roberts, 2019; Peters, 2020; Purcell et al., 2023; Wong et al., 2020). For example, Grahamslaw (2010) found that the level of self-efficacy

belief held by ELSAs influenced self-efficacy beliefs in students. Furthermore, other studies have suggested that ELSA skill aids implementation (Fairall, 2020; Nicholson-Roberts, 2019), and Dalby (2024) highlights that the accredited nature of the ELSA training may afford ELSAs with greater authority. Therefore, the interaction between ELSAs' power, authority and subsequent influence on the programme may be more nuanced and complex than this study suggests. In future, further research exploring the interaction between ELSAs', EPs' and senior leaders' power and authority, and its influence on the ELSA programme's implementation and impact is needed to understand this further.

This study suggests that the lack of power and authority ELSAs hold may be in stark contrast to their increasing responsibility to support students with higher and more complex needs, sometimes as an alternative to specialist SEMH services. This discrepancy has been noted in other studies, for example, Fairall (2020) comments on the difference between the high responsibility and low power ELSAs hold. The potential discrepancy between low power and authority and high responsibility is important to consider for two main reasons. Firstly, Green and Molenkamp (2005) define authority as 'the right to do the work' (p. 5), and are clear that, to undertake a task successfully, authority (alongside role boundaries) must be clearly defined. In addition, the person must take up their authority, and have the necessary tools to exercise it; without this, tasks cannot be completed successfully (Green & Molenkamp, 2005). Therefore, if ELSAs experience high responsibility and low authority, this may have a negative impact on their task to support children and young people's SEMH. Accordingly, it will be helpful for future research to explore this discrepancy further, including whether it impacts the programme's effectiveness.

Secondly, the discrepancy between power, authority and responsibility raises ethical questions regarding the suitability of the ELSA programme for students with higher and more complex SEMH needs i.e., should ELSAs be supporting this group of young people? Within wider literature about TAs in UK schools, there are concerns that the most vulnerable students are spending the most time with the least qualified members of staff (Graves & Williams, 2017; Rice O'Toole & Soan, 2022). This is a concern because, when TAs are not deployed properly, research has shown this can have a negative impact on student outcomes (Blatchford et al., 2009). Although ELSAs receive 6 days of training and ongoing EP-led supervision, further reflection is needed about whether ELSAs have adequate training, knowledge and skills to support students with higher and more complex SEMH needs, especially if, in some schools, they are plugging the gap for specialist SEMH services. Specifically, is it professionally safe for ELSAs to be working in this way, and are positive impacts of the programme maintained for students with higher and more complex needs? Therefore, this study invites further reflection about the ethics of ELSAs supporting students with higher and complex needs.

In summary, 'support from those with power and authority foundational' suggests that EPs perceive ELSA implementation to be strongly influenced by how much those with power and authority support and value the programme, over and above most other factors. In schools, those with power and authority are conceptualised as senior leaders and ELSA line managers. In addition, EPs referenced, albeit more implicitly, their own power and authority to influence implementation. There is a sense that those with power and authority must work together to facilitate successful implementation, and that ELSAs alone lack sufficient power and authority to implement the programme successfully (hence needing support from those who do).

However, confusing, sometimes contradictory, messages regarding ELSAs' power and authority are highlighted, which may contribute to ELSAs (and EPs) feeling unsure about what's within the ELSA remit. This study suggests that a potential discrepancy may exist between the high responsibility ELSAs hold (especially while working with students with higher and more complex needs) and their low power and authority. An argument is made that this matters and requires further exploration because the discrepancy may negatively affect ELSAs' ability to support students' SEMH needs. In addition, this study invites further reflection regarding the ethics of ELSAs supporting students with higher and more complex needs, sometimes as an alternative to specialist SEMH services. Next, the implications of this study's findings are explored.

5.5 Implications

This study's findings have many implications for practice. For example:

- Key stakeholders of the ELSA programme e.g., ELSAs, school senior leaders, EPs and the ELSA network, need to be aware that there is a discrepancy between intended and actual practice i.e., there is an implementation gap.** EPs should incorporate this finding into both the set-up of the programme when they liaise with senior leaders, and ELSA training, so ELSAs are prepared for what might happen regarding implementation and where to seek support. Fairall (2020) offers an implementation resource for schools with the different phases of implementation and challenges which may arise; this may offer a helpful starting point for EPs incorporating implementation considerations into the set-up of the programme.

- As an implementation gap is highlighted in this study and previous research, **EPs and / or the ELSA Network should try to develop and implement a way of monitoring how big the implementation gap is for different facets of the programme** e.g., time and resources for role, so this can be thoughtfully considered, and research can be undertaken exploring the impact of any implementation gaps on the programme's impact. Further, if EPs and / or the ELSA Network establish areas where there is an implementation gap, interventions and support can be put in place.
- **Successful implementation of the ELSA programme cannot be taken for granted; EPs, school leaders, and ELSAs must monitor the programme's implementation over time, and pre-empt and prepare for any systemic changes in school** e.g., a change of senior leadership, so the programme's implementation is not derailed when these changes occur.
- **EPs should emphasise with senior leaders the need for contingency plans** when setting up the programme, and what can happen without such plans i.e., potential benefits of the ELSA programme can be lost.
- **EPs should consider how implementation factors interact to create and maintain cycles of implementation, rather than viewing implementation facilitators and barriers as separate and binary.** Systems theory offers a useful lens through which to do this. EPs can use implementation cycles to plan interventions where needed and explain implementation to school leaders and ELSAs. Furthermore, **EPs should remember that the ELSA programme does not operate in silo; how it is perceived and implemented interacts with the wider sociopolitical and economic landscape** e.g., the availability of specialist SEMH services and the financial

context for schools. Thus, exploration of the impact and implementation of the programme should always be considered alongside wider context.

- At both an ELSA level, and wider education level, **this study invites further reflection regarding the ethics of students with high levels of need often being supported by those with the least qualifications.** This is a pattern entrenched in UK education systems which may be extending to the ELSA programme, as some ELSAs are perceived to plug the gap for diminishing specialist SEMH services. The ELSA network, EPs, school leaders and ELSAs themselves must reflect on whether this is professionally 'safe' and best supports both children and young people and ELSAs, as some ELSAs report feeling 'unsafe' and out of their depth in supervision.
- **The ELSA Network should consider clarifying the boundary of the ELSA role and task, i.e., what is within and outside the scope of an ELSA, and create guidance for ELSAs working in specialist provision.**
- **The ELSA Network should consider updating the ELSA training to incorporate updated theory and research and changing needs of students** e.g., EBSNA, so that there is greater consistency and fidelity to the programme across the UK, and it remains up to date and relevant.
- **EPs must consider how to gain meaningful engagement from school senior leaders, especially during the set up of the programme when more implementation challenges occur,** as this is perceived as essential for implementation success.
- **EPs should consider how best to use their own power and authority to positively influence the implementation of the programme.**

- **Examples of successful implementation should be recognised, celebrated and shared** so that school communities can better embed the programme in future.

5.6 Future research

As well as the implications and possible next steps detailed above in section 5.5, other future research opportunities include:

- **Gathering more information about how the ELSA programme is being implemented within individual LAs and across the UK.** This may involve data regarding how many ELSAs are being trained, how long ELSAs stay in role, how long ELSA programmes function for, and how many ELSAs leave their role and why.
- **Exploring other key implementation outcomes**, for example, the programme's reach i.e., who works with ELSAs, adaptations to the programme and their effect on the programme's impact, and examining what the core parts of the programme which must be implemented with fidelity are. Researchers can explore the different implementation outcomes outlined by Durlak and DuPre (2008) (see Table 1 on p. 15 for a summary).
- **Exploring the different levels of implementation i.e., individual ELSA, school, LA and UK.** This may, for example, involve looking at how much fidelity is shown to the ELSA training model across different LAs, and how ELSA teams in schools influence impact and implementation.
- **Investigating the interaction between the ELSA programme's impact and its implementation** e.g., exploring how implementation challenges mediate the impact for students.

- **Establishing whether the programme has a positive impact for all young people who take part** e.g., exploring who the programme is most impactful for, and whether positive impacts are maintained for students with complex needs including physical disability and SEN.

5.7 Strengths and limitations

Firstly, this study has generated knowledge in areas which require further study. For example, the findings of this study offer further insight into the implementation of the ELSA programme, which is less studied compared to the programme's impact (Rogers & Kelly, 2024b). Furthermore, this study centred EPs' experiences of the implementation of the ELSA programme; this not only offers a unique perspective of the programme's implementation across different school settings, but also begins to address the lack of EPs' perspectives in existing ELSA literature (Rogers & Kelly, 2024b). Secondly, this study embraces and embeds systems theory, thus it offers exploration of both the individual parts of implementation, and how these come together as a whole. It emphasises the integration and interaction of implementation factors, rather than presenting them as binary and separate e.g., a list of implementation barriers and facilitators. It also considers implementation of the ELSA programme within a situated socioeconomic and political context (a key part of rTA). Thirdly, the researcher aimed to undertake a high quality, qualitative study using rTA. The researcher spent a significant portion of the study's timeline (5 months) analysing the data to ensure robust and meaningful analysis; steps taken to ensure this study's quality can be found in section 3.10 'Quality considerations'.

On the other hand, there are limitations of this study. For example, it was outside the scope of this research to explore other stakeholders' views of the ELSA

programme's implementation, thus triangulation was not possible. However, this study nevertheless contributes valuable insights regarding the ELSA programme's implementation in schools from the perspective of EPs. In addition, Braun and Clarke (2022) recommend that researchers undertaking rTA specifically locate the dataset or participant group in context, by describing demographic aspects and the context within which the study took place. Although research context was explored in section 3.6.1 'Population and research setting', the researcher did not collect demographic data of participants due to concerns that anonymity may be breached due to the small dataset size. This may, therefore, impact the reader's ability to 'make a judgement about whether, and to what extent, they can safely transfer the analysis to their own context or setting' (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 143), thus impacting the research's transferability.

5.8 Dissemination strategy

The researcher plans to disseminate the research findings in the following ways:

- The findings will be shared with the LA who took part during a whole team service day.
- The findings will be shared with Year 1, 2 and 3 TEPs at the Tavistock and Portman NHS Trust.
- The researcher will approach research journals and attempt to publish the findings.
- The researcher will contact the ELSA Network website to share the research via this forum.
- The researcher will seek out opportunities to share the findings via EP webinars and conferences in the UK.

5.9 Conclusion

In conclusion, this study suggests that, from the perspective of EPs, implementation of the ELSA programme is varied and complex, and it interacts with wider socio-economic and political factors, and individual school contexts. Although successful implementation is perceived to be happening, this study highlights that, in response to factors such as diminishing specialist SEMH services and ELSAs working in diverse school settings, ELSAs may be increasingly supporting students with higher and more complex needs. In addition, perhaps partly in response to the changing role of ELSAs, the programme is being implemented differently across schools to cater to the needs of ELSAs and the students they support. Sometimes, there are challenges implementing the programme e.g., ELSAs don't have time or space to practice, which leads to potential benefits of the programme being lost.

This study highlights that, at this stage in the ELSA programme's development across the UK, greater clarity is required regarding ELSAs' role boundary and task, and how much responsibility and authority they should hold for students with complex SEMH needs. Further this study invites reflection regarding the ethics of how some ELSAs are utilised within schools. In line with previous research, this study suggests that support from those with power and authority e.g., school leaders and EPs, is foundational for successful implementation. Finally, this study aims to move away from a binary view of implementation i.e., lists of implementation facilitators and barriers, and instead applies systems theory to consider how factors interact to create and maintain circular patterns in implementation.

Appendices

Appendix A: Critical appraisal sheet proforma

Research reference		
Research title		
Date research appraised		
Type of research e.g., peer-reviewed or not, thesis (grey literature)		
References checked (snowballing?) If so, any new references?		
Area appraised	Information	Appraisal / comments / thoughts
Study focus i.e., which part / how it evaluated the ELSA programme? - Evaluation / impact or implementation or both? - Training, supervision, programme in schools?		
Study aims - Is there a clear statement of the aims of the research? - Is the aim / goal important and relevant?		
Participants - Was the recruitment strategy appropriate for the aims of the study? - If data saturation mentioned, is this clearly defined and explored and is this appropriate? - Consider Malterud's information power: did the dataset hold adequate information power to develop new knowledge referring to the aim of the study?		
Method / design / analysis - Is the methodology appropriate for the research aims? - Does the researcher justify their choice of method / design / analysis? - Are the methods used clear e.g., if interviews used, is there indication of how they were conducted?		
Worldview / paradigm / ontology and epistemology? - Is this clearly stated? - Is it appropriate? - Any tensions?		

Findings / knowledge generated - Is this transparent and coherent? - Is the language used appropriate (if qualitative) e.g., not using language like 'this study found...'? - Is there impact and importance of the knowledge generated? The 'so what?' of the study. - What are the implications of the study?		
Ethical considerations - Have ethical considerations been taken into consideration and if so, how? E.g., ethical issues discussed, ethical approval sought, EDI considerations more generally e.g., re reflexivity, researcher impact?		
For qualitative research:		
Is there compatibility and alignment between the assumptions, position, design and critique of the study? - Is there any 'positivist creep'?		
Researcher reflexivity - Has the relationship between the researcher and participants been adequately considered? - Has the researcher examined their role and influence in the study? - Is there sensitivity to context regarding previous literature, the perspective and sociocultural context of ppts, and in data analysis?		
Data analysis - Is there sufficient depth of analysis and inclusion of all data to generate new insights? - Is there an in-depth description of the data-analysis process? - If other researchers coded the data, why was this and was it appropriate? - How were disconfirming cases explored? - Paper trail / audit?		
Additional, data analysis, thematic analysis considerations:		

Table 1. A tool for evaluating thematic analysis (TA) manuscripts for publication: Twenty questions to guide assessment of TA research quality. These questions are designed to be used either independently, or alongside our methodological writing on TA, and especially the current paper, if further clarification is needed. <i>Adequate choice and explanation of methods and methodology</i> 1. Do the authors explain why they are using TA, even if only briefly? 2. Do the authors clearly specify and justify which type of TA they are using? 3. Is the use and justification of the specific type of TA consistent with the research questions or aims? 4. Is there a good 'fit' between the theoretical and conceptual underpinnings of the research and the specific type of TA (i.e. is there conceptual coherence)? 5. Is there a good 'fit' between the methods of data collection and the specific type of TA? 6. Is the specified type of TA consistently enacted throughout the paper? 7. Is there evidence of problematic assumptions about, and practices around, TA? These commonly include: • Treating TA as one, homogenous, entity, with one set of – widely agreed on – procedures. • Combining philosophically and procedurally incompatible approaches to TA without any acknowledgement or explanation. • Confusing summaries of data topics with thematic patterns of shared meaning, underpinned by a core concept. • Assuming grounded theory concepts and procedures (e.g. saturation, constant comparative analysis, line-by-line coding) apply to TA without any explanation or justification. • Assuming TA is essentialist or realist, or atheoretical. • Assuming TA is only a data reduction or descriptive approach and therefore must be supplemented with other methods and procedures to achieve other ends. 8. Are any supplementary procedures or methods justified, and necessary, or could the same results have been achieved simply by using TA more effectively? 9. Are the theoretical underpinnings of the use of TA clearly specified (e.g. ontological, epistemological assumptions, guiding theoretical framework(s)), even when using TA inductively (inductive TA does not equate to analysis in a theoretical vacuum)? 10. Do the researchers strive to 'own their perspectives' (even if only very briefly), their personal and social standpoint and positioning? (This is especially important when the researchers are engaged in social justice-oriented research and when representing the 'voices' of marginal and vulnerable groups, and groups to which the researcher does not belong.) 11. Are the analytic procedures used clearly outlined, and described in terms of what the authors actually did, rather than generic procedures? 12. Is there evidence of conceptual and procedural confusion? For example, reflexive TA (e.g. Braun and Clarke 2006) is the claimed approach but different procedures are outlined such as the use of a codebook or coding frame, multiple independent coders and consensus coding, inter-rater reliability measures, and/or themes are conceptualised as analytic inputs rather than outputs and therefore the analysis progresses from theme identification to coding (rather than coding to theme development). 13. Do the authors demonstrate full and coherent understanding of their claimed approach to TA? <i>A well-developed and justified analysis</i> 14. Is it clear what and where the themes are in the report? Would the manuscript benefit from some kind of overview of the analysis: listing of themes, narrative overview, table of themes, thematic map? 15. Are the reported themes topic summaries, rather than 'fully realised themes' – patterns of shared meaning underpinned by a central organising concept? • If so, are topic summaries appropriate to the purpose of the research? ◦ If the authors are using reflexive TA, is this modification in the conceptualisation of themes explained and justified? • Have the data collection questions been used as themes? • Would the manuscript benefit from further analysis being undertaken, with the reporting of fully realised themes? • Or, if the authors are claiming to use reflexive TA, would the manuscript benefit from claiming to use a different type of TA (e.g. coding reliability or codebook)? 16. Is non-thematic contextualising information presented as a theme? (e.g. the first 'theme' is a topic summary providing contextualising information, but the rest of the themes reported are fully realised themes). If so, would the manuscript benefit from this being presented as non-thematic contextualising information? 17. In applied research, do the reported themes have the potential to give rise to actionable outcomes? 18. Are there conceptual clashes and confusion in the paper? (e.g. claiming a social constructionist approach while also expressing concern for positivist notions of coding reliability, or claiming a constructionist approach while treating participants' language as a transparent reflection of their experiences and behaviours) 19. Is there evidence of weak or unconvincing analysis, such as: • Too many or too few themes? <i>(Continued)</i> Table 1. (Continued). Too many theme levels? Confusion between codes and themes? Mismatch between data extracts and analytic claims? Too few or too many data extracts? Overlap between themes? 20. Do authors make problematic statements about the lack of generalisability of their results, and/or implicitly conceptualise generalisability as statistical probabilistic generalisability (see Smith 2017)?		
For quantitative research: Add appropriate prompts from CASP checklists, MMAT (mixed methods tool) and Holland and Rees / Oxford Higher Education tool for quant research.		

Appendix B: Completed critical appraisal literature review sheet example

Research reference	Silver et al. (2024)	
Research title	Emotional literacy support assistant (ELSA) intervention: medium-term impact on pupils' emotional literacy in one local authority in Wales.	
Date research appraised	6/12/24	
Type of research e.g., peer-reviewed or not, thesis (grey literature)	Peer reviewed	
References checked (snowballing?) If so, any new references?	Yes – Dunn (2020)	
Area appraised	Information	Appraisal / comments / thoughts
Study focus i.e., which part / how it evaluated the ELSA programme?	Good rationale – looking at	They mention that the ELSA intervention is part

- Evaluation / impact or implementation or both? - Training, supervision, programme in schools?	medium term outcomes with quant measures.	of universal provision / offer in all the LA's schools – this is interesting and something to mention in my context section re how differently different LAs apply the ELSA programme – would the implementation here be really different if all schools are expected to have ELSA? Also mentions that some colleges in LA are training ELSAs.																																																																																																																																				
Study aims - Is there a clear statement of the aims of the research? Yes - Is the aim / goal important and relevant? Yes	Look at EL outcomes from the perspective of CYP, ELSAs and class teachers 10 weeks post intervention.																																																																																																																																					
Participants - Was the recruitment strategy appropriate for the aims of the study? - If data saturation mentioned, is this clearly defined and explored and is this appropriate? - Consider Malterud's information power: did the dataset hold adequate information power to develop new knowledge referring to the aim of the study?	The control group weren't matched pairs – did they test whether there were sig. differences at baseline between the groups?	Opportunity sampling. There might limitations re this and a quant framework – random sampling would've been better? <table><caption>Table 1. Sociodemographic data of the participants.</caption><thead><tr><th rowspan="2">Characteristic</th><th colspan="6">Condition</th></tr><tr><th colspan="2">Intervention</th><th colspan="2">Control</th><th colspan="2">Overall</th></tr><tr><th></th><th>n</th><th>%</th><th>n</th><th>%</th><th>n</th><th>%</th></tr></thead><tbody><tr><td>Age</td><td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td></tr><tr><td>0-4</td><td>7</td><td>38.89%</td><td>4</td><td>23.53%</td><td>11</td><td>31.43</td></tr><tr><td>5-10</td><td>5</td><td>27.78%</td><td>5</td><td>28.42%</td><td>10</td><td>40</td></tr><tr><td>11-16</td><td>6</td><td>33.33%</td><td>4</td><td>23.53%</td><td>10</td><td>26.47</td></tr><tr><td>School</td><td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td></tr><tr><td>Primary</td><td>13</td><td>72.22%</td><td>12</td><td>26.09%</td><td>25</td><td>71.43</td></tr><tr><td>Secondary</td><td>3</td><td>16.67%</td><td>3</td><td>17.65%</td><td>6</td><td>17.14</td></tr><tr><td>Special school(PRI)</td><td>2</td><td>11.11%</td><td>2</td><td>11.76%</td><td>4</td><td>11.43</td></tr><tr><td>Geographical location in Local Authority (clusters)</td><td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td></tr><tr><td>A school</td><td>2</td><td>11.11</td><td>1</td><td>5.88</td><td>3</td><td>8.57</td></tr><tr><td>B school</td><td>3</td><td>16.75</td><td>3</td><td>17.65</td><td>6</td><td>17.14</td></tr><tr><td>C school</td><td>4</td><td>22.22</td><td>4</td><td>23.53</td><td>8</td><td>22.86</td></tr><tr><td>D school</td><td>3</td><td>16.75</td><td>3</td><td>17.65</td><td>6</td><td>17.14</td></tr><tr><td>E school</td><td>0</td><td>0</td><td>0</td><td>0</td><td>0</td><td>0</td></tr><tr><td>F school</td><td>2</td><td>11.11</td><td>2</td><td>11.76</td><td>4</td><td>11.43</td></tr><tr><td>G school</td><td>4</td><td>22.22</td><td>4</td><td>23.53</td><td>8</td><td>22.86</td></tr></tbody></table> Doesn't have gender data which is unusual. Again, no mention of ethnicity or other social characteristics e.g., diagnoses, disability, SEN.	Characteristic	Condition						Intervention		Control		Overall			n	%	n	%	n	%	Age							0-4	7	38.89%	4	23.53%	11	31.43	5-10	5	27.78%	5	28.42%	10	40	11-16	6	33.33%	4	23.53%	10	26.47	School							Primary	13	72.22%	12	26.09%	25	71.43	Secondary	3	16.67%	3	17.65%	6	17.14	Special school(PRI)	2	11.11%	2	11.76%	4	11.43	Geographical location in Local Authority (clusters)							A school	2	11.11	1	5.88	3	8.57	B school	3	16.75	3	17.65	6	17.14	C school	4	22.22	4	23.53	8	22.86	D school	3	16.75	3	17.65	6	17.14	E school	0	0	0	0	0	0	F school	2	11.11	2	11.76	4	11.43	G school	4	22.22	4	23.53	8	22.86
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Method / design / analysis - Is the methodology appropriate for the research aims? Yes, although confusing re inclusion of qual data whilst saying it's not part of study. More clarity needed on framework used.	Only took baseline and time 1 data for the control group – they didn't collect	Bit confused by the mention of 4/18 qualitative data reports from ELSAs. Doesn't really fit with the methodology laid out so																																																																																																																																				

- Does the researcher justify their choice of method / design / analysis? Sort of, mentions that no quant, medium term outcome studies have been done yet. - Are the methods used clear e.g., if interviews used, is there indication of how they were conducted?	time 2 (10 week post intervention data) – why? Because didn't want to delay CYP accessing ELSA. The ELSA and class teacher jointly completed pre and post IAR questionnaire – so only one measure collected? I would've liked to have seen them separately as previous studies have had different results for ELSAs, parents and class teachers. Class teacher within secondary environment encompassed any member of staff who knew the YP well e.g., pastoral staff. The SESA and IAR measures were created by the ELSA network with ELSAs – there are no stats re the reliability and validity of the measures*	far. So is it mixed methods? No. Didn't collect baseline CYP measure for control group – they did – bit confusing to read. Some control re when the interventions started and ended. No other SEMH / EL support given to CYP in maintenance period. CYP also submitted data for time 2 (younger CYP may have had support from the ELSA). I'm unsure whether they tested the difference between control and intervention group at baseline to see if they were sig. different to each other (does mention data didn't violate assumptions of independence or normality of variance). I would've liked to have seen a comparison between time 1 and 2 to explore whether sig. difference in maintenance period. This would show whether there's a reduction in scores post intervention i.e., does the effect reduce? Didn't collect time 2 data for CYP as didn't want to delay their start with the ELSA.
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Worldview / paradigm / ontology and epistemology? - Is this clearly stated? No - Is it appropriate? - Any tensions?	No worldview, no explicit mention of methodology e.g., was it mixed methods as they did collect qual data? Said insufficient qual data so although collected, it's not viewed as part of the study. So not mixed methods.	
Findings / knowledge generated - Is this transparent and coherent? - Is the language used appropriate (if qualitative) e.g., not using language like 'this study found...'? - Is there impact and importance of the knowledge generated? The 'so what?' of the study. - What are the implications of the study?	Class teacher and ELSA knew purpose of research and would've been aware of LA monitoring.	They do mention social desirability and demand characteristics.
Ethical considerations - Have ethical considerations been taken into consideration and if so, how? E.g., ethical issues discussed, ethical approval sought, EDI considerations more generally e.g., re reflexivity, researcher impact?	Didn't seek consent from CYP and parents so I suppose they couldn't collect anymore data re demographics. This surprises me.	It looks as though this study may have happened as a direct result of the LA being placed under monitoring although this is not clearly stated – sense within wider system that things needed to improve and be promising.
For qualitative research:		
Is there compatibility and alignment between the assumptions, position, design and critique of the study? - Is there any 'positivist creep?'	N/A	
Researcher reflexivity - Has the relationship between the researcher and participants been adequately considered? - Has the researcher examined their role and influence in the study?	Some context given re the study happening post Covid-19	

- Is there sensitivity to context regarding previous literature, the perspective and sociocultural context of ppts, and in data analysis?	after schools reopened. LA judged, at the time, by Estyn to be an authority causing sig. concerns that required monitoring.	
Data analysis - Is there sufficient depth of analysis and inclusion of all data to generate new insights? - Is there an in-depth description of the data-analysis process? - If other researchers coded the data, why was this and was it appropriate? - How were disconfirming cases explored? - Paper trail / audit?	N/A	
Additional, data analysis, thematic analysis considerations: Table 1. A tool for evaluating thematic analysis (TA) manuscripts for publication: Twenty questions to guide assessment of TA research quality. These questions are designed to be used either independently, or alongside our methodological writing on TA, and especially the current paper, if further clarification is needed. <i>Adequate choice and explanation of methods and methodology</i> 1. Do the authors explain why they are using TA, even if only briefly? 2. Do the authors clearly specify and justify which type of TA they are using? 3. Is the use and justification of the specific type of TA consistent with the research questions or aims? 4. Is there a good 'fit' between the theoretical and conceptual underpinnings of the research and the specific type of TA (i.e. is there conceptual coherence)? 5. Is there a good 'fit' between the methods of data collection and the specific type of TA? 6. Is the specified type of TA consistently enacted throughout the paper? 7. Is there evidence of problematic assumptions about, and practices around, TA? These commonly include: • Treating TA as one, homogenous, entity, with one set of – widely agreed on – procedures. • Combining philosophically and procedurally incompatible approaches to TA without any acknowledgement or explanation. • Confusing summaries of data topics with thematic patterns of shared meaning, underpinned by a core concept. • Assuming grounded theory concepts and procedures (e.g. saturation, constant comparative analysis, line-by-line coding) apply to TA without any explanation or justification. • Assuming TA is essentialist or realist, or atheoretical. • Assuming TA is only a data reduction or descriptive approach and therefore must be supplemented with other methods and procedures to achieve other ends. 8. Are any supplementary procedures or methods justified, and necessary, or could the same results have been achieved simply by using TA more effectively? 9. Are the theoretical underpinnings of the use of TA clearly specified (e.g. ontological, epistemological assumptions, guiding theoretical framework(s)), even when using TA inductively (inductive TA does not equate to analysis in a theoretical vacuum)? 10. Do the researchers strive to 'own their perspectives' (even if only very briefly), their personal and social standpoint and positioning? (This is especially important when the researchers are engaged in social justice-oriented research and when representing the 'voices' of marginal and vulnerable groups, and groups to which the researcher does not belong.) 11. Are the analytic procedures used clearly outlined, and described in terms of what the authors actually did, rather than generic procedures? 12. Is there evidence of conceptual and procedural confusion? For example, reflexive TA (e.g. Braun and Clarke 2006) is the claimed approach but different procedures are outlined such as the use of a codebook or coding frame, multiple independent coders and consensus coding, inter-rater reliability measures, and/or themes are conceptualised as analytic inputs rather than outputs and therefore the analysis progresses from theme identification to coding (rather than coding to theme development). 13. Do the authors demonstrate full and coherent understanding of their claimed approach to TA? <i>A well-developed and justified analysis</i> 14. Is it clear what and where the themes are in the report? Would the manuscript benefit from some kind of overview of the analysis: listing of themes, narrative overview, table of themes, thematic map? 15. Are the reported themes topic summaries, rather than 'fully realised themes' – patterns of shared meaning underpinned by a central organising concept? • If so, are topic summaries appropriate to the purpose of the research? ◦ If the authors are using reflexive TA, is this modification in the conceptualisation of themes explained and justified? • Have the data collection questions been used as themes? • Would the manuscript benefit from further analysis being undertaken, with the reporting of fully realised themes? • Or, if the authors are claiming to use reflexive TA, would the manuscript benefit from claiming to use a different type of TA (e.g. coding reliability or codebook)? 16. Is non-thematic contextualising information presented as a theme? (e.g. the first 'theme' is a topic summary providing contextualising information, but the rest of the themes reported are fully realised themes). If so, would the manuscript benefit from this being presented as non-thematic contextualising information? 17. In applied research, do the reported themes have the potential to give rise to actionable outcomes? 18. Are there conceptual clashes and confusion in the paper? (e.g. claiming a social constructionist approach while also expressing concern for positivist notions of coding reliability, or claiming a constructionist approach while treating participants' language as a transparent reflection of their experiences and behaviours) 19. Is there evidence of weak or unconvincing analysis, such as: • Too many or too few themes? (Continued)	N/A	

Table 1. (Continued). Too many theme levels? Confusion between codes and themes? Mismatch between data extracts and analytic claims? Too few or too many data extracts? Overlap between themes? 20. Do authors make problematic statements about the lack of generalisability of their results, and or implicitly conceptualise generalisability as statistical probabilistic generalisability (see Smith 2017)?		
For quantitative research: Add appropriate prompts from CASP checklists, MMAT (mixed methods tool) and Holland and Rees / Oxford Higher Education tool for quant research used (incorporated above).		

Appendix C: Table of research included in the literature review

Author(s) (Year)	Research type	Title	Research aim	Methodology	Sample / dataset size
Bravery & Harris (2009)	LA evaluation	Emotional literacy support assistants in Bournemouth: Impact and outcomes.	To explore how the first cohort of ELSAs is establishing their role one year after the initial training. To explore impact via headteacher feedback.	Interviews and online questionnaire for headteachers.	21 ELSAs interviewed from 2007-08 cohort, 17 headteachers responded to questionnaire.
Burton, Traill & Norgate (2009)	LA evaluation	An evaluation of Emotional Literacy Support Assistant (ELSA) programme.	To evaluate the effectiveness of the Emotional Literacy Support Assistant (ELSA) programme and its impact on children and young people.	Quantitative study using teacher and parent completed SDQs.	107 pre and post teacher SDQs, 52 parent.
Bradley (2010)	LA evaluation	The scope and nature of the emotional literacy support assistant work.	To determine how many children had received support during the academic year 2009-10, the scope of that work and issues relating to the work of ELSAs.	Questionnaire sent to 525 ELSAs.	243 questionnaires returned.
Burton, Osborne & Norgate (2010)	LA evaluation	An evaluation of the impact of the emotional literacy	To evaluate the impact of ELSA support on primary and	Quantitative study using teacher and pupil	60 teacher completed SQDs, 48 pupil

		support assistant (ELSA) project on pupils attending schools in Bridgend.	secondary aged pupils in schools in Bridgend.	completed SDQs, and wait list control group.	
Grahamslaw (2010)	Thesis	An evaluation of the emotional literacy support assistant (ELSA) project: What is the impact of an ELSA project on support assistants' and children's self-efficacy beliefs?	To evaluate the ELSA programme on support assistants' self-efficacy for working with children and children's emotional self-efficacy beliefs.	Mixed methods, cross-sectional design. Different data collection and analyses to test hypotheses. Questionnaires to measure self-efficacy	64 ELSAs intervention group, 58 control group 48 CYP intervention group, 50 control group
Mann & Russell (2011)	LA evaluation	An evaluation of the ELSA interventions on children and young people.	To independently evaluate the impact of ELSA work in Dorset across year 2010-11.	Investigative methodology, mixed methods. Quantitative EL checklist questionnaire and ELSA reflections (qualitative).	30 ELSA completed pre and post questionnaires for 170 CYP across 18 settings.
Butcher, Cook, & Holder-Spriggs (2013)	LA evaluation	Exploring the impact of the emotional literacy support assistant (ELSA) intervention on primary school	To explore whether the ELSA intervention is effective in reducing the child's behaviours that are of concern and whether it supports children to achieve their EL targets.	Single-case design. Momentary time sampling and frequency recording used.	3 CYP (2 males in Year 3 and 1 female in Year 5). Female later excluded because of difficulty getting consistent

		children using single-case design.			baseline measure of behaviour.
Hill, O'Hare, & Weidberg (2013)	LA evaluation	'He's always there when I need him': Exploring the perceived positive impact of the Emotional Literacy Support Assistant (ELSA) programme.	'To explore the perceived positive impact of ELSA programme deployment from the perspective of Headteacher's, ELSAs and children in two schools.' (p.6).	Qualitative research, semi-structured interviews, thematic analysis, case study approach.	4 CYP 2 headteachers 3 ELSAs
Mann (2014)	Thesis	A mixed methods evaluation of the Emotional Literacy Support Assistants (ELSA) project.	Aimed to explore the perceptions of recently trained ELSAs regarding their role and training in support the development of emotional wellbeing. Also explored whether the ELSA programme has a measurable impact on pupils' emotional wellbeing.	Mixed methods. Quantitative – SDQ and EL checklist data (pupil and teacher). Qualitative – focus group and questionnaire data 6 months post training (ELSAs).	Quantitative – 14 ELSAs intervention group, 1 control group Qualitative – 14 ELSAs in focus group, 5 ELSAs questionnaires.
Dodds, Blake, Garland, & Shotter (2015)	LA evaluation	Investigation into the effectiveness of the Emotional Literacy Support Assistants (ELSAs) in schools.	Aimed to evaluate pre and post training the ability to understand concept of emotional literacy, the impact of EL on pupils, confidence to plan and deliver training and their experience of supervision.	Pre and post questionnaire from first and last day of ELSA training. Online surveys. Interviews.	97 ELSA pre and post training questionnaires. 20 survey responses. Number of interviewees not specified.

Hills (2016)	Published paper	An evaluation of the emotional literacy support assistant (ELSA) project from the perspective of primary school children.	To evaluate the ELSA project from the perspectives of primary school children to explore whether programme was effective and to identify factors which contributed to perceived effectiveness.	2 phase, sequential, mixed methods design. Quantitative – questionnaires. Qualitative – semi-structured interviews, and thematic analysis.	53 CYP questionnaire between 6-11 years old. 9 CYP interviews between 7-10 years old.
Wilding, & Claridge (2016)	Published paper	The Emotional Literacy Support Assistant (ELSA) programme: Parental perceptions of its impact in school and at home.	To explore parental perceptions of the ELSA programme' exploring constructs about several aspects of the programme.	Qualitative – semi-structured interviews, thematic analysis.	8 parents (1 male) from 4 primary schools.
Edwards (2016)	LA evaluation	The emotional literacy support assistant (ELSA) programme evaluation report.	Service evaluation for Cheshire West and Chester. Evaluation of impact of ELSA programme in this area.	Questionnaire, analysis method not specified.	47 ELSAs. 23 line managers (headteachers and SENDCos).
Barker (2017)	Thesis	The emotional literacy support assistant intervention: an exploration from the perspectives of pupils and parents.	To understand the experiences of individuals directly involved with ELSA as well as enquiring into aspects of the intervention process i.e., the psychological processes involved.	Semi-structured interviews, IPA.	2 primary school students and their parents.

Bowerman & Davies (2018)	LA evaluation	The impact of the emotional literacy support assistant (ELSA) programme on children in care: Evaluation report.	To evaluate the impact of ELSA training, on children in care within Cheshire West and Chester.	Questionnaire. Interviews.	19 primary school ELSAs, 6 secondary school ELSAs, 14 senior leaders returned questionnaire 2 ELSAs, 3 CYP interviewed.
Balampanidou (2019)	Thesis	Emotional Literacy Support Assistant (ELSA) programme: Child-centred approach, building trust, listening and trusting children's voices: A grounded theory analysis.	To understand CYP perspectives of ELSA following participation in the programme and to explore how and why the ELSA intervention may lead to change.	Grounded theory, qualitative, semi-structured interviews.	8 KS2 students (2 males).
Nicholson-Roberts (2019)	Thesis	'A little pebble in a pond': A multiple case study exploring how the Emotional Literacy Support Assistant (ELSA) project operates in secondary schools.	To explore how the ELSA project operates in secondary schools.	Multiple case study design, semi-structured interviews, thematic analysis.	7 interviews one school. 7 interviews second school (ELSA, SENDCos, pupils and school staff).

McEwen (2019)	Published paper	The emotional literacy support assistant (ELSA) programme: ELSAs' and children's experiences.	To explore the experiences of ELSAs and the children with whom they work.	Interviews, thematic analysis.	8 ELSAs, 7 CYP between 5-11 years old.
Haigh (2019)	Thesis	An exploratory evaluation of the Emotional Literacy Support Assistant (ELSA) project.	Investigates the impact of the ELSA project on primary school pupils and, where improvements are identified, attempts to uncover the factors that contribute to its positive implementation.	Exploratory, pragmatic, mixed methods approach, multiple case study design.	Quantitative – 5 CYP between 7-10 years (2 females) Qualitative – 5 CYP, ELSA (number not specified), 1 parent.
Krause et al. (2020)	Published paper	An exploration of the impact of the Emotional Literacy Support Assistant (ELSA) programme on wellbeing from the perspective of pupils.	Investigated impact of ELSA programme on wellbeing from the perspective of pupils.	Semi-structured interviews, thematic analysis.	13 CYP primary school, 2 CYP secondary school between 5-16 years old.
Peters (2020)	Thesis	Exploring the experience for young people of the Emotional Literacy Support Assistant (ELSA) intervention:	To gain an understanding of how the YP experiences the ELSA intervention.	Qualitative, in-depth multiple case study design, semi-structured interviews, drawing tasks, diaries and a focus group.	4 YP in years 7 and 8 and 3 ELSAs were interviewed. 8 ELSAs (from 7 different schools) also took part in a focus group.

		case studies in secondary schools.			
Wong et al. (2020)	Published paper	Primary school children's perspectives and experiences of the Emotional Literacy Support Assistant (ELSA) support.	Explores primary school children's perspectives and experiences of ELSA programme.	Qualitative, semi-structured interviews, thematic analysis.	12 KS2 pupils
Fairall (2020)	Thesis	The ELSA project in two primary schools: reflections from key stakeholders on the factors that influence implementation.	'...to examine the implementation of the ELSA project in primary school contexts, including the factors that act as facilitators and barriers for effectively implementing this intervention' (p.49).	Mixed methods multiple case study design. 2 case schools (ELSA project 1 year and less than 1 year). Questionnaire, frequency analysis. Interviews – thematic analysis.	2 case schools. 2 ELSAs, 2 ELSA line managers, 2 members of SLT, 4 teachers, 3 Link EPs, 2 ELSA EP supervisors.
Robertson (2021)	Thesis	Can emotional literacy support assistant (ELSA) interventions support positive change in the wider school?	To explore how the planning and introduction of ELSA interventions may support positive change to the wider school.	Qualitative, 2 focus groups of ELSAs, thematic analysis.	11 secondary school ELSAs from 3 different schools.

Russo (2022)	Year 1 research project for EP doctorate	'It's a strategic toolkit'. How can the Emotional Literacy Support Assistant (ELSA) programme be used to support children and young people post-lockdown?	To explore how ELSAs can be used to support pupils in schools post-lockdown.	Mixed methods, questionnaires and paired interviews.	301 ELSAs questionnaire (201 66.9% mainstream primary, 57 / 18.9% mainstream secondary, 31 / 10.3% other e.g., PRU or EY. 12 / 11.7% specialist provision. 4 ELSAs interviewed.
Thomas (2022)	Dissertation for clinical psychology masters	A content analysis evaluating the Emotional Literacy Support Assistants program in Wales.	To evaluate delivery of the ELSA programme in Wales.	Qualitative, online survey, directed and frequency content analysis.	4 EPs, 2 EPs returned survey. 3 service level reports from different LAs in the UK.
Purcell & Kelly (2023)	Published paper	A systematic literature review to explore pupils' perspectives on key outcomes of the Emotional Literacy Support Assistant (ELSA) intervention.	Explores pupils' perspectives of their outcomes from participating in ELSA and how those views were gathered.	Systematic literature review.	12 papers met inclusion criteria.
Purcell et al. (2023)	Published paper	Exploring secondary school pupils' views regarding the skills	To explore pupils' views of the outcomes that they feel they	Qualitative, semi-structured interviews, thematic analysis.	7 secondary aged pupils (years 7-11), 3 females, 1 male, one

		and outcomes they gain whilst undertaking the Emotional Literacy Support Assistant (ELSA) intervention.	have gained from participating in the ELSA intervention.		non-binary from the same school.
Mbire-Chigumba (2023)	Thesis	Exploring ELSA: teacher and pupils' views on culturally responsive approaches: how can cultural responsiveness improve sense of belonging and social and emotional support in schools?	Exploring the cultural responsiveness of ELSAs in their work with pupils from diverse backgrounds. To develop an understanding of how ELSAs perceive and achieve CRP (culturally responsive practice).	Mixed methods sequential design. Multicultural attitudes survey followed by semi-structured interviews.	60 ELSAs survey. 7 ELSAs interviews.
Silver (2024)	Published paper	Emotional literacy support assistant (ELSA) intervention: medium-term impact on pupils' emotional literacy in one local authority in Wales.	To look at medium term EL outcomes from the perspective of CYP, ELSAs and class teachers 10 weeks post intervention.	Quantitative, within-subjects design, non-matched or randomised control group.	18 CYP in intervention group. 18 CYP in control group. All CYP between ages of 3 and 16.
Rogers & Kelly (2024)	Published paper	A scoping review of the literature exploring	To 'systematically identify and map the current composition of	Scoping review.	53 studies met inclusion criteria.

		and evaluating the emotional literacy support assistant (ELSA) intervention.	the ELSA research body, including the purpose, methods and range of research available'.		
Rogers & Kelly (2024)	Published paper	Exploring the relationship between the Emotional Literacy Support Assistant (ELSA) intervention and whole-school approaches to wellbeing – a case study.	To explore the relationship between the ELSA intervention and whole-school approaches to wellbeing in one primary school'.	Qualitative single-case study design, reflexive thematic analysis. Interviews and focus groups.	1:1 interviews with 1 ELSA, 3 parents, one assistant EP. Focus group with 1 teacher and 2 TAs, and 3 members of SLT.

Appendix D: How the research question evolved

The first research question was: what are educational psychologists' experiences of supporting schools to implement the ELSA programme? This later changed to: what are educational psychologists' experiences of the implementation of the ELSA programme in school settings? Braun and Clarke (2022) are clear that through the flexible and organic process of rTA, analytic insights can shift as long as the research question does too.

Appendix E: Participant recruitment message



Robyn Cufley
 20/05/2024 12:16

Recruiting participants for thesis research

Hi everyone,

I've now been given the ethics green light to proceed with my research, so am beginning to recruit participants 😊

For my research, **I am aiming to explore how Emotional Literacy Support Assistant (ELSA) programme is being implemented in real-school settings** (as this is an area which requires further study).

To do this, **I will be interviewing 4-10 educational psychologists** to learn about the EP experience regarding the implementation of the ELSA programme.

To take part, you need to:

- Be a qualified EP.
- Have at least one year's experience with the ELSA intervention in any of the following capacities: delivering the ELSA training, supervising ELSAs, being a Link EP to a school which has an ELSA.
- Be free for a face-to-face 45-minute semi-structured interview at the office (time/date can be flexible around you).

If you are interested (and willing) to take part, please send me a message and I will send over the information sheet.

Thanks so much 😊

Robyn

Appendix F: Participant information sheet and consent form

Tavistock and Portman Trust Research Ethics Committee

If you have any queries regarding the conduct of the programme in which you are being asked to participate, please contact:

Head of Academic Registry (academicquality@tavi-port.nhs.uk)

The Researchers

Robyn Cufley (doctoral student at the Tavistock and Portman Trust)

Dale Bartle (research supervisor)

The Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust Child & Family Department Tavistock Centre
120 Belsize Lane London NW3 5BA
<http://www.tavistockandportman.nhs.uk/>

Email:

RCufley@tavi-port.nhs.uk

DBartle@tavi-port.nhs.uk

Telephone: 07918099899

Consent to Participate in a Research Study

The purpose of this letter is to provide you with the information that you need to consider in deciding whether to participate in this study. This research has received formal approval from the Tavistock Research Ethics Committee.

Project Title

Exploring the Emotional Literacy Support Assistant (ELSA) intervention as an evidence-based practice; educational psychologists' experiences of supporting school staff to implement the ELSA intervention.

Project Description

This research aims to explore how the Emotional Literacy Support Assistant (ELSA) intervention is being implemented in real-world settings. It will do this by asking educational psychologists (EPs) about their experiences of supporting school staff to implement the ELSA intervention.

You can take part if:

- You are a qualified educational psychologist.
- You have at least one year's experience with the ELSA intervention in any of the following capacities: delivering the ELSA training, supervising ELSAs, being a Link EP to a school which has an ELSA.

The researcher is aiming to interview between 4-10 educational psychologists for this research. If more than 10 educational psychologists are interested in taking part, the researcher will choose 10 participants at random.

Participants will be interviewed face-to-face by the researcher for up to 45 minutes at the local authority offices in a private room at a time which is convenient. 15 minutes will be left at the end of the interview for debriefing. Participants will be asked questions about their experience supporting school staff to implement the ELSA intervention.

At the end of the interview, participants will be asked whether they would like additional information following their involvement in the research. Participants can choose to receive:

- Verbal feedback regarding the findings of the research.
- A written summary of the findings of the research.
- Access to the full write up of the thesis.

The results of the study will be fed back to X EPS once the research is completed.

The researcher does not anticipate any risks or harm from participating in this research, but a 15 minute debrief session will be offered at the end of the interview if needed.

Confidentiality of the Data

Participation is voluntary; there are no repercussions for not taking part. You can choose not to answer a question, pause, or stop the interview at any time (without question). The interview will be confidential, bar a safeguarding disclosure of imminent harm to self or others.

The interview will be audio-recorded on two devices (a laptop and an audio recording device).

The laptop audio-recording will be done via a Microsoft Teams meeting (video will not be enabled). The researcher will also be using Microsoft Teams' Transcription Service, whereby speech-to-text is transcribed in real time (please note, that Microsoft Teams is a cloud-based service, and the audio data may be transferred outside of the UK; for more information regarding

Microsoft's privacy, security and data protection policies, please see the websites in the footnotes¹²³⁴). Once the interview is over, the transcription / recording via the Teams meeting will be stopped and immediately saved onto the researcher's encrypted laptop in a password protected folder. The transcription / recording held on Microsoft Teams will then be deleted. The separate audio recording (via an audio recording device) will be immediately uploaded to the same password protected folder on the researcher's encrypted laptop and deleted from the device. The researcher will return to the audio to check and edit the transcription within 7 days. The audio files will then be deleted, and the transcript will be held confidentially on a password protected laptop, in a password protected file. Only the researcher and research supervisor will have access to the transcription.

All data will be anonymized, however the study is relatively small and the researcher cannot, therefore, guarantee that anonymization will protect you entirely from recognition, despite all identifying information being changed or omitted. Confidentiality of information is subject to legal limitations.

Audio recordings from the interviews will be erased once the transcriptions are completed, however anonymized transcripts might be kept for a duration of up to ten years for further analysis and may be used for later publication. Data generated during the research will be retained in accordance with the Trust's Data Protection and handling policies which can be found here: <https://tavistockandportman.nhs.uk/about-us/governance/policies-and-procedures/>.

¹ [View live transcription in Microsoft Teams meetings - Microsoft Support](#)

² [Data, privacy, and security for Speech to text - Azure AI services | Microsoft Learn](#)

³ [WindowsAzure-SecurityPrivacyCompliance.pdf](#)

⁴ [Microsoft Privacy Statement – Microsoft privacy](#)

You can withdraw your data from the research within a 2-week timeframe after the interview.

The results of this research will be presented within the researcher's thesis, as part of the researcher's Doctorate in child, community, and educational psychology, accredited by the University of Essex. The researcher may seek to publish the findings in an academic journal after the research is complete. Any publication will be anonymous (with the limits described above).

Location

Interviews will take place in a booked, private room at the local authority offices.

Remuneration

There is no remuneration for taking part in this study.

Disclaimer

You are not obliged to take part in this study and are free to withdraw at any time during the interview (without question), and can withdraw your data within 2 weeks of being interviewed. Should you choose to withdraw from the programme you may do so without disadvantage to yourself and without any obligation to give a reason.

Consent to Participate in an Experimental Programme Involving the Use of Human Participants

Research Title: Exploring the Emotional Literacy Support Assistant (ELSA) intervention as an evidence-based practice; educational psychologists' experiences of supporting school staff to implement the ELSA intervention.

Researchers: Robyn Cufley (doctoral student at the Tavistock and Portman NHS Trust) and Dale Bartle (research supervisor).

I have read the information leaflet relating to the above programme of research in which I have been asked to participate and have been given a copy to keep. The nature and purposes of the research have been explained to me, and I have had the opportunity to discuss the details and ask questions about this information. I understand what is being proposed (a 45-minute face-to-face interview with the researcher followed by a 15-minute debrief) and the procedures in which I will be involved have been explained to me.

I understand that this research is being conducted as part of the child, community and educational psychology doctorate at the Tavistock and Portman NHS Trust.

I understand that my involvement in this study, and particular data from this research, will remain strictly confidential, bar a safeguarding disclosure or risk of imminent harm to self or others. Confidentiality is also subject to legal limitations. Only the researchers involved in the study will have access to the data. It has been explained to me what will happen once the experimental programme has been completed.

I understand that the interview will be audio-recorded on two devices (a laptop and an audio recording device). I understand that the laptop audio-recording will be done via a Microsoft Teams meeting (video will not be enabled), and the researcher will be using Microsoft Teams'

Transcription Service, whereby speech-to-text is transcribed in real time. I understand that, as Microsoft Teams is a cloud-based service, the audio data may be transferred outside of the UK. I understand that immediately after the interview, the researcher will save the audio recordings and the transcription to their encrypted laptop and will delete the audio recordings / transcription from Microsoft Teams and the audio recording device. I understand that the researcher will return to the audio to check and edit the transcription within 7 days. I understand that the audio files will then be deleted, and the transcript will be held confidentially on a password protected laptop, in a password protected file.

I understand that the data will be anonymized however, because the study is relatively small, the researcher cannot guarantee that anonymity will protect me entirely from recognition, despite all identifying information being changed or omitted. I understand that anonymized quotes will be used in publication/the write-up of the research.

I understand that the results of this research will be presented within the researcher's thesis, as part of the researcher's Doctorate in child, community, and educational psychology, accredited by the University of Essex. I understand that the researcher may seek to publish the findings in an academic journal after the research is complete.

I hereby freely and fully consent to participate in the study which has been fully explained to me. Having given this consent I understand that I have the right to withdraw from the study at any time during the interview, and within 2 weeks of the interview ending without disadvantage to myself and without being obliged to give any reason.

Participant's Name (BLOCK CAPITALS)

Participant's Signature

Investigator's Name (BLOCK CAPITALS)

ROBYN CUFLEY

DALE BARTLE

Investigator's Signature




Date:

Appendix G: Research interview and transcription procedure

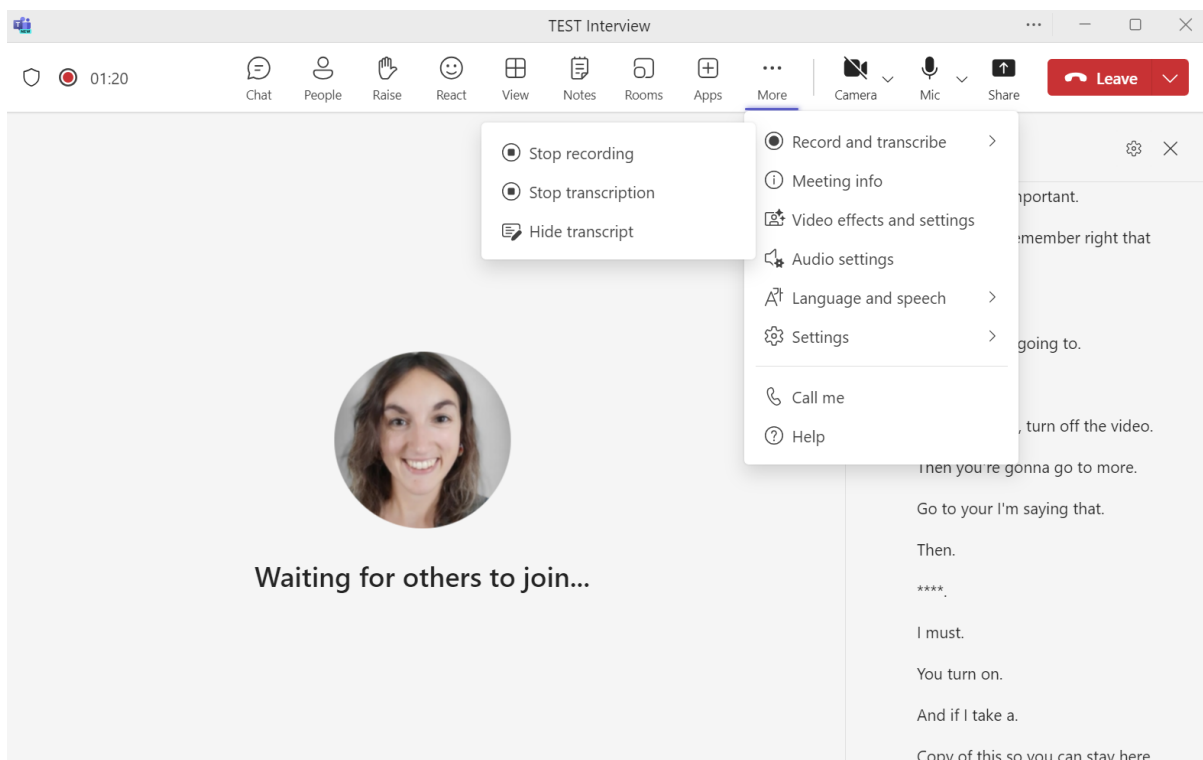
Research Interview and Transcription Procedure

Remember to bring:

- Research interview and transcription procedure print out.
- Copies of the information sheet and consent form.
- Audio recorder, USB cable and instructions (in box).
- Laptop and charger.

Set up

- Book a room at LA office.
- Prepare Microsoft teams meeting transcription:
 - Set up Teams meeting with only me as an attendee.
 - Join Teams meeting on computer, turn off video. Go to 'more' and select recording, then transcription – both MUST be turned on:



- Record without video.
 - Ensure laptop is plugged in.
- Prepare back-up audio recorder (check battery life – have USB cable). Password XXX.
- Bring up online consent form ready for the participant to sign (include options for additional involvement).

Beginning of interview

- Welcome participant, thank you for taking part.
- Reiterate what the study is about and check inclusion criteria:
 - Check that the participant has at least 1 years' experience with the ELSA programme (being part of ELSA training, supervising ELSAs, being a Link EP for a school with an ELSA, experience with ELSA programme in different LA).
- Explain that I will let the participant know when I will start and end the recording and that the interview will be a conversation with some semi-structured questions.

- Reiterate that the participant can end the interview without giving a reason at any time and can withdraw their data within 2 weeks of the interview without consequence.
- Reiterate re confidentiality and anonymity i.e., interview is confidential bar the usual limits e.g., safeguarding, data will be anonymised but as participant group small I can't guarantee that anonymization will protect you entirely from recognition.
- Explain how the interview will be recorded and check the participant is happy to continue.
- Ask whether the participant needs anything e.g., water.
- Start the recording with the agreement of the participant.

During the interview

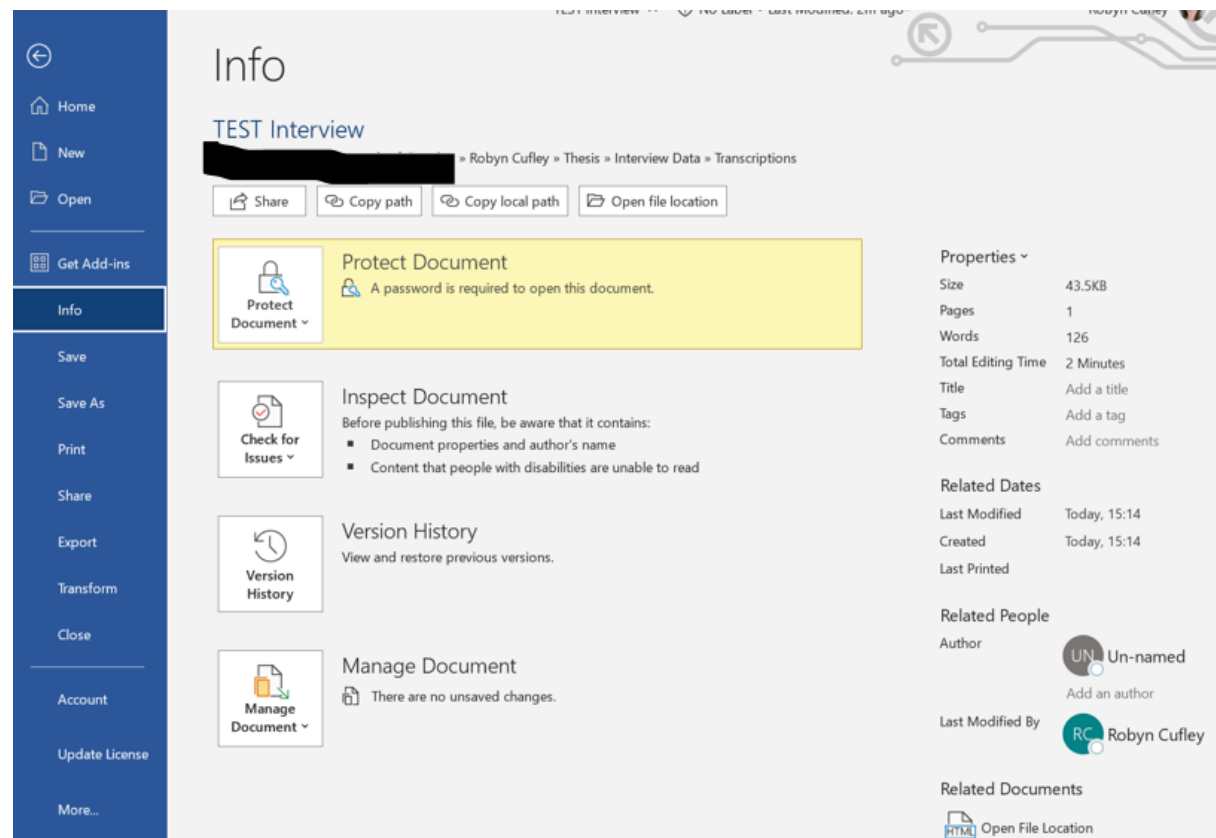
- Interview length 40-45 minutes (15 left for debriefing).
- Conduct the interview using the semi-structured questions:
 - Tell me a bit about your experience with the Emotional Literacy Support Assistant (ELSA) programme?
 - What have you noticed about how the ELSA programme is being carried out in schools?
 - Tell me about your experience supporting school staff to implement the ELSA programme.
 - What has worked well regarding embedding the ELSA programme? Prompt: how would you see it working better?
 - From your point of view, what have been the challenges regarding the implementation of the ELSA programme?
 - What other thoughts do you have about the way the ELSA programme is being used in schools?
 - Is there anything we haven't covered that you'd like to tell me about now?
- Prompts include:
 - That sounds really interesting, tell me more about that.
- Attend to the participants' body language and feelings and offer a break or to stop if necessary.
- Ask how the participant is feeling. If the person is anxious or distressed, I will signpost to:
 - The supervision the participant has at the LA, the peer supervision the participant has access to at the LA, any other as appropriate e.g., GP.

The end of the interview / debriefing

- Let the participant know the recording is being stopped.
- Thank them for participating.
- Let the participant know I will share my findings with the team once completed. Ask them how they'd like the findings to be communicated:
 - Verbal feedback regarding the findings of the research.
 - A written summary of the findings of the research.
 - Access to the full write up of the thesis.
- 10-15 minutes should be left for any questions.

Data saving / transcription

- After the interview, immediately save the transcription from the Teams meeting to my LA laptop in a password protected file:



- I'll find it on my Teams chat like this / the recording is sent to a recordings folder on my Onedrive:

TEST Interview Chat Files Recap Attendance Breakout Rooms +2 Join 1

15:50 recording has started

13:51 Meeting ended: 1m 34s

TEST Interview

10 June 2024 13:30 - 14:00

[View recap](#)

Content

 Transcript

TEST Interview
 2018-19-2019-20
 100% 100%
 46s

⌚ Set to expire

13:51 Recording has stopped.

13:53 Meeting started

13:53 Recording has started

13:55 Meeting ended: 1m 43s

TEST Interview

10 June 2024 13:30 - 14:00

[View recap](#)

Content

 Transcript

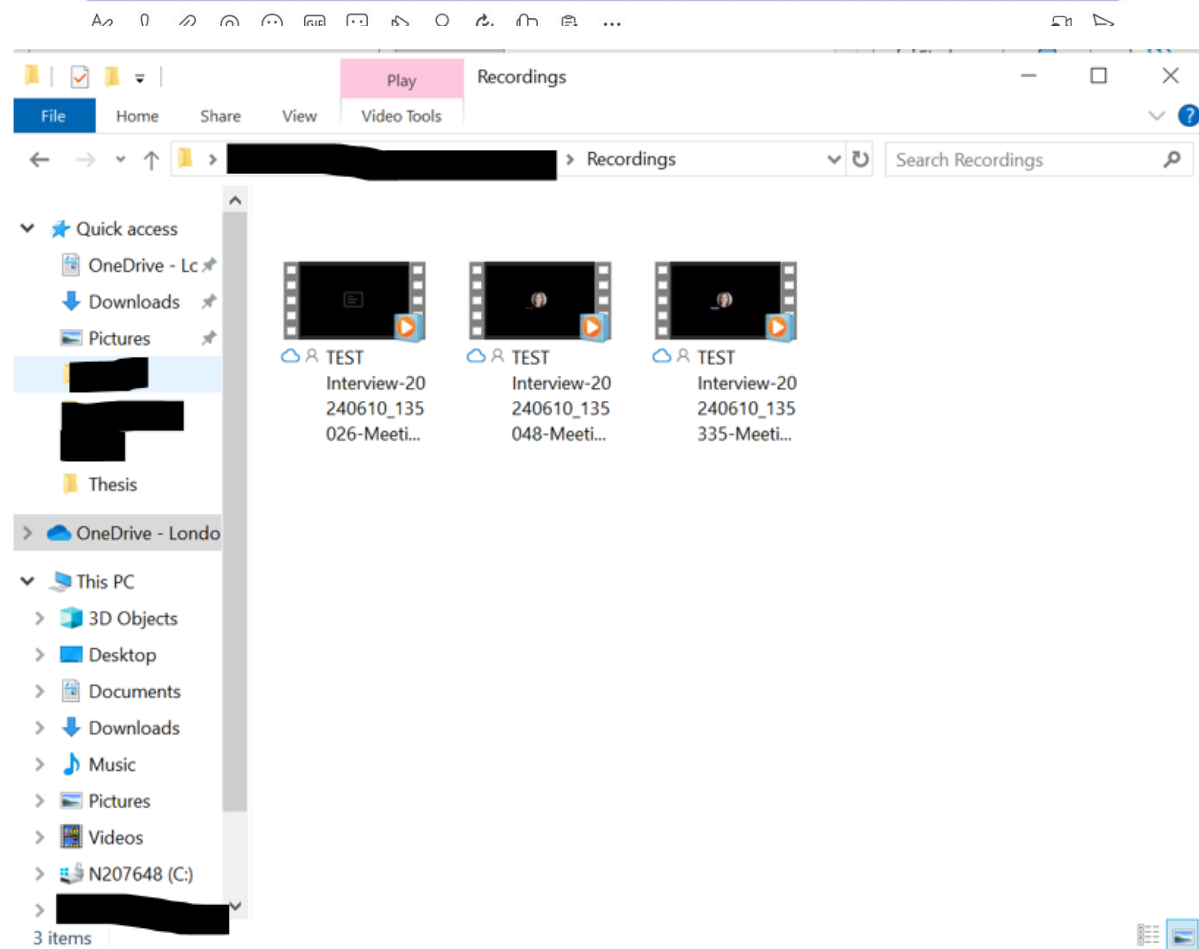
TEST Interview

1m 35s

⌚ Set to expire

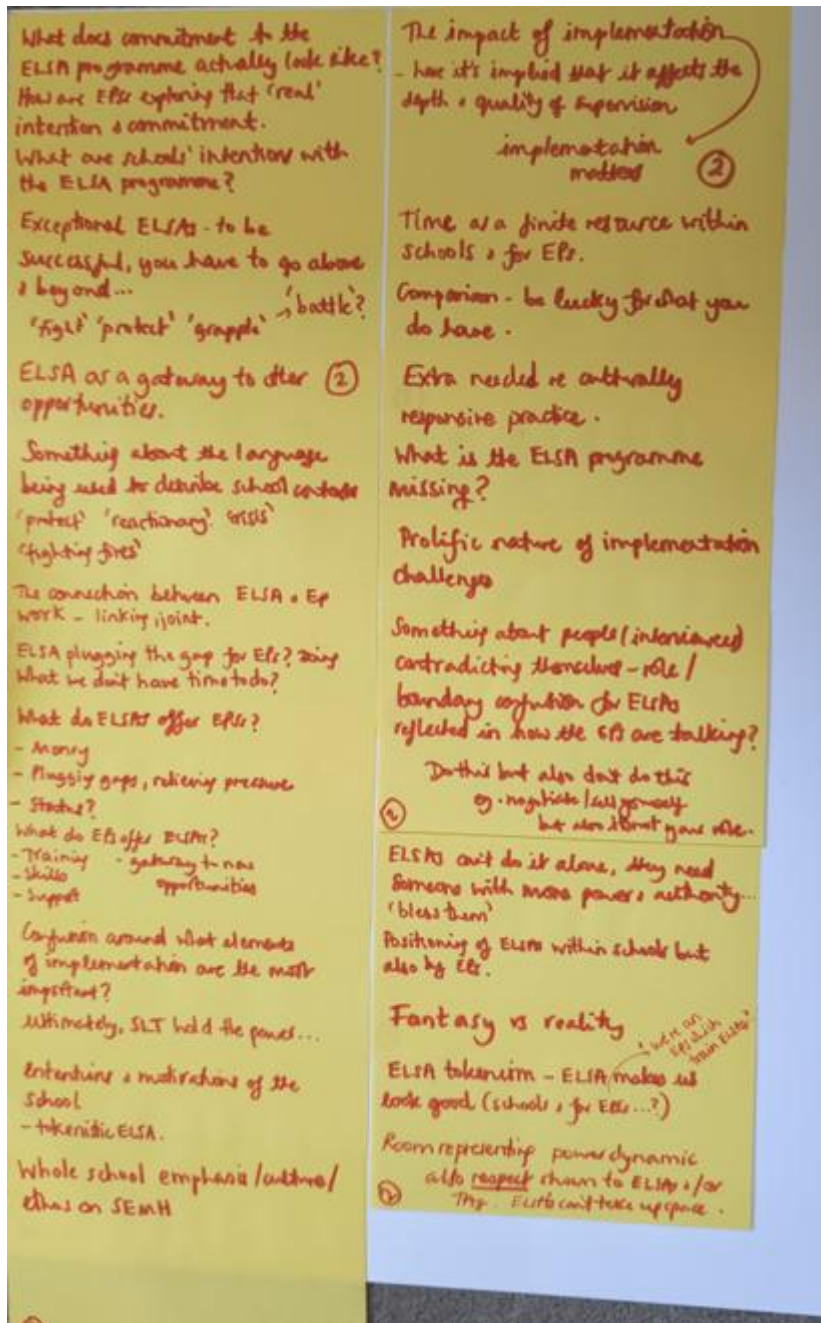
13:55 Recording has stopped.

Type a message



- Delete the recording from Microsoft Teams / recordings folder.
- Immediately upload the audio recording from the back-up device to the same folder and delete from the machine (use USB cord and move audio file into folder).
- Transcribe the interview within 7 days of the interview.
- Delete the audio recordings.

Appendix H: Example of the data familiarisation process



Good experience of the programme - enjoying most, seeing positive changes, 'fantastic work'.

Variability - each setting unique.

Primary vs secondary mentioned, no ref. to EY or specialist provision.

'Exemplary', 'model' ELIA: ^{giving all meaningful supply.}

Is referred to as an 'exception'.

How many references to ELIAs not holding the power can I find?

How many references to ELIAs holding power?

Who is portrayed as holding power?

'Insect' 'power' 'allies'.

Why?

Facilitators to success - ind. characteristics, systemic factors.

POWER - ELIA valued or devalued

eg. not even having a room or space

Is just like an indication of how little power, authority ELIAs given.

ELIAs need SUT backing because they have the power, authority etc.

Interesting use of the word 'safe' / 'feeling not safe'.

ELIA vs system - the system is stronger!

Visibility vs invisibility of students.

Autonomy mentioned.

Ref comparison of ELIAs to other services

They aren't / shouldn't be like this service but they also kind of are...

I'm thinking about all the things that are pushing and pulling ELIAs' confidence in different directions.

Is the implementation of ELIA fair & equitable?

Extra needed to implement this most successfully - EP support, training updates.

Working alongside someone with more skills and/or power? (Cynical of me?)

Extra needed?

Community!! Feels like an army of ELIAs reviving energy & building strength & power together.

'common cause' 'community identity'.

Missing voices re CYP, parents, other school staff in community.

Responsibility - high

Power

Accountability - high?

Autonomy

Loss of other services

Loss?

Pressure

Comparison between ELIAs & other professionals (cause they're not EPI).

When an ELIA does & acts as everything, that's when it works best to hash of me? Cynical?

Interesting reference to not only school finances but also EPS finances (albeit briefly).

Money matters - to school and EPS.

The value of ELIA vs the cost of ELIA

I think here, again the financial landscape of EPS is being stalked about.

①

Appendix I: Excerpt of a voice note recorded during data familiarisation (transcript)

'Okay, so I've just familiarised myself and read through, um, the second interview number two. I think some other interesting reflections and noticings after reading this one, Um, I think there's something really interesting about the use of language, um, and I'm not doing a discourse analysis, but there's something interesting for me around what's being, what's been communicated both about the state that school systems are actually in right now. Um, some of the language is, I mean I think at one point, the interviewee does actually use the language battle, Um, in the last interview, there was like safety, you know, protection, fight, grappling with.

So I think there is something interesting going on potentially around the perception of these participants of like what it's actually like to be in schools right now. It's reactionary. Yes, unsafe. Um, so that feels quite interesting. And I think there's also some interesting meaning, potentially within the, within the language, being used to talk about ELSAs themselves.

Um, So like in the interview I've just read it's like 'bless them, they would burn out'...I don't know, it feels like there's something interesting going on again, around the positioning of ELSAs and there, just seems something quite striking around the contradictions around what they should and shouldn't do and the directions they're getting pulled in, like, you should sell yourself, you need to negotiate. And then when I clarified it with the participant, it was like, oh no, no. But that's also not their responsibility. Um and again this idea of like, in order to make this work, you have to be exceptional, you have to go above and beyond because like you're fighting in this environment that's like kind of hostile to you.

Um, and I think, as well again, it came through, in this interview, there's really something about I think there's something being communicated about the power and authority and autonomy. And also potentially respect, which isn't a word that I've written down yet, but something about the respect, towards ourselves or maybe this, you know, around teaching assistants more generally.'

Appendix J: Example of initial coding phase

Interviewee: So it's, it's interesting that...because I guess, ELSA, it's all about that relational approach, but she doesn't have the time to often build that over time, so she has to really utilise those skills in the hour to facilitate that engagement and do lots of fun things to enhance well-being, but it might not be...an intervention or a programme that she monitors or that she evaluates because there's no time for it. RC: Yeah, that's, that's a really interesting example. Actually yeah, I'd not realised that we had an ELSA in X school, but yeah, that's that's, I mean, what are your kind of thoughts on like the way that that's worked for her or the way that the EPS has had to support her? I don't know. Yeah. Do you have any thoughts about? Interviewee: Yeah, she's probably one of the ELSAs that gets in touch the most with little questions or, you know...do you have resources for this or how can I do that? And I think having her in the supervision group has been really fantastic in terms of helping other ELSAs think about how the role can look differently in different settings. But I think she has had quite a lot of challenges and obviously her...it's quite an emotive role that she's got working with children, with quite severe health needs or physical disabilities. But I think she really enjoys her role and...bringing that little bit of sunshine to children's days when they yeah, and families as well when they've gone through a really difficult time. RC: Yeah, I think that's...yeah, that's super interesting. You've also mentioned there was like a secondary school that had like 5 ELSAs like, yeah, tell me a bit about that, that sounds really interesting too. Interviewee: Yeah, so they all trained at the same time as well. So that was a challenge of the training because obviously that was a little subgroup and they often sat together or when the training was online, they'd be in the same room. And when we had break out rooms, it was quite difficult. So we actually had to ask them to, can, can you guys like split up and [momentary laughter, unintelligible] join. But no, it's it's great for the school...that school actually buy in extra EP time as well, so they have 3 EPs allocated to the school. And the school EPs, I haven't done a lot of direct work with the ELSAs apart from supervision, because they have that time and the EPs attached to the school can, can link in with them. Yeah, so it's good that the school has a lot of need. So I think building that team within the school is just such a fantastic resource when EPs and CAMHS are quite, quite full up.	Robyn Cufley ELSAs can't always monitor and evaluate their work / interventions Reply Robyn Cufley The enemy of time / not enough time to do the role properly Reply Robyn Cufley ELSAs need extra support 01 November 2024, 15:44 Robyn Cufley EPs answer ELSAs' questions 01 November 2024, 15:44 Robyn Cufley EPs share extra resources 01 November 2024, 15:45 Reply Robyn Cufley Diversity of experiences in supervision is good Reply Robyn Cufley ELSAs broaden each other's thinking Reply Robyn Cufley The ELSA programme looks different in different schools Reply
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Appendix K: Example of coding refinement

Interviewee: So it's, it's interesting that...because I guess, ELSA, it's all about that relational approach, but she doesn't have the time to often build that over time, so she has to... really utilise those skills in the hour to facilitate that engagement and do lots of fun things to enhance well-being, but it might not be...an intervention or a programme that she monitors or that she evaluates because there's no time for it
RC: Yeah, that's, that's a <u>really interesting</u> example. Actually yeah, I'd not realised that we had an ELSA in X school, but yeah, that's <u>that's</u> . I mean, what are your kind of thoughts on like the way that that's worked for her or the way that the EPs has had to support her? I don't know. Yeah. Do you have any thoughts about?
Interviewee: Yeah. <u>She's probably one of the ELSAs that gets in touch the most with little questions or, you know...do you have resources for this or how can I do that? And I think having her in the supervision group has been <u>really fantastic</u> in terms of helping other ELSAs think about how the role can look differently in different settings. But I think she has had quite a lot of challenges and obviously her...it's quite an emotive role that she's got working with children, with quite severe health needs or physical disabilities. But I think she really enjoys her role and <u>bringing</u> that little bit of sunshine to children's days when they yeah, and families as well when they've gone through a really difficult time.</u>
RC: Yeah, I think that's...yeah, that's super interesting. You've also mentioned there was like a secondary school that had like 5 ELSAs like, yeah, tell me a bit about that, that sounds <u>really interesting</u> too.
Interviewee: Yeah, so they all trained at the same time as well. So that was a challenge of the training because obviously that was a little subgroup and they often sat together <u>when the training was online, they'd be in the same room. And when we had break out rooms, it was quite difficult. So we actually had to ask them to, can, can you guys like split up and [momentary laughter, unintelligible] join. But no, it's <u>it's</u> great for the school...that school <u>actually have</u> in extra EP time as well, so they have 3 EPs allocated to the school. And the school EPs, I haven't done a lot of direct work with the ELSAs apart from supervision, because they have that time and the EPs attached to the school can, can link in with them. Yeah, so it's good that-the school has a lot of need. So I think building that team within the school is just such a fantastic resource when EPs and CAMHS are <u>quite, quite full up.</u></u>
RC: Yeah. Yeah. OK, that's super interesting. How do you think that came about? That five ELSAs were trained from that school. Yeah. How did you? Yeah. How did you think that came about?
Interviewee: Yeah. I think part of it was...they got extra funding from the ENG pot. So the money that was <u>leftover</u> from their cluster of schools, they could use it on training, and that school really wanted to train more ELSAs.
RC: OK.
Interviewee: Yeah. [Laughter]

Reply

Robyn Cufley

EP support (informal)

29 January 2025, 15:15

Robyn Cufley

Training just the start

29 January 2025, 15:15

Robyn Cufley

Strength comes from ELSA community

29 January 2025, 15:15

Robyn Cufley

ELSA role changing

29 January 2025, 15:15

Robyn Cufley

Diverse experiences in supervision

29 January 2025, 15:16

Robyn Cufley

Role of supervision (peer support)

29 January 2025, 15:16

Robyn Cufley

Implementation can be hard

29 January 2025, 15:16

Robyn Cufley

Emotional Impact ELSA role

29 January 2025, 15:17

Robyn Cufley

Complex CYP needs

29 January 2025, 15:17

Robyn Cufley

ELSAs enjoy role

29 January 2025, 15:17

Robyn Cufley

ELSA makes a positive difference (EPs)

29 January 2025, 15:17

Robyn Cufley

Children with health needs

13 February 2025, 08:00

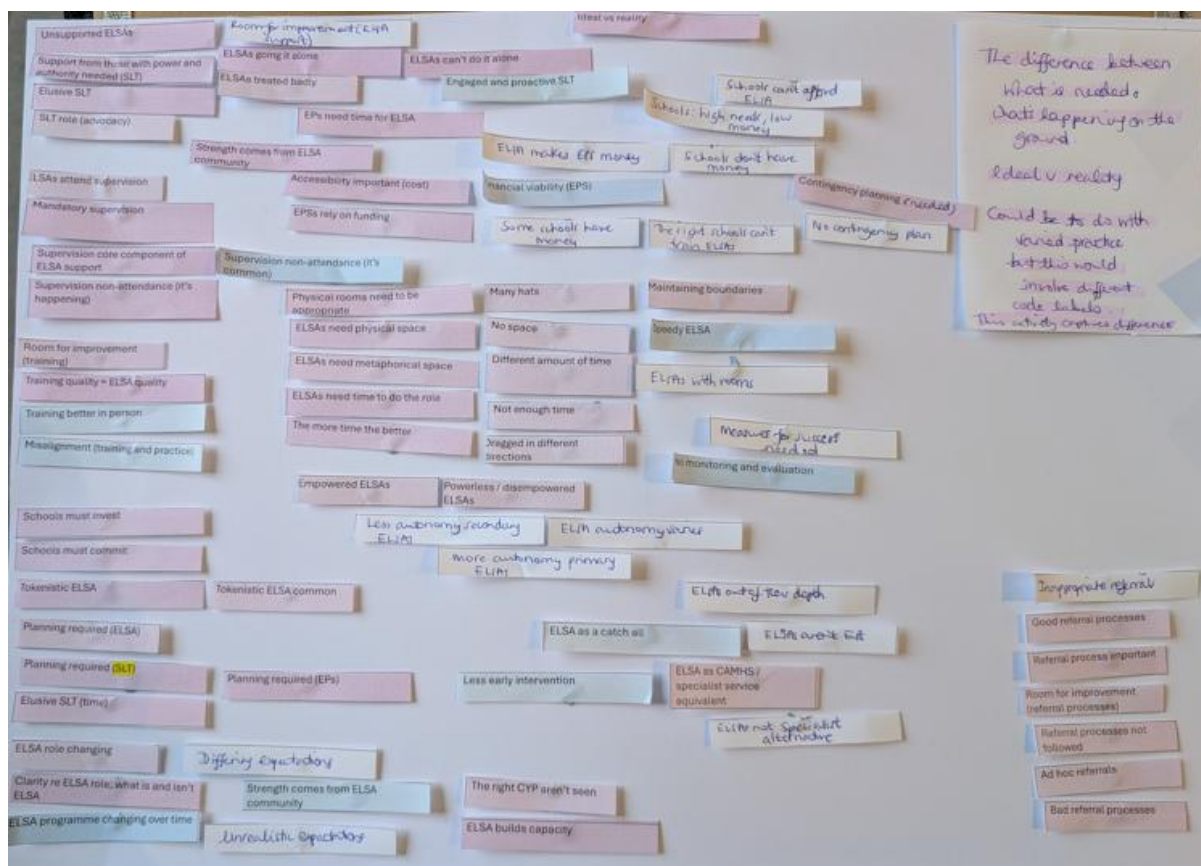
Robyn Cufley

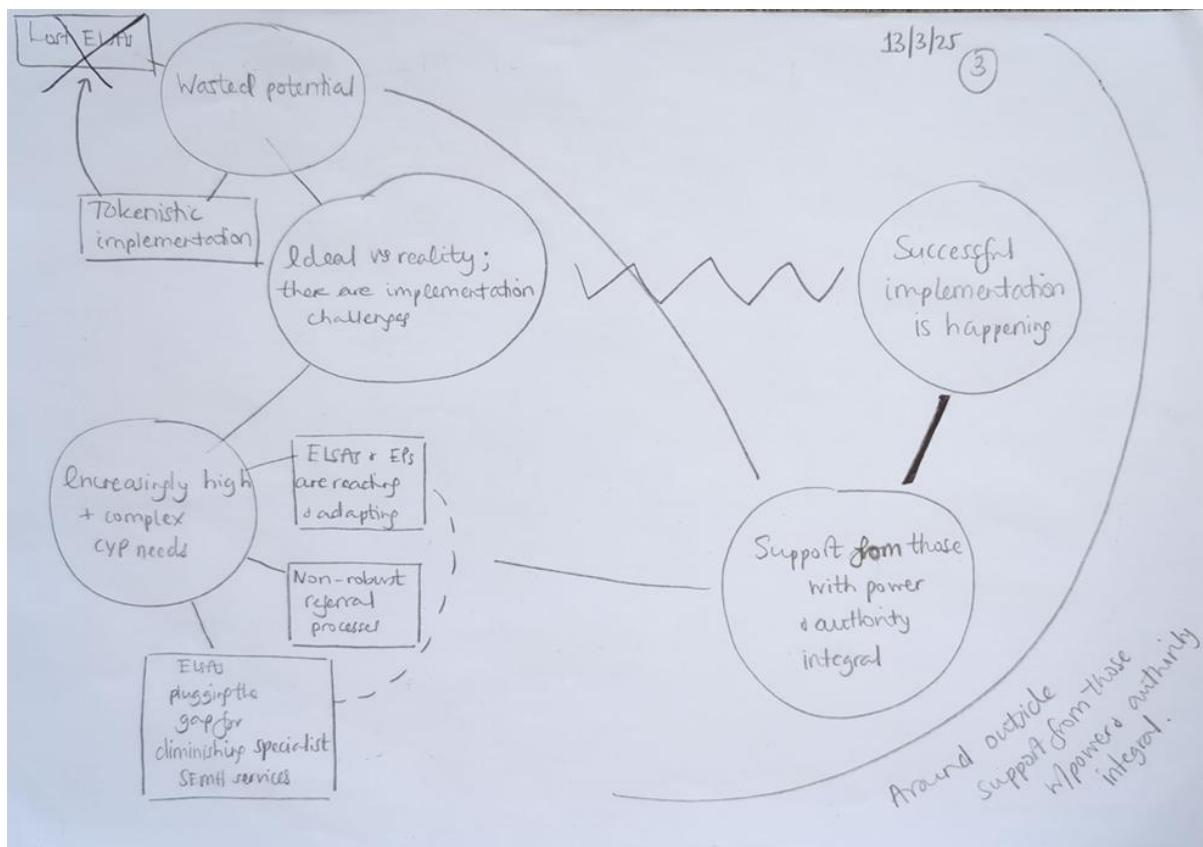
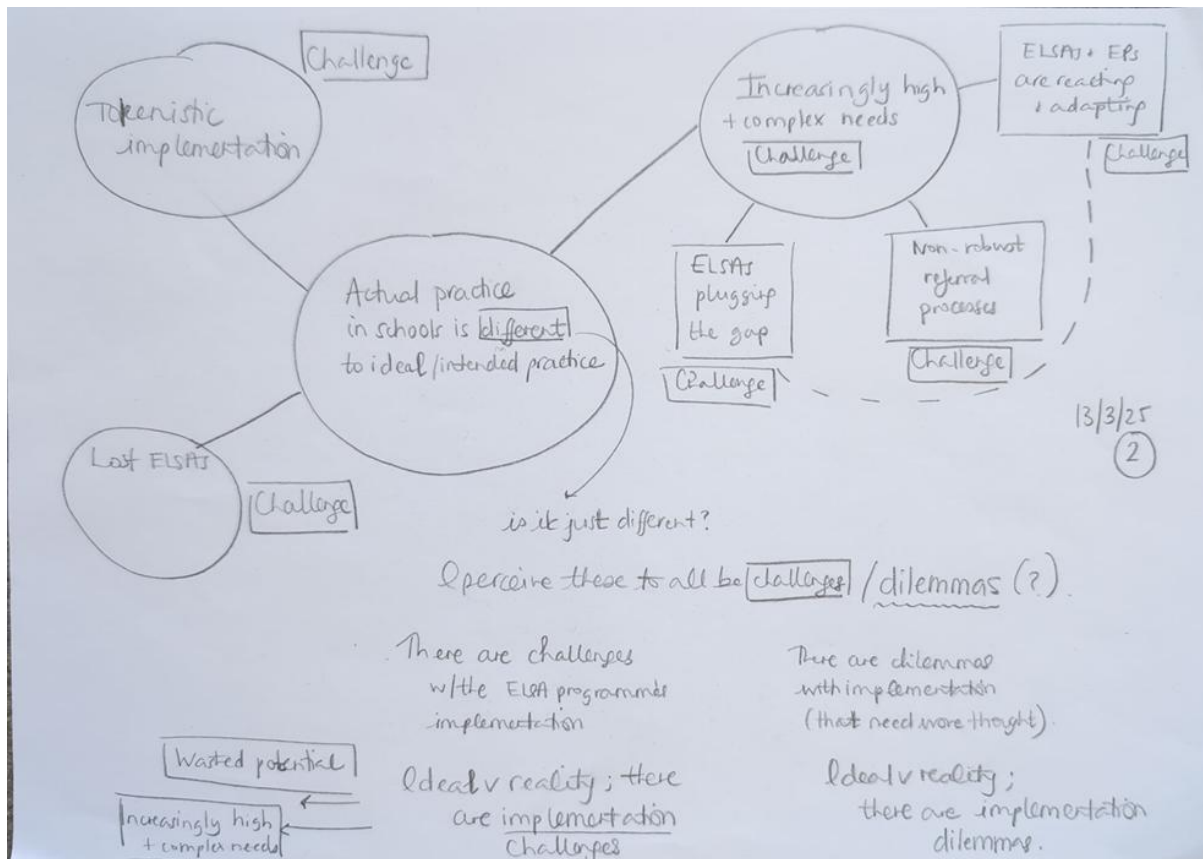
Children with physical disability

13 February 2025, 08:00

Reply

Appendix L: Example of initial theme development





Appendix O: Ethical approval

The Tavistock and Portman 
NHS Foundation Trust

Quality Assurance & Enhancement
Directorate of Education & Training
Tavistock Centre
120 Belsize Lane
London
NW3 5BA

Tel: 020 8938 2699

<https://tavistockandportman.nhs.uk/>

Robyn Cufley

By Email

14 May 2024

Dear Robyn,

Re: Trust Research Ethics Application

Title: *'Exploring the Emotional Literacy Support Assistant intervention (ELSA) as an evidence-based practice; educational psychologists' experiences of supporting school staff to implement the ELSA intervention'.*

Thank you for submitting your updated Research Ethics documentation. I am pleased to inform you that subject to formal ratification by the Trust Research Ethics Committee your application has been approved. This means you can proceed with your research.

Please be advised that any changes to the project design including changes to methodology/data collection etc, must be referred to TREC as failure to do so, may result in a report of academic and/or research misconduct.

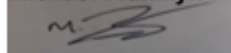
If you have any further questions or require any clarification do not hesitate to contact me.

I am copying this communication to your supervisor.

May I take this opportunity of wishing you every success with your research.

Yours sincerely,

Michael Franklyn



Academic Governance and Quality Officer

T: 020 938 2699

E: academicquality@tavi-port.nhs.uk

cc. Course Lead, Supervisor, Research Lead

Appendix P: Risk assessment

Fieldwork Risk Assessment Audit

Name: Robyn Cufley	School: Tavistock & Portman NHS Foundation Trust
Student number: 22002864	Supervisor / Director of Studies: Dale Bartle (research supervisor)
Thesis Title: Exploring the Emotional Literacy Support Assistant (ELSA) intervention as an evidence-based practice; educational psychologists' experiences of supporting school staff to implement the ELSA intervention.	
Fieldwork location: Institutional setting / Local authority offices.	Type of Fieldwork: Face-to-Face Interviews
Proposed dates or periods of Fieldwork: February / March 2024 to May / June 2025	
Potential hazards or risks: (<i>rate high medium or low</i>)	
1. Fire in the offices (low)	2. Slips, trips, and falls (low).
3. Participants or the researcher becoming distressed during or after the interviews resulting in harm (low).	4. Audio recording not working (thus wasting the participant's time).
5. Participants unhappy with the conduct of the researcher (low).	6.
7.	8.

9.	10.
Potential Consequences for each hazard: <i>(please continue on a separate sheet if necessary)</i> 1. Injury or, in extreme cases, death. 2. Injury or, in extreme cases, death. 3. Psychological or physical harm (short or long term). 4. Distress for participant or researcher, wasting participant time. 5. Psychological or physical harm (short or long term). Ethical standards not maintained by the researcher.	
Controls in place for each hazard in order of likely risk: <i>(please continue on a separate sheet if necessary)</i> 1. X local authority has a set fire alarm procedure which we will follow in the event of a fire. Both the participant and researcher will be aware of this process because both have been inducted at X LA and it is their normal place of work. 2. X LA offices comply with health and safety standards. The researcher will be aware of the first aid point on the floor where the interview is being conducted and the first aid / health and safety procedure of X LA will be followed in the event of an accident. 3. The researcher will be attuned to the emotional state of the participant throughout the interview and, if they appear distressed, they will ask whether the participant would like to stop or take a break. The researcher will make clear at the start of the interview that the participant can stop or take a break at any time. Participants will be reminded that they can withdraw their data anytime during the interview and within 2 weeks after the interview has finished. The researcher will ask how the participant is feeling at the end of the interview. If any distressing thoughts or emotions have surfaced because of participating in the interview, the researcher will signpost to the following additional support: • The supervision the participant has access to at the local authority. • The peer supervision the participant has access to at the local authority. • Any other appropriate e.g., GP. In addition, the researcher will update their X EPS calendar with the interview times, dates, and location so colleagues know where the researcher and participant are. Interviews will take place in rooms with glass doors. 4. The researcher will be audio recording the interview using 2 devices; Microsoft Teams with transcription enabled (no video) and an audio recorder device. 5. All participants will have an information sheet which has details of the Head of Academic Registry (academicquality@tavi-port.nhs.uk) at the Tavistock and Portman NHS Trust which they can contact with any concerns regarding the conduct of the research. Participants will also have the researcher and research supervisor's contact details.	

By signing this document you are indicating that you have consulted the policy and have fully considered the risks.

Signature of Student:



Robyn Cufley

Date: 26/1/24

I agree to the assessment of risk in relation to this project.

Signature of Supervisor of Studies:



Dale Bartle

Date:

8/3/24

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