

The Emotional Literacy Support Assistant (ELSA) Programme: Can you develop an evidence base for an adaptive intervention?

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This article considers different aspects of the Emotional Literacy Support Assistant Programme. Specifically, it critiques the evidence base for the intervention and discusses issues relating to the adaptability of the programme.

Understanding Emotional Literacy

Emotional literacy (EL) is defined as the ability to recognise, understand, manage and appropriately express our emotions (Sharp, 2001) and respond appropriately to those expressed by other individuals (Southampton Psychology Service, 2003). This concept is closely linked to that of emotional intelligence, a term first defined by Salovey and Mayer (1990) as the ability to monitor your own and others' feelings and emotions, and to use this to guide thoughts and actions. Although these terms are often used interchangeably, the term emotional literacy is preferred in education as the notion of intelligence implies something fixed and innate, rather than something that can be learnt and developed (Shotton & Burton, 2008; Weare, 2004).

What are ELSAs?

The Emotional Literacy Support Assistant (ELSA) programme is a within-school provision designed to provide one-to-one support for children in need of additional help with their emotional literacy skills. ELSAs receive five or six days of initial training on different aspects of EL, including emotional awareness, self-esteem, social and friendship skills, anger management, social communication difficulties, and loss and bereavement. Within this training they are introduced to psychological theories, such as Maslow's (1970) hierarchy of needs, that help them to better understand children's behaviour and how to provide effective support (Burton, 2008). Following their initial training, ELSAs deliver targeted interventions lasting

approximately six to eight weeks, with Educational Psychologists (EPs) providing ongoing, half-termly supervision. While ELSAs often work with children on a one-to-one basis, they are also responsible for delivering small group interventions.

History of ELSA

The ELSA programme began in 2001 as a peripatetic service, offered by Southampton Local Authority (LA), to support vulnerable children referred to the Educational Psychology Service (EPS) for social and emotional needs (Burton, 2008). Grounded in psychological theory such as theory of motivation (Maslow, 1970) and theory of multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1983), the ELSA programme stemmed from the work of Goleman (1995), who suggested that a child's success in school is not based solely on intelligence, but on emotional and social characteristics developed early in life. Designed to work alongside a whole school approach, the purpose was to provide individualised programmes of support to children identified by the school as requiring additional help with their EL skills. This evolved into a school-based service, whereby teaching assistants were provided with specific training from EPs to give them the skills and resources needed to support children's social and emotional learning (Burton, Traill, & Norgate, 2009). The ELSA programme is now well-established in multiple authorities across England and Wales.

Why is Emotional Literacy important?

In order for children to become effective learners, Maslow (1970) suggested that it is first necessary to ensure that children's physiological and emotional needs are met. Gardner (1983) argued that emotional and social abilities, including intra and interpersonal intelligence, may be more influential than conventional intelligence for personal, career and school success (cited in Burton, Osborne, & Norgate, 2010). Research has found that children's emotional competence at preschool predicts concurrent and later social competence (Denham et al., 2003), and that socioemotional skills and well-being underpin later academic achievement

(Duncan et al., 2007; Greenberg et al., 2003; Berger, Lidia, Alejandra & Neva, 2011; Djambazova-Popordanoska, 2016). Children's social and emotional wellbeing is now recognised as a key factor in determining how well children do at school (National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence, 2008, 2009), with direct teaching of EL found to increase children's academic achievement and improve behaviour (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011; Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg, & Walberg, 2007). When these emotional needs are not met, children are at greater risk for maladjustment and psychopathology (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

The importance of developing emotional literacy has been demonstrated in empirical literature. While Ciarrochi, Chan, and Caputi (2000) found that low EL was associated with low levels of empathy and difficulty regulating moods, Liau, Liau, Teoh and Liau (2003) surveyed over 200 secondary school students in Malaysia and found a significant negative relationship between levels of EL and internalising behaviours, whereby those with lower levels of EL had higher levels of stress and depression. A significant negative association was also found between EL and externalising problem behaviours, with low levels of EL related to high levels of aggression. Although this suggests that emotional literacy skills may be important for both internalising and externalising behaviour, it is important to be aware that this research was reliant on self-report measures (Liau et al., 2003).

How effective is ELSA?

Although the ELSA initiative has been received positively by ELSAs, teachers and pupils (Burton, 2008), there is currently a lack of peer reviewed research. Most studies have been conducted by LAs and Trainee EPs to explore the effectiveness of the intervention.

Using a mixed methods approach, Russell and Mann (2011) found that teachers identified a measurable and significant improvement in children's emotional literacy, post intervention. In the absence of a control group, however, it is not possible to determine whether

this was the direct result of the ELSA intervention. In addition, although teachers reported improvements in EL on an emotional literacy checklist, the results for parent and child measures were found to be non-significant.

Research conducted by Burton et al. (2010) compared pupils who received ELSA intervention against a wait-list control group identified as needing this support. Significant improvements were found for the intervention group in the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ; Goodman, 1997) sub-categories of conduct problems, hyperactivity and peer problems, and in a teacher rated EL measure for empathy, self-awareness, self-regulation and social skills (Burton et al., 2010). Improvements seen were not isolated to the intervention group, however, with control participants making significant improvements in peer problems and motivation. Although this may reflect support put in place for wait-list children, it demonstrates the difficulties of having a passive control group in a natural setting. Due to the absence of an active control group it is not possible to rule out the Hawthorne effect (Wickstrom & Bendix, 2000), whereby individuals improve as a result of the increased level of attention they receive as part of the intervention.

A 2010 study by Grahamslaw found that children who had received ELSA support held higher beliefs in their own emotional self-efficacy than children who had not. This suggests that the ELSA programme might support children to develop increased confidence in their ability to regulate their emotions. Despite the inclusion of a control group in this study, no pre-post measures were administered due to variation in the type of interventions being delivered. In addition, a positive relationship was found between children's emotional self-efficacy and ELSAs' self-efficacy in working with children. This indicates that ELSAs might require high levels of self-efficacy in order to develop children's beliefs in their own capabilities.

One problem with much of the research conducted on the effectiveness of ELSA interventions is the lack of sensitivity in measures of EL. Using a case study design, Butcher,

Cook and Holder-Spriggs (2013) carried out a small scale research project looking specifically at the progress of individual children on tailored targets. While they found positive progress in most cases, difficulties within this study occurred due the inability to effectively measure this progress. This suggests that some measures such as the Emotional Literacy Checklist (Faupel, 2003, in Southampton Psychology Service, 2003) may not be sufficiently sensitive to measure changes in EL. They are also dependent on subjective ratings.

The possibility that children may improve following an ELSA intervention purely as a result of the attention it provides raises questions about how we assess the effectiveness of this work. Teaching to individual targets or an EL measurement tool might result in improvement on these measures, but this overlooks the extent to which these skills can be generalised to wider contexts. For educators, the generalisation of EL skills back into the classroom or playground is arguably more important than whether children improve on a particular measurement tool. Head teachers and ELSAs report that ELSA interventions have a positive impact on individual pupils' behaviour, emotional well-being and relationships (Bravery & Harris, 2009), with ELSAs also reporting a positive impact on attendance, reducing bullying and academic achievement. This suggests that it might be beneficial to measure more general outcomes, such as academic achievement, in order to evaluate the effectiveness of ELSA interventions. For example, Sayer (2011) found no impact of ELSA intervention on attendance or EL skills, but he did find a positive effect on academic achievement.

The adaptability of ELSA

Research into the effectiveness of ELSA intervention has found mixed results. Whilst some suggest it effective at improving children's EL skills (Burton et al., 2010; Russell & Mann, 2011), others have found it to make no significant impact in this area (Sayer, 2011). One possible reason for these conflicting results concerns inconsistencies in the intensity and duration of interventions delivered, as well as differences in the measures used. In Sayer's

study, for example, pupils received support for 30 minutes per week over a six week period, yet elsewhere this has been recommended as only the minimum requirement for an intervention (Burton et al., 2010, 2009).

Interventions vary between ELSAs, with some providing one-off sessions to individual pupils and others provide ongoing support across the academic year (Bradley, 2010). In the absence of a single programme for ELSA intervention, children will likely experience different sessions, tools and strategies of support (Sayer, 2011). This flexibility is aimed at enabling ELSAs to develop tailored programmes that meet the needs of individual children in order to achieve clear outcomes or targets (Burton et al., 2009). It is seen as a strength of ELSA work (Burton, 2008), particularly as adaptability is important in order for a programme to be embedded successfully into an organisation (Durlak & DuPre, 2008).

However, adaptability may also impact negatively on the effectiveness of the intervention delivered. Although research has found that ELSAs' self-efficacy for working with children increases post-training (Grahamslaw, 2010), a lack of skills, confidence and competence in delivering interventions can remain a significant barrier to successful implementation and adaptation (Lendrum, Humphrey, & Wigelsworth, 2013). It is important to consider these factors when carrying out an evaluation, since effective implementation of a programme is associated with stronger and more beneficial outcomes (Durlak & DuPre, 2008).

Adaptability also results in difficulties in comparing like for like ELSA experiences (Sayer, 2011). Durlak et al. (2011) suggest that programmes which are sequenced, active, focused and explicit (SAFE) are less likely to encounter implementation problems and thus be more effective. Whilst ELSA interventions have the potential to be SAFE, the design and delivery of tailor-made programmes that meet these criteria will depend upon ELSAs' skills and self-efficacy. Given the adaptable nature of ELSA work, it is therefore important to

understand how it is implemented across settings in order to ascertain whether interventions are likely to lead to positive outcomes.

As an adaptable intervention, the value of ELSA is that it is grounded in strong psychological theory and can be tailored to meet the needs of individual children. Without consistent programme content and comparable pre-post measures, however, it is difficult to ascertain what components of the intervention are effective. Even with standard measures in place and ongoing programme monitoring, there are so many variables involved that it would be difficult to separate the effects of the individual programme from other factors such as the intensity of the intervention or qualities of the ELSA themselves.

What do children say about ELSA work?

Within all this variation, a possible common factor might be that the nature of the relationship children have with an ELSA is something qualitatively different from that which they have with other members of school staff. To date, only one peer-reviewed study has considered the thoughts of children themselves on the nature of ELSA work. Hills (2016) surveyed 53 children across 16 primary schools and reported that all of these participants rated ELSA work as effective, with 42% choosing the maximum effectiveness rating available to them. Of these children, nine were interviewed in more depth. Core themes emerging from these interviews on the reasons for this perceived effectiveness were the importance of the therapeutic relationship children felt they had with the ELSA, the impact of being able to talk and think about their feelings, and the resilience they felt this intervention helped them to build.

Conclusions and implications for EP Practice

The ELSA programme is an adaptable intervention, which provides schools with a way to support children with low levels of emotional literacy through tailor-made interventions on a one-to-one or small group basis. The extent to which it can be considered an evidence-based intervention depends on the view taken as to what constitutes a sufficient evidence base.

Attempts have been made to evaluate its effectiveness, yet difficulties remain in comparing like for like interventions. Whilst there is some evidence to suggest that ELSAs can be effective in supporting children and young people to develop their EL skills, a failure to address these difficulties in research design makes it difficult to say with certainty what it is that makes a particular ELSA intervention successful. Caution is recommended regarding describing the ELSA programme as an evidence-based intervention in the absence of a more complete understanding of these factors.

EPs have an important role in helping schools understand what makes the implementation of an ELSA intervention successful and can advise on the importance of ELSAs' skills, confidence and competence in delivering programmes. Whilst initial training may focus predominantly on teaching skills, EPs need to be aware that the development of ELSA confidence and competence requires ongoing supervision and the provision of opportunities to discuss and reflect on practice.

Research has suggested that children's emotional self-efficacy is positively associated with ELSAs' self-efficacy in working with children (Grahamslaw, 2010). This suggests that EPs need to support and encourage ELSAs to believe in their ability to work with children and deliver EL interventions. This may be especially true for ELSAs who are new to the role or have limited experience in working with children and young people.

Rather than continuing to research the effectiveness of an adaptable intervention, it could be argued that it is more important to ascertain whether the EL skills children learn during ELSA interventions have generalisable effects. For schools considering whether or not to invest in ELSAs, this is likely to have a significant impact on their decision. EPs may therefore have an important role in helping ELSAs and schools to monitor the wider impact of ELSA interventions such as on children's attendance, attainment and social relationships. Furthermore, future research may benefit from eliciting the views of children who have

received an ELSA intervention in order to help EPs and researchers better understand the value of this work for young people themselves.

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