

# Exploring the Experiences of Emotional Literacy Support Assistants (ELSAs) Providing Support to Children and Young People During and Outside of the COVID-19 Lockdowns

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Social, emotional, and mental health (SEMH) needs continue to rise amongst children and young people (CYP), particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic. The Emotional Literacy Support Assistant (ELSA) intervention in schools aims to support CYP with SEMH difficulties to develop their emotional literacy skills. The current study addressed a gap in the literature by capturing ELSAs' views of the supportive factors and barriers to their work during and outside of the COVID-19 lockdowns. Thirty-two ELSAs completed an anonymous online qualitative survey. Codebook thematic analysis identified five overarching themes: 1) supportive professional relationships, 2) understanding and communication, 3) resources in the role, 4) relationships with CYP and family, and 5) effects of COVID-19. Findings highlight individual-level and systemic factors impacting ELSA implementation and the impact of COVID-19 lockdowns, furthering our understanding of how to develop and maintain effective and sustainable ELSA interventions. Limitations, recommendations for future research, and practice implications are discussed.

*Keywords:* emotional literacy, ELSA; mental health, wellbeing, SEMH, COVID-19

## Introduction

Concern over the social, emotional, and mental health (SEMH) needs of children and young people (CYP) has risen considerably in recent years. A recent large-scale UK survey highlighted that one in six CYP have a probable mental health condition and reported greater proportions of CYP experiencing deterioration in mental health since 2017 (NHS Digital, 2021). Since the COVID-19 pandemic partial school closures, more CYP than ever are being referred to mental health services (Peytrignet et al., 2022). UK legislation emphasises the pivotal role that schools play in developing CYP's social and emotional skills and supporting their SEMH needs (e.g., Children and Families Act, 2014; DoH & DfE, 2017).

A key skill, emphasised in the educational sector, that contributes to CYP's positive mental health and wellbeing is their emotional literacy (Weare, 2003). Emotional literacy is commonly defined as being able to recognise, understand, regulate, and appropriately express our emotions and respond to the emotions of others (Sharp, 2001). In CYP, greater ability to understand and regulate emotions is associated with decreased stress, depression, and aggression (Liau et al., 2003), increased empathy, self-esteem, life satisfaction (Ciarrochi et al., 2000), and positive peer relations and prosocial behaviour (Petrides et al., 2006). Although typically viewed as an individual-level

construct, emotional literacy can also be conceptualised and cultivated at group and whole-school levels (Roffey, 2008; Weare, 2003), for example, by promoting a whole-school ethos and environment that supports the mental wellbeing of, and develops emotional literacy skills for, all members within the whole school community (Roffey, 2008).

## ELSA Intervention

The Emotional Literacy Support Assistant (ELSA) intervention was developed with the aim of building capacity within schools to support CYP with SEMH difficulties to develop their emotional literacy skills (Burton, 2008; Weare & Gray, 2003). The intervention is delivered by school staff (e.g., Teaching Assistants) who have completed six days of ELSA training. Training is facilitated by educational psychologists (EPs) and provides knowledge of psychological theory and practical strategies to support CYP in areas related to emotional literacy (e.g., emotional awareness, self-esteem, social communication). Once trained, the staff members become ELSAs and deliver targeted and individualised one-to-one and small-group interventions lasting approximately six to 13 weeks. ELSAs receive half-termly group supervision from EPs to discuss cases, problem-solve, and share ideas and resources (Osborne & Burton, 2014). The intervention is widely

delivered in UK local authorities (LAs) (ELSA Network, 2017).

Findings from existing research largely support the acceptability and effectiveness of the intervention. For example, the intervention has been received positively by pupils, parents, and school staff (e.g., Burton, 2008; McEwen, 2019; Wong et al., 2020) and is associated with perceived improvements in CYP's emotional literacy skills and related outcomes, such as resilience, wellbeing, optimism, strength of relationships (peers, school staff, and family), and engagement in school (e.g., Grahamslaw, 2010; Krause et al., 2020; Wilding & Claridge, 2016).

Despite widespread delivery and evidence for effectiveness, there is limited research evaluating the implementation of the ELSA intervention, specifically, factors that help (i.e., facilitators) or hinder (i.e., barriers) the delivery of the intervention. This is due, in part, to the individualised and adaptive nature of the intervention, which makes it difficult to make comparisons within and between ELSAs (Pickering et al., 2019), for example, interventions are not manualised but individualised based on the child or young person's particular needs and targets, against which to monitor progress, are personalised. Research exploring implementation has highlighted a range of facilitators and barriers to the intervention, including level of understanding and support from senior leadership teams (SLT) (Leighton, 2015; McEwen, 2019), need for resources, caseload size (McEwen, 2019), time constraints (Mann, 2014), protected time to plan and attend booster training (Grahamslaw, 2010), the importance of supervision from EPs (Osborne & Burton, 2014), whole-school understanding of SEMH needs, effective communication with staff and parents, and ELSA-pupil relationship (McEwen, 2019; Nicholson-Roberts, 2019).

Although potential facilitators and barriers have been highlighted across several studies, there is limited dedicated research exploring ELSAs' views on the factors impacting the implementation of the intervention. Additionally, although research has highlighted the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on the implementation of psychological interventions more broadly (e.g., Capobianco et al., 2022; Inchausti et al., 2020), no known studies have explored the impact of the lockdowns on ELSA provision and practice. It has been alluded to that COVID-19 restrictions, which included temporary school closures, social distancing, and class and year group 'bubbles', changed the way in which the ELSA intervention was implemented (Teach Now, 2022), for example, resulted in some sessions occurring remotely rather than in person.

Examining ELSAs' views on the factors impacting

intervention implementation is likely to further our understanding of how to develop and maintain effective and sustainable ELSA interventions. This is particularly important given the strong empirical links between intervention implementation and effectiveness (Durlak & DuPre, 2008). Therefore, furthering our understanding of ELSA intervention implementation has the potential to benefit whole-school emotional literacy (Roffey, 2008; Weare, 2003) and positively enhance practice within the school community, including the practice of ELSAs, EPs, and school staff. In addition to developing effective ELSA interventions, exploring ELSAs' views has the benefit of providing them with reflective opportunities, which has been shown to contribute to their professional confidence and competence (Osborne & Burton, 2014). The current study aimed to explore ELSAs' views of the supportive factors and barriers to their work in schools both during the COVID-19 lockdowns and outside of the lockdowns.

## Methods

### Participants

Participants were 32 ELSAs working in an LA in the South of England. Participants' mean age was 50.16 years ( $SD = 7.10$ , range = 32 to 61) and the majority defined themselves as female ( $n = 30$ ; 93.8%) and from an English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish, or British ethnic background ( $n = 27$ ; 84.4%). The majority ( $n = 30$ ; 93.8%) worked in primary schools. Participants' experience in the role ranged from half a year to four years ( $M = 1.8$ ,  $SD = 1.07$ ), with 16 ELSAs (50%) being in the role before the first COVID-19 lockdown (i.e., having experience of supportive factors and barriers to their work generally, outside of the lockdowns) and 16 (50%) starting in the role after the first lockdown. Number of days per week worked in the role ranged from half a day to five days ( $M = 2.66$ ,  $SD = 1.67$ ). Data were collected between March and May 2022.

### Design

This study used an anonymous online qualitative survey design. A critical realist epistemological position was adopted, assuming a straightforward relationship between the data (i.e., participants' accounts of their experiences) and its meaning, but also acknowledging that participant responses will be influenced by contextual factors, such as socio-cultural factors (e.g., school setting, COVID-19) and research-specific factors (e.g., the current methodology and methods, how questions were phrased) (Willig, 2013). The survey asked participants to reflect on a range of personal

and professional factors impacting ELSA work during and outside of the COVID-19 lockdowns. Participants who started their role after the first COVID-19 lockdown were only asked to reflect on their experiences of ELSA work during the lockdowns, to gain a clearer distinction between general factors impacting ELSA work (i.e., outside of the lockdowns) and the specific impact of the lockdowns. Ethical approval was granted by the Faculty Research Ethics Committee (FREC) at the University of Southampton (Ethics/ERGO Number: 80052).

## Procedure

EPs who were ELSA supervisors in the LA distributed the online survey link to participants. Participants were asked seven open-ended questions to capture their experiences of working with CYP. Survey questions (Appendix A) adhered to good practice guidelines for qualitative surveys (Braun et al., 2021). The survey took approximately 20 minutes to complete.

## Data Analysis

Qualitative data were analysed using the codebook approach to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2022). This approach was deemed appropriate given the design and epistemology of the current study. Braun and Clarke's (e.g., 2006, 2012, 2019, 2020) six-phase process was used to guide the thematic analysis. The phases included data familiarisation, coding, generating initial themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing up. Rather than progressing through the phases in a linear fashion, an iterative approach to analysis was used. As recommended (Braun et al., 2021), thematic analysis was applied across the entire dataset rather than in relation to each question.

During the first phase, four of the authors individually read through all survey responses to become familiar with the data. Lists of initial codes (i.e., a label assigned to part of the text which contain a unit of meaning) were generated by each researcher, using a 'bottom up' inductive coding approach. A semantic approach to coding was used where the focus was on identifying surface-level units of meanings from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Initial codes were collaboratively collated into a single comprehensive codebook (i.e., a table that lists all of the codes in the analysis, with definitions and examples of each, and organises the codes into overarching subthemes and themes). Researchers, then, independently and manually applied the codes in the codebook to all responses, with each researcher coding a different portion

of the data. Themes were generated collaboratively by combining initial codes based on their shared meanings. A consensus was reached, through discussion, regarding the identified themes and the relationships between (sub)themes and codes.

## Findings

Five themes were identified which capture ELSAs' experiences of working with CYP during and outside of the COVID-19 lockdowns. Figure 1 presents the themes in a thematic map.

### Supportive Professional Relationships

This theme captures participants' views on the supportive professional relationships that facilitate their work. Support was identified as being from: 1) school SLT and ELSA line managers, 2) wider school community, 3) other ELSAs, 4) supervision, and 5) continuous professional development (CPD) and training.

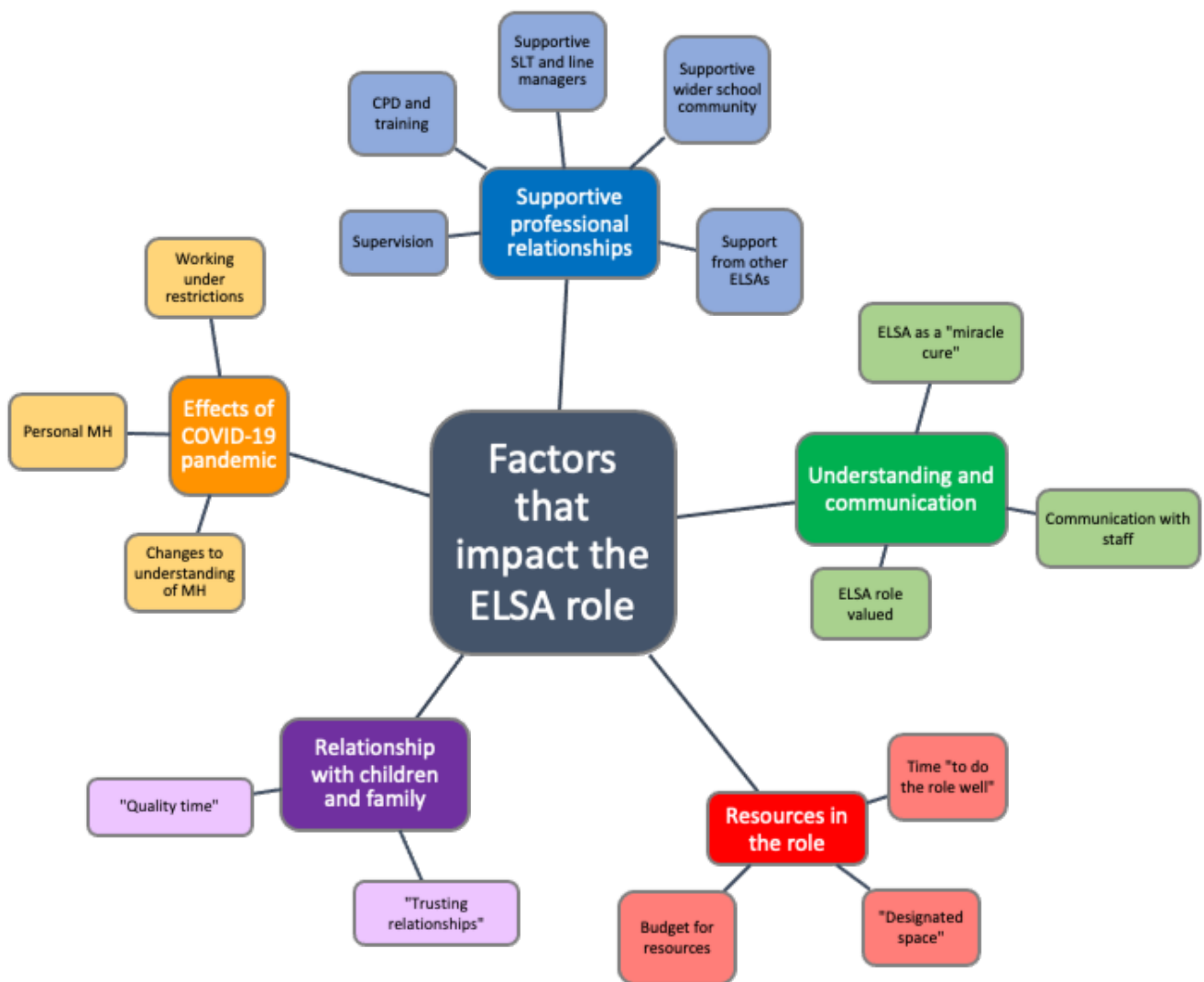
### Supportive SLT and Line Managers

Support from SLT and line managers was a supportive factor, with one participant commenting that "I have been given fabulous support from management" (P19). Some participants linked SLT support with protection of ELSA time. For example, one participant noted "I've had a very supportive assistant head who has tried very hard to ensure the ELSA is given priority" (P1). This was often underpinned by SLT having a good understanding of the role, for example:

*Having the support, recognition from teachers and line managers that ELSA is valuable and an important part of a child's well-being and road to achievement...Support from my line manager and head teacher, giving me the time and understanding that ELSA work is extremely important to children. (P9)*

Good communication between ELSAs and their SLT and line managers also appeared to facilitate this supportive relationship, often in the form of planning together, "agreeing priorities, actions" (P18), or by being listened to: "Senior management, governors and staff fully support the ELSA programme and value my opinions and suggestions" (P2).

During the COVID-19 lockdowns, SLT support helped some participants to continue carrying out their work, by "[providing] remote access to ELSA support for identified parent/child" (P16).



**Figure 1**

*Thematic Map of the Overarching Themes and Subthemes*

Some ELSAs highlighted that lack of support from SLT and other school staff as a barrier. One said that their role would be improved by “being supported by all staff in the school” (P22) and another found that this lack of support was exacerbated by COVID-19, sharing that:

*[the barriers to the role have been] an uninvolved line manager and an overworked [SENCo]... my old [school line manager] was uninvolved and I seem not to have one now, which has been compounded by staff shortages due to [COVID-19]. (P4)*

This lack of support was also attributed to SLT understanding of the ELSA role. One participant said they didn’t “feel that the headteacher and even my new [SENCo]

completely understand the running of an ELSA session” (P1).

### **Supportive Wider School Community**

Many participants shared that positive relationships within the wider school community acted as a facilitator, for example: “Having a great supportive relationship with both parents, children and teachers. Senior management, government and staff fully support the ELSA programme” (P2).

Some expressed their desire for more support from the wider school community. One contrasted this lack of wider support with positive support from SLT: “I have found that

apart from my assistant head at the moment there isn't a great deal of support of the ELSA role and often feel alone in my role" (P1).

### Support From Other ELSAs

One participant summarised the support from their peers as being both "professional and emotional" which they had "found very helpful" (P26). "Termly supervision" (P16) and "training and supervision with like-minded peers" (P18) were mentioned as key ways in which ELSAs supported each other. Peer support came not only from supervision; it was suggested that "also helpful for advice are online forums" (P26), which gave practical advice and support.

### Supervision

Participants highlighted supportive relationships with an EP as a key benefit of ELSA supervision, noting that they "[help] connect us and provide the supervision that is needed" (P14). Participants also detailed factors that made supervision helpful, including "receiving advice, solving problems and having contact with others in the same role" (P6).

One participant shared that they were supported during the COVID-19 lockdowns with remote supervision: "[a supportive factor was] still being able to talk to other ELSAs by phone, zoom, teams etc." (P3). By contrast, another participant struggled with a lack of supervision at this time, which emphasised how important it has been:

*During lockdown I struggled to let go of what I carried and carried the emotion and challenges/stresses in an unhealthy way. I needed more supervision and support however I was not part of ELSA supervision at that time. ELSA supervision has made a difference. (P32)*

### CPD and Training

Participants highlighted "CPD to upskill" (P16), "ongoing training and refresher courses, (P7), and "additional training" (P2) as a supportive factor in their role. One participant directly linked training to developing confidence and skills: "I feel like my practice is deepening and developing [and] I'm starting to gain more confidence in my use and understanding of interventions" (P17).

Another participant highlighted the benefits of training to overcoming barriers such as a lack of knowledge on a particular topic: "Lack of knowledge about a particular subject .....[was] an initial barrier improved by undertaking CPD" (P16).

This lack of knowledge was a re-occurring theme, with participants indicating the need for more training and CPD in specific areas:

*The ELSA training doesn't really tackle anxiety-based issues in depth. Anxiety - especially post [COVID-19] - is a really big issue in schools...it would be great if ELSAs could access training in graded exposure and cognitive restructuring... CAMHS and MHST wait lists are so long or catchments limited- ELSAs are left holding. Developing ELSA roles would be more effective and have better outcomes for children- prevention! (P17)*

Another participant felt a lack of confidence in their ability to support children, following COVID-19 disruptions to their training:

*I did no ELSA work in the first lockdown because our course was halted, and I couldn't finish training. I love the role but I feel my confidence was broken due to the course being halted during [COVID-19]. I feel I've forgotten what we did in the first half. (P4)*

A need for more CPD and training for ELSAs working in secondary schools was also shared: "it seems to be a very primary school role that has now expanded" (P19).

### Understanding and Communication

This theme captures ELSAs' views of others' understanding of their role. Three subthemes emerged: ELSA as a "miracle cure", communication with staff, and valuing the ELSA role.

#### ELSA as a "Miracle Cure"

Several participants shared that a barrier was colleagues viewing ELSA sessions as a "miracle cure" (P1) or an "instant fix" (P8), creating "unrealistic expectations of the potential/likely progress achievable" (P6). One participant linked these expectations to "communication between teams [being] poor" (P24).

Others felt that ELSA was used as "cure for bad behaviour that [staff] can't deal with" (P1) and that there needs to be "more understanding that ELSA work isn't behaviour management" (P17).

#### Communication With Staff

Poor communication was presented as a barrier to the ELSA role. Some participants felt communication was affected by a lack of time "to talk about individual children with their teachers and all support staff who know them" (P3).

Others raised communication issues during the referral process and the importance of having an effective and timely referral process for ELSA intervention. It was felt that "teachers referring children earlier" (P23) would be an improvement. Another participant shared: "I need people to give me their referral forms on time" (P18). Additionally,

participants mentioned that “teachers do not always refer” (P8) and suggested “a better referral process (through SENCo)” (P6)

Conversely, good communication was cited as a supportive factor in ELSA work. Good communication with “parents/caregivers” (P19), students (P2, 19), teachers, and SENCos (P26) allowed them to be “part of the process” (P2), helping them to engage with ELSA interventions. Good communication involved teachers “tak[ing] on board advice and transfer[ing] skills I have taught into class” (P12) and being “happy to answer my questions, adopt strategies and give me feedback...[being] accommodating about the times when I plan individual sessions” (P3). Finally, one ELSA shared how they built communication with staff, and developed their understanding of and engagement in the intervention, by working with teachers to deliver whole-class emotional literacy sessions:

*I also had open sessions [with CYP] where I was allowed to plan whole class sessions, so the teachers joined in too for certain things. The adults got to see parts of ELSA sessions which they would never have done before (P9)*

### ELSA Role Valued

Several participants referred to how the ELSA role was valued and understood by their school, for example, “The staff understand the importance of my role in school....my role as an ELSA is valued” (P14).

One participant saw the positive impact of staff valuing the role through improved understanding:

*[A barrier to the ELSA role is that] sometimes time has been taken away, for example in the past, when short staffed and have been asked to cover elsewhere. This is happening less now because of the realisation of how important ELSA is. (P7)*

Participants were supported by “colleagues understand[ing] the importance of the role” (P14) and “appreciat[ing] that I do not have a ‘magic wand’” (P2). Some shared that children “appreciate and enjoy their ELSA time” (P28) and “it is reassuring that ELSA work is valued highly and appreciated by the students” (P18). Not being valued acted as a barrier: “It would help even more...if all sectors and professionals recognised its worth” (P3). “Promotion of the role after the training from other professionals including supervisors of the ELSA” (P22) and “more information given to staff about the role as at times I feel it is undervalued” (P8) were suggested as ways to improve understanding of the importance of the role.

### Resources in the Role

This theme captures participants’ views on resources needed to work effectively and efficiently. It contains three

subthemes: time “to do the role well”, “designated space”, and budget for ELSA resources.

### Time “To Do the Role Well”

Many participants shared that a barrier to their work is the lack of time “to do the role well” (P5), for example, “to prepare and record keep adequately”, “have an in-depth conversation with class teachers and support staff” (P3), and see children. Conversely, other participants described having “adequate time to prepare resources and do my job” (P18). An important part of this involves having adequate time to plan sessions, for example:

*I find that it is important to acknowledge that the timetable should be at least 40% planning time to be able to deliver valuable ELSA sessions. A barrier is if this is not granted and it can be quite overwhelming. (P26)*

A key factor impacting the time ELSAs have to “do the role well” is the presence of role conflicts, having other roles and covering staff absences. One participant expressed that:

*Other roles associated with my job such as HLTA [higher level teaching assistant] and staff absences which has meant I’ve either covered classes or had to stand in for other TAs and this has impacted on my ELSA time on occasions. (P1)*

Other participants talked about the value of having protected time for work, for example: “I am lucky that my role is protected ... this has given consistency to the children that I work with” (P30).

Many participants, when describing their lack of time, also linked it to caseload size, commenting that they have “excessive caseload for one person” (P10) and “too many children on my caseload” (P18).

Participants highlighted supportive professional relationships as additionally impacting how much time they have to work effectively. They shared that staff “do everything they can to protect my time with the children” (P14) and that their “line manager makes sure ELSA time is protected” (P3). Conversely, one participant expressed that “much of this [more time needed] stems from [SLT] lack of understanding of time needed to plan and build resources” (P17).

Finally, ELSAs highlighted the value of autonomy within their role, in terms of being “trusted to manage my time and have my own space” (P10). Others highlighted a lack of autonomy around timetables, with one participant sharing: “we were told and taught very clearly on the training not to move, miss or rearrange (if possible) but school life makes this very hard” (P9).

### “Designated Space”

Participants viewed having a “designated space” (P19) as serving several important functions; being able to “furnish it and have space for ELSA resources/books” (P16), ensure a “safe, confidential, well-equipped space” (P3), and make the environment child-friendly:

To have a dedicated room (rather than the current space that is also used for PPA time and the [SENCo]). Because it is a shared space the environment is not child friendly ie no pictures or supportive messages on the walls etc. (P28).

Designated space for ELSA work was affected by COVID-19. One participant shared that:

*Eventually in the last lockdown, I was able to 'cross bubbles' but not use my ELSA room as this was being used by EYFS next door for a ventilated changing room! I became a 'travelling ELSA' which was far from ideal but better than nothing. (P2)*

### Budget For Resources

Some ELSAs shared that there is a lack of budget for resources, noting that “it is tempting to fund materials myself as the ELSA budget is tiny” (P3) and that “[there is a] lack of funds for resources...I end up paying for much of my own resources” (P17). This is linked to having time “to do the role well”, with participants mentioning that “an increased budget would probably save a lot of time” (P3) and “more time [is needed]! However, budgets do not allow for that” (P28). Conversely, other ELSAs shared that they have “good access to resources and equipment” (P19) and “an annual budget” (P32).

### Relationships with Children and Family

This theme captures participants’ views on their relationships with children and their families and is divided into two subthemes: “trusting relationships” and “quality time”.

#### “Trusting Relationships”

Participants expressed the importance of building “trusting relationships”, where children felt “able to talk freely about their worries, anxieties or experiences” (P28) and know “that they have someone in school to rely on and a safe person to talk to” (P25).

COVID-19 appeared to impact the development of trusting relationships. One participant noted how rebuilding trust was hard for some children:

*The [barriers] during COVID[-19] were face-to-face sessions and regular check in's were disrupted for many children. This had [an] impact on the programme and*

*targets, trust, relationships that had been [built] over time. Gaining the trust back after COVID[-19] and building that relationship and social interaction was hard for some children. (P7)*

#### “Quality Time”

Participants shared the importance of having “quality time” (P9) with children: “I feel like I am giving the children time to talk, someone they know they can talk to. The children think they are having special time” (P15). This, in turn, supported children to make progress and contributed to ELSAs feeling that they are making a positive difference: “Individual and group interventions I feel are working well and can see progress in so many children” (P9). Some participants shared that the COVID-19 lockdowns gave more opportunities to offer quality time to CYP, for example:

*After the first lockdown, children numbers were down at school, and it wasn't compulsory to attend the school setting, this gave me more time to build relationships with new to school children who were very anxious about attending a new setting, giving them & us the flexibility to manage their time in school and build their confidence & trust in a smaller, more relaxed classroom environment. (P30)*

### Effects of COVID-19

This theme captures participants’ views on the effects of COVID-19 on their role. It comprises three subthemes: working under restrictions, changes to understanding of mental health, and personal mental health.

#### Working Under Restrictions

Some ELSA provision halted during COVID-19 lockdowns. Participants shared that “some children were not in school so sessions and support stopped” (P8) and “my ELSA role was non-existent and I was used as a TA” (P1).

Changes in forms of contact (e.g., face-to-face to online) were a barrier for some participants, with one noting that “not having face-to-face contact with children who were not in my year group [was a barrier]” (P2). Participants shared how moving online affected who they could see and “[disrupted] regular check-ins... for many children” (P7).

Indirect forms of contact were used, often through the parent: “communicating with parents by phone and email to provide them with support and resources for children working from home” (P18). COVID-19-specific procedures, such as the use of face masks, also changed the nature of contact. One participant shared that:

*Masks and sometimes not seeing pupils face to face [was*

*a barrier] (face to face with people for training or a meeting of adults is fine) ... you can tell a lot about kids from what their hands, feet, how their arms are so zoom sessions or a phone call were only partially helpful (P20).*

### Understanding of Mental Health

Participants felt COVID-19 resulted in an increase in mental health difficulties in CYP, with one commenting on the “high number of children who have suffered through lockdown with depression or anxiety” (P9). Despite potential increases in mental health difficulties, participants also viewed COVID-19 as increasing understanding of the importance of supporting positive mental health in schools. One participant shared that lockdowns resulted in “my school prioritising the wellbeing and [mental health] of children” (P18). Another observed how attitudes towards mental health were changing: “Since COVID-19 I feel the attitudes of adults working in school have changed, children with anxiety are more understood now due to the adults going through the anxiety of COVID-19” (P9).

### Personal Mental Health

For some participants, their own mental health acted as a barrier to carrying out ELSA work: “during COVID[-19], a barrier [was] my own anxieties and stresses” (P18). Others spoke about methods to support wellbeing, which included “mindfulness, yoga, drumming...fundraising for ELSA resources...hav[ing] someone to confidentially speak with, [regarding] own wellbeing” (P16). One participant suggested a necessary balance between protecting their own mental health and prioritising the needs of CYP:

*[I would like to add that] every day is different. Talking and receiving ideas and advice from others is priceless. You can cry occasionally. Reach out for help. Be yourself. Show you care and that they are important, even if your world is crumbling. (P18)*

### Discussion

The current study addressed a gap in the literature by exploring the facilitators and barriers to ELSA work both during and outside of the COVID-19 lockdowns. Five themes were identified using codebook thematic analysis: 1) supportive professional relationships, 2) understanding and communication, 3) resources in the role, 4) relationships with CYP and family, and 5) effects of COVID-19.

The importance of the following factors was emphasised by ELSAs: support from SLT, line managers, wider school community, and other ELSAs; supervision with EP; additional training to develop knowledge, skills, and confidence; having a good understanding of the role and

realistic expectations; building good communication with staff, families, and CYP; role being valued; adequate and protected time “to do the role well” and plan sessions; autonomy in their role; “designated space” to store equipment and ensure a safe, confidential, and child-friendly environment; adequate budget and access to resources; building “trusting relationships” with CYP; and having “quality time” with children and families, which supports efficacy and contributes to ELSAs feeling they make a positive difference.

ELSAs also highlighted a number of ways in which the COVID-19 lockdowns impacted their practice. For some, provision was stopped, and they were redeployed (e.g., as TAs). Others were able to continue in their role but described their work being limited (e.g., to keyworker children) and diminished communication and forms of contact (e.g., online contact, indirect contact through parents, face masks). Some ELSAs expressed that the lack of face-to-face contact and regular meetings negatively impacted the development of “trusting relationships” with CYP, which needed to be regained after COVID-19. However, a few described having more time and opportunities to offer quality time and build relationships with some CYP and families. Many ELSAs talked about the value of continued peer support and group supervision during the lockdowns, particularly for supporting their personal mental health. Despite generally viewing COVID-19 as increasing mental health difficulties in CYP, ELSAs also shared that this appears to have increased empathy for CYP with mental health difficulties and understanding of the importance of positive mental health within schools.

Many of the current (sub)themes are consistent with facilitators and barriers identified in previous ELSA research, for example, SLT understanding of the intervention and support (Leighton, 2015; McEwen, 2019), ELSAs having protected planning time (Grahamslaw, 2010), need for resources, caseload size (McEwen, 2019), time constraints (Mann, 2014), the importance of supervision (Osborne & Burton, 2014), whole-school understanding of SEMH needs, effective communication, and ELSA-pupil relationship (McEwen, 2019; Nicholson-Roberts, 2019). Findings are also consistent with the broader psychological literature on the facilitators of and barriers to the implementation of school-based SEMH interventions. For example, findings from recent systematic reviews and thematic syntheses have emphasised the role of SLT support, staff perceived benefit of the intervention, staff understanding of the intervention, and effective referral systems as key facilitators and staff capacity, competing priorities and lack of consistency in staffing, time constraints, constraints imposed by the physical environment of the school, and staff turnover as key barriers (Gee et al., 2021; March et al., 2022).



Current findings also contributed to the existing evidence base by identifying additional factors that influence ELSA intervention implementation, including the importance of peer support; additional training to develop ELSAs' knowledge, skills, and confidence; role boundaries; and autonomy. The facilitators and barriers identified can be viewed as being consistent with self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), which proposes that motivation and engagement in activities arises from fulfilling our three core psychological needs of autonomy (i.e., feeling in control of our actions and goals), competence (i.e., having the necessary skills and having a sense of efficacy), and relatedness (i.e., feeling like we are socially connected and belong). Specifically, ELSAs expressed the importance of having autonomy (e.g., over timetables, how they work with CYP), feeling competent (e.g., need for training), and experiencing relatedness (e.g., support from peers, SLT, wider community; quality time with CYP) in their work. Additionally, findings draw connections between (sub)themes. For example, they suggest that key factors that impact whether ELSAs have adequate time include the presence of role conflicts, caseload size, sufficient budgets, supportive relationships with SLT, and SLT having a greater understanding of the role. Greater understanding of the role (e.g., by wider school community, SLT) also appears to be associated with greater support for ELSAs, improved communication, and the role being valued within the school.

Finally, current findings related to how COVID-19 lockdowns impacted ELSA practice builds on the existing body of evidence around how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the implementation of psychological interventions more broadly (e.g., Capobianco et al., 2022; Inchausti et al., 2020). Current findings not only support findings from broader literature (e.g., by highlighting the challenges associated with the shift from face-to-face to remote delivery; by emphasising the importance of (re)building connection and trust), but they also offer novel insights into the specific impact that the lockdowns have had on the delivery of the ELSA intervention.

### Limitations and Avenues For Future Research

While current findings offer novel insights into the factors impacting ELSA implementation, ELSAs were recruited within just one LA. Findings may therefore not be entirely applicable to the experiences of ELSAs in other LAs, at different stages of ELSA implementation. However, it is worth noting that as a qualitative research study, we were not aiming for generalisability. Future larger-scale quantitative research, for which issues of generalisability are relevant, may involve recruiting from multiple LAs, including those with more established ELSA programmes where ELSAs are likely to have more experience working

outside of COVID-19, which could extend the current findings. By capturing a broader range of experiences, existing findings are likely to be further developed and the impact of implementation stage examined.

The study was advertised to participants by ELSA supervisors and many ELSAs were invited to complete the survey during supervision sessions. This recruitment strategy may have biased participants' responses and the emergence of (sub)themes. For example, this process may have primed many ELSAs to reflect on supervision as a supportive factor and led to the importance of supervision being overemphasised in our analysis. Although this appears to be unlikely, given that the importance of supervision has also been identified in previous research using different recruitment strategies (e.g., Osborne & Burton, 2014), future research could consider using more direct recruitment methods.

A qualitative survey was used to capture ELSAs' experiences. Although there are numerous benefits to qualitative surveys (Braun et al., 2021), at times, individual responses lacked detail or were unclear and it was not possible to seek clarification or ask follow-up questions. This may have limited the analysis. However, Braun et al., acknowledging this as a commonly cited limitation of qualitative surveys, argued that qualitative surveys can provide rich and detailed accounts of experiences when considering the dataset as a whole, irrespective of the brevity of individual responses. They note that survey responses are likely to be more focused and relevant to the research question than interview data.

### Implications

Current findings have research and practice implications. They support and contribute to emerging research on the factors impacting ELSA implementation and further our understanding of how to develop and maintain effective and sustainable ELSA interventions in schools. For example, findings highlight factors that need to be considered to support the continued implementation of the intervention. Interestingly, there was consistency in the facilitators and barriers expressed by ELSAs both during and outside of the lockdowns; across contexts, ELSAs mentioned the importance of communication, support from SLT, quality time with CYP, building relationships with CYP and families, peer support, supervision, training, and wider school community understanding of mental health and the role of the ELSA. This consistency emphasises the core importance placed by ELSAs on these factors for the successful implementation of the intervention. Additionally, the identification of facilitators and barriers at the whole-school level as well as the individual-level is consistent with the conceptualisation of emotional literacy as both a systemic and individual-level construct (Roffey,

2008; Weare, 2003) and emphasises the importance of developing whole-school practice in emotional literacy, by attending to systemic influences on ELSA implementation (e.g., improved communication, understanding, and support from SLT and wider school community; protected time).

Current findings also have implications for the development of ELSA training programmes. The survey highlighted that more specific training around the provision of ELSA in secondary settings would be helpful, with a greater focus on issues of particular relevance to this population, such as anxiety, depression, and self-harm. COVID-19 additionally highlighted the need for better understanding of certain SEMH needs. Previous research similarly highlighted that ELSAs sought additional training for the growing range of SEMH needs with which CYP presented (Bravery & Harris, 2009; Russell, 2011).

EPs are well-placed to support schools to implement the ELSA intervention successfully. They can advise on the importance of systemic factors, particularly those identified both during and outside of the lockdowns (e.g., support from SLT, wider school community understanding of the role), and support schools to develop whole-school practice in emotional literacy (e.g., through SLT consultation, whole-school training). Current findings also highlight the value of EP-facilitated supervision, as a space for ELSAs to reflect on practice, problem solve, receive peer support, and share knowledge and resources. In addition to continuing to provide such high-quality supervision, EPs who are ELSA supervisors would also benefit from being made aware of other individual-level factors raised by ELSAs, as ELSAs may find these helpful to discuss in supervision. One of these individual-level factors include ELSAs personal mental health; some participants felt that their own mental health can suffer, particularly during the pandemic. This is a concern because research has shown if staff emotional wellbeing is not looked after, they will struggle to support CYP (Weare, 2007). Current findings indicate that EP supervision and peer support supported ELSAs' mental health.

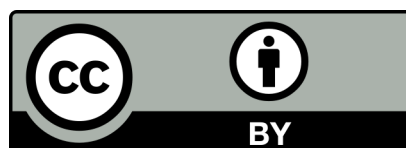
## Conclusions

The current study addressed a gap in the literature by exploring ELSAs' views of the supportive factors and barriers to their work during and outside of the COVID-19 lockdowns. The following five themes were identified, which highlight individual-level and systemic factors impacting ELSA implementation: 1) supportive professional relationships, 2) understanding and communication, 3) resources in the role, 4) relationships with CYP and family, and 5) effects of COVID-19 (e.g., provision being stopped, redeployment, changes to communication, impact on relationships with CYP, on personal mental health, on raising awareness and

understanding of mental health issues in schools). Current findings support and extend the growing evidence base around the delivery of effective and sustainable ELSA interventions in schools. They also have research and practice implications, including implications for EP practice and for the development of ELSA training programmes.

## Disclosure Statement

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.



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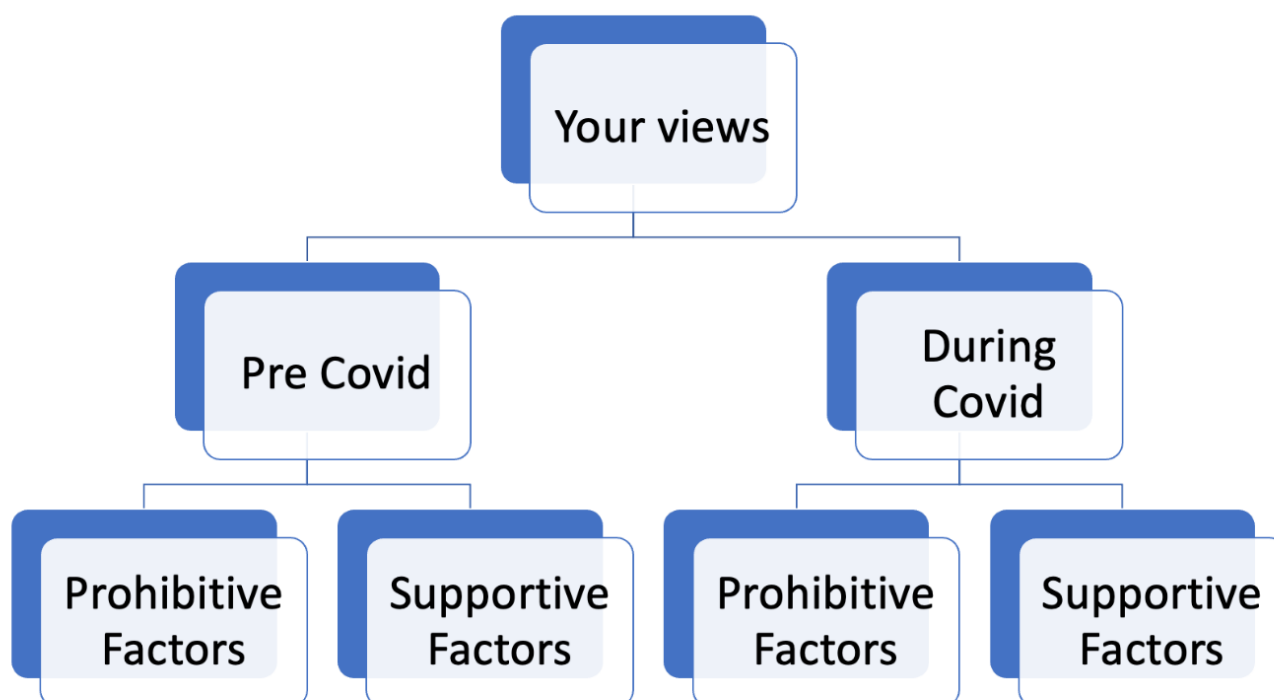
## Appendix A

### Online Qualitative Survey Questions

The below questions ask about your experiences of working with children and young people, in your ELSA role, and the supportive factors and barriers to this work. Some questions ask about your experiences in your ELSA role during the COVID-19 lockdowns and some ask about your experience generally, outside of the COVID-19 lockdowns.

If you started working in your role (i.e., after completing ELSA training) after the start of the first COVID-19 lockdown (i.e., March 2020), then please disregard the general questions and complete only questions 3 to 7 below.

The image below gives an overview of the questions asked in this survey. When answering the questions, please do not include any identifying information (e.g., names of schools or children).



1. Generally (i.e., *outside* of the COVID-19 lockdowns), what have been *supportive* factors in you working with children and young people in school?

*Please describe your experiences of these supportive factors (these could be personal, professional, emotional and/or organisational factors) in as much detail as possible - we are interested in capturing your experiences as fully as possible.*

*If you started your role after the start of the first COVID-19 lockdown (i.e., March 2020), please start from question 3.*

2. Generally (i.e., *outside* of the COVID-19 lockdowns), what have been *barriers* to you working with children and young people in school?

*Please describe your experiences of these barriers (these could be personal, professional, emotional and/or organisational factors) in as much detail as possible - we are interested in capturing your experiences as fully as possible.*

*If you started your role after the start of the first COVID-19 lockdown (i.e., March 2020), please start from question 3.*

3. What were the *supportive* factors in you working with children and young people in school *during the COVID-19 lockdowns*?

*Please describe your experiences of these supportive factors (these could be personal, professional, emotional and/or organisational factors) in as much detail as possible - we are interested in capturing your experiences as fully as possible.*

4. What were the *barriers* to you working with children and young people in school during the *COVID-19 lockdowns*?

*Please describe your experiences of these barriers (these could be personal, professional, emotional and/or organisational factors) in as much detail as possible - we are interested in capturing your experiences as fully as possible.*

5. What do you feel is working particularly well in your work as an ELSA in your school?

6. How can things be improved in your work as an ELSA?

7. Is there anything else you would like to add?

### **Demographic Questions**

1. What is your age?

[dropdown menu 18 to 100]

2. Gender

Do you currently identify as being... Man / Woman / Non-binary / Prefer not to say / Prefer to self-describe (specify if you wish)

3. What is your ethnic background?

Bangladeshi / Chinese / Indian / Pakistani / African / Caribbean / Arab

White and Asian / White and Black African / White and Black Caribbean

English/Welsh/Scottish/Northern Irish/British

Irish

Roma/Traveller/Irish Traveller

Any other ethnic group (please describe)

Prefer not to say

4. Which type of school do you work in?

Mainstream school / Specialist or alternative provision school

5. Do you work in a primary or secondary school?

Primary / Secondary

6. How many days per week do you work in your ELSA role?

0.5 / 1 / 2 / 3 / 4 / 5

7. How many years and months have you spent in your ELSA role?

[short open text box]