# ‘It was a time for ELSAs to come alive’: exploring experiences of the Emotional Literacy Support Assistant role in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic

Thesis submitted to the University of Nottingham for the degree of Doctor of Applied Educational Psychology
June 2021

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# Abstract

The Emotional Literacy Support Assistant (ELSA) initiative is designed to develop the skills of Teaching Assistants (TAs) to improve the capacity of schools to support pupils' social and emotional wellbeing. Existing research has suggested that the ELSA role warrants further exploration, particularly in relation to its parameters, emotional challenges, and the qualities required. Recent research has also recognised the integral role that TAs have played in sustaining school communities throughout the Covid-19 pandemic and has called for a focus on TAs' voices and experiences. The present study, therefore, aims to address the gap highlighted in existing research by exploring experiences of the ELSA role in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a small sample of ELSAs in November 2020, a mid-point in the pandemic. Data were analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). Four superordinate themes were identified across those ELSAs sampled: *stepping up, stepping out; having time and space; living through challenge,* and *knowing worth.* The findings suggest that throughout the initial period of school closures, ELSAs went above and beyond the role to support the needs of their school communities, working intuitively and proactively to build and maintain connections with children and their families. For most ELSAs sampled, the busyness and action of this period held a tension with an increased sense of time and space in the school setting. The freedom that this afforded saw ELSAs use their skills to widen their reach to other children and staff within school, as well as to families at home. Although the themes that emerged were largely positive, it was clear that working as an ELSA in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic was also a time of personal and professional challenge. Participants appeared to react in different ways to the fears they held around the children being at home, as well as to practical worries for their own safety. The challenges faced in the role were offset, however, by the appreciation and value they felt from others, as well as the sense of reward and satisfaction they gained from the role itself.

The findings provide valuable insight to Educational Psychologists (EPs) involved in the training and supervision of ELSAs but are also relevant to other ELSAs who are working through similar experiences. Possible implications for ELSA training and supervision are raised, as well as recommendations for future research, such as further exploration of the widening scope of the ELSA role.

# Acknowledgements

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the ELSAs who so kindly gave their time to share their experiences.

I would like to thank my placement supervisors for their generous support. I would also like to thank Dr Nick Durbin for his invaluable guidance and encouragement from the very beginning of my training experience through the challenges presented by the past year.

A special thanks go to Cohort 13 for their friendship and encouragement.

Finally, deepest thanks are given to the people close to me for their wonderful support and help to keep on going. Thanks to Emma, Beth, Harri, and Rich. Thanks especially to Matt, and to my parents, Richard and Deborah Endersby.

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# Glossary

| | |
|---|---|
| Covid-19 | Coronavirus Disease 2019 |
| CYP | Children and Young People |
| DfE | Department for Education |
| DfEE | Department for Education and Employment |
| DfES | Department for Education and Skills |
| EHCP | Education, Health and Care Plan |
| EL | Emotional Literacy |
| EI | Emotional Intelligence |
| EP | Educational Psychologist |
| EPS | Educational Psychology Service |
| ELSA | Emotional Literacy Support Assistant |
| IPA | Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis |
| LA | Local Authority |
| PPE | Personal Protective Equipment |
| SEAL | Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning |
| SEMH | Social Emotional and Mental Health |
| SEN | Special Educational Needs |
| SENCo | Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator |
| TA | Teaching Assistant |
| TEP | Trainee Educational Psychologist |
| WHO | World Health Organisation |

# 1. Introduction

This thesis explores the lived experiences of Emotional Literacy Support Assistants (ELSAs) working in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was used as a methodological framework to examine these experiences. This chapter will begin by introducing the key terms used in the study, including emotional literacy (EL) and the ELSA project. A brief outline of the origins of the ELSA project is then offered, before narrowing to a description of the ELSA project in the Local Authority (LA) in which the current research is located. A brief introduction to the Covid-19 pandemic is provided and is followed by an outline of my personal and professional interest in the area, the research question, and an overview of subsequent chapters.

## 1.1. Introduction to key terms

In the context of this research, emotional literacy (EL) is defined as 'the ability to recognise, understand, handle and appropriately express emotions' (Sharp, 2000, p. 8).

The ELSA initiative was designed to develop the skills of Teaching Assistants (TAs) to support pupils' social and emotional wellbeing to help schools offer this mode of support from within their own resources (Burton, 2009). It aims to equip TAs to identify pupils' needs and plan and deliver bespoke, individualised support. The ELSA project aims to facilitate positive change for pupils with temporary or long-term emotional needs by helping them to feel better about themselves and about their time in school. This is in line with the understanding that children learn better and are happier in school if their emotional needs are met (Burton, 2009). Within one-to-one or small group intervention sessions, the broad focus of ELSA work is to help pupils understand their emotions and the feelings of those around them through the teaching of new skills or coping strategies (Osborne & Burton, 2014). The ELSA may identify a specific focus of sessions with the pupil. Sessions may address, for example, the child's self-esteem, relationships with peers, processing significant loss or bereavement, or conflict resolution (Burton, 2009).

## 1.2. Background to the Emotional Literacy Support Assistant (ELSA) project

The decision to make EL an equal priority with literacy and numeracy for all children in Southampton was triggered by an Educational Psychologist (EP) and Chief Inspector for Education in Southampton after reading Goleman's (1995) *Emotional Intelligence* at the same time (Sharp, 2000). Their decision to prioritise EL led to a city-wide campaign in 1998 to promote EL through seminars, presentations, and publications to headteachers, teachers, parents, pupils, police, and health and care colleagues (Weare & Gray, 2003). As a result of this initiative, Southampton Educational Psychology Service (EPS) was given the mandate to develop interventions to promote the EL of children and staff (Woodcock, 2007). It was within this context that the ELSA project began.

Southampton EPS initially appointed five peripatetic ELSAs to visit primary schools to deliver individualised EL programmes to pupils (over six to twelve weeks) who had been referred by EPs as needing additional EL support (Burton, 2009). Schools received this work very positively (Woodcock, 2007) and the model of delivery changed over time to a more sustainable model, with many schools choosing to appoint one of their own TAs to train as an ELSA (Burton et al., 2010). The peripatetic service began to adopt an advisory role as they supported TAs in their EL work (Burton et al., 2010) and a pilot project was subsequently established in the county of Hampshire (Burton & Shotton, 2004).

Since its original introduction by Southampton EPS in 2001, the ELSA programme has become well-established across many LAs in England and Wales (Pickering et al., 2019). Initially, most ELSAs worked in primary schools, but ELSA work has since expanded to include secondary settings (Burton et al., 2009).

## 1.3. The ELSA project in the context of the current research

In the LA in which the present study is located, the first cohort of ELSAs trained in 2016. There are currently 292 ELSAs in the LA, and 210 schools in the LA have at least one ELSA.

There are currently nine supervision groups, supervised by one or two EPs depending on the size of the group.

Following the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, supervision moved to an online form of delivery in the LA. The ELSA five-day training course takes place over a period of approximately five weeks. The training days cover EL/coaching, active listening and circle techniques; self-esteem, relationships and friendships; regulating strong emotions (anger and anxiety) and using therapeutic stories; social communication difficulties and practical strategies; and loss and bereavement and bespoke ELSA programme planning. Following guidance from the ELSA Steering Group regarding training in the pandemic context (ELSA Network, 2020b), training in the LA began online in the autumn term of 2020.

## 1.4. The Covid-19 pandemic

The severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus-2 (SARS-CoV-2) that caused the outbreak of the coronavirus disease 2019 (Covid-19) towards the end of 2019 spread across the world at an unparalleled speed (Cheng et al., 2020). It is argued that this represented the greatest global health emergency in more than 100 years (Morrison Coulthard & Devlin, 2020). At the time of data collection in the present study (November 2020), there had been over 53 million confirmed cases of Covid-19, resulting in over 1.3 million deaths globally (World Health Organisation [WHO], 2020). Beyond the severe harm to health and threat to life, the impact of Covid-19 has been felt across all areas of society, including education (Sharp et al., 2020a).

In Spring 2020, educational settings closed their doors to pupils and students in over 190 countries (United Nations, 2020). The UK Government announced that all schools should close on 20th March 2020 as the UK went into 'lockdown', although schools were asked to provide on-site provision for children of key and critical workers (such as those working in health and social care, or education, for example) and vulnerable children (deemed to be those with an Education, Health and Care Plan [EHCP], a social worker, or identified as

vulnerable by the LA or education provider; Cabinet Office & Department for Education [DfE], 2020).

## 1.5. Personal and professional interest

My experience of working alongside ELSAs as a Trainee Educational Psychologist (TEP) contributed to my choice of topic. I was given the opportunity to co-facilitate supervisions of ELSAs in September 2019, at the beginning of my Year 2 placement. Facilitating a supervision session in June 2020 gave me the beginnings of an insight into the 'frontline' experiences of ELSAs. I was aware of the unique opportunity presented by the context of the Covid-19 pandemic and it appeared that researching ELSAs' lived experiences would be a supportive process to both ELSAs and EPs within the LA.

## 1.6. Research question

The study aims to provide insight into and understanding of the ELSA role in the context of the pandemic, so that others may learn from an in-depth exploration of their experiences. The research has a single exploratory question at the centre, as follows:

> *How do ELSAs make sense of their experience of the role in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic?*

## 1.7. Summary of chapters

Following *Chapter 1. Introduction,* the thesis is comprised of the following chapters:

*Chapter 2. Literature review* addresses key areas of literature including EL, the role of the TA, the ELSA evidence base, and the context of the Covid-19 pandemic in the form of a narrative review. A summary of the research rationale follows on.

*Chapter 3. Methodology* outlines the rationale for the choice of methodology and research methods used in the study, before moving on to present the method and practical aspects of the research.

*Chapter 4. Findings* presents a narrative account of the IPA of ELSAs' experiences of the role in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic.

*Chapter 5. Discussion* presents the findings of the current research in relation to the research question and the literature presented in *Chapter 2. Literature Review*. Key limitations of the study and implications for practice and future research are presented.

The thesis concludes with *Chapter 6. Conclusion.*

# 2. Literature Review

## 2.1. Introduction

Firstly, as the Emotional Literacy Support Assistant (ELSA) project is based on emotional literacy (EL), the review begins by exploring the concept and its evolution. Secondly, the role of the teaching assistant (TA) is presented. An overview of the ELSA project is then provided, before introducing the current evidence base. The review then moves on to critically consider perceptions of the ELSA role within the research, before culminating in an exploration of ELSAs' perceptions of the role. The review then situates the research within the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, with attention given to research exploring the experiences of TAs working throughout the pandemic. A summary of the research rationale follows on.

### 2.1.1. Approach to literature review

A narrative approach was adopted for the literature review. This allowed for consideration of a broad range of subjects 'at various levels of completeness and comprehensiveness' (Grant & Booth, 2009, p. 94), and so was deemed an appropriate way of bringing together the breadth of relevant material necessary. A narrative review was also considered to be consistent with the philosophical assumptions underpinning the research, based on relativism and social constructionism. It also was judged to align with the IPA methodology chosen for the present research. Smith et al. (2009) note that although research questions in IPA studies are not theory-driven, a literature review may be helpful in finding a gap in the literature and learning about potential participants.

Whilst systematic literature reviews offer many advantages, including a comprehensive search method and a rigorous framework to appraise the quality of the literature being reviewed (Collins & Fauser, 2005), the limited UK ELSA evidence base meant that adopting a systematic approach to the literature with a narrow scope was not deemed appropriate.

The rationale of the research is built cumulatively through consideration of a range of relevant topics in a sequential manner, for clarity: from a review of the concept of EL, to the evolution of the TA role, through to the creation of the ELSA project in 2001 and its development, before finally exploring the Covid-19 pandemic context in which the study was carried out.

### 2.1.2. Literature search strategy

Narrative reviews offer a degree of flexibility and individuality. However, adopting a narrative approach to reviewing the literature has possible limitations. Narrative reviews can fail to offer the same benefits that systematic literature reviews provide, namely the transparent and reproducible account of the search method, selection, and appraisal of studies (Collins & Fauser, 2005). Possible implications of adopting a narrative rather than systematic approach to the literature review include the risk of not accessing the full breadth of material required, and the appraisal of studies using a less rigorous framework.

In order to begin to address these possible implications, an outline of the literature search strategies employed is provided below.

Initial non-systematic searches were conducted from July 2020 onwards to explore the concept of EL, the role of the TA, the ELSA evidence base, and experiences of the Covid-19 pandemic.

This was followed by a final literature search for ELSA research, conducted on the 25th March 2021, using the eLibrary gateway from the University of Nottingham student portal. Three databases were searched: ERIC, PsycINFO, and Scopus. The key search terms were: "ELSA" and "Emotional Literacy Support Assistant". Searches were limited to 2001 – 2021, in line with the intervention's conception in 2001. Due to the limited published research identified in this area, the search was expanded to include 'grey' literature, including unpublished doctoral theses. Further relevant literature was therefore identified using the

same search terms on EThOs (a database of unpublished doctoral theses) and Google Scholar. The ELSA Network website was also consulted for LA-commissioned reports. All studies pertaining to ELSAs were selected (see *2.4.7: An overview of the ELSA evidence base* for a discussion of the limitations of including 'grey' literature in the review). Searches yielded a combined total of 33 results after duplicates had been removed (see *Appendix A: Table of ELSA research*).

## 2.2. Emotional Literacy (EL)

### 2.2.1. Aim

As the role of an ELSA is underpinned by the concept of EL, this section aims to introduce the concept by first engaging with the debate around emotional intelligence (EI) in order to then offer clarification as to how EL has emerged as the preferred nomenclature within the UK. The section then progresses to outline the rationale for EL, before exploring the concept within the context of educational policy in the UK.

### 2.2.2. What is EL?

EI and EL experienced a resurgence of interest from the late 90s onwards, becoming 'buzzwords' in the fields of education and psychology (Perry et al., 2008). Within the literature, EI and EL are often used as if they were interchangeable terms (e.g., Coppock, 2007). For some researchers (e.g., Perry et al., 2008; Park, 1999), this is not problematic because they argue that there is not sufficient evidence to suggest that EI and EL describe qualitatively different concepts. Other researchers, however (e.g., Weare & Gray, 2003; McLaughlin, 2008) stress that it is important to clarify the differences between terms, namely the different emphases and conceptions of wellbeing that distinguish one from another. For the purposes of this review, consideration will be given to the EI movement (Gardner, 1983; Salovey & Mayer, 1990; Goleman, 1995), in order to more fully explore and understand the concept of EL.

Gardner's (1983) work on 'personal intelligences' extended conventional thinking around intelligence to include a broader array of mental abilities, namely our ability to access our own emotions (intrapersonal intelligence) and our ability to monitor others' emotions (interpersonal intelligence; Brackett et al., 2011). This theory foregrounded the concept of EI, which sits akin to Gardner's 'personal intelligences' (Burton et al., 2009). EI was first formally defined by Salovey and Mayer (1990) as 'the ability to monitor one's own and others' feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them and to use this information to guide one's thinking and actions' (p. 189) and several years later, as 'the ability to perceive accurately, appraise and express emotion; the ability to access and/or generate feelings which facilitate thought; the ability to understand emotion and emotional knowledge; the ability to regulate emotions to promote emotional and intellectual growth' (Mayer & Salovey, 1997, p. 10).

Both definitions emphasise the cognitive and behavioural elements of the construct of EI (Weare & Gray, 2003) and assume the mental ability to recognise, process and regulate emotions (Zeidner et al., 2004).

EI remained a term mostly unfamiliar to both the research community and the general public until Goleman (1995) popularised the term in his best-selling book, *Emotional Intelligence: Why it can Matter More than IQ.* He defined EI in a much broader way, to include not just the ability to manage emotions but a diverse array of skills and positive attributes, such as self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills (Hagarty & Morgan, 2020). Goleman's views on EI, packaged for the general public, suggested that EI was more influential than conventional intelligence for personal and career successes (Weare, 2004). This conclusion was thought to extend beyond the evidence base for EI (Brackett et al., 2011), but resonated with people from all professions, including EPs in the UK (e.g., Sharp, 2000). Subsequently, EI became a widely used term in the US (Weare & Gray, 2003).

In the UK, however, a review of the literature indicates that EI is not the preferred term (Weare & Gray, 2003). Park (1999) notes the problematic association between EI and attempts to develop measures to test Emotional Quotient (EQ). This indicates a view of EI as a quality determined largely by personal factors and omits the influence of a person's social and institutional environment. Weare and Gray (2003) elaborate upon this by suggesting that the use of the term 'intelligence' implies an innate, fixed quality, rather than a competence or skill that can be learned over time. The debate around the nature of EI and its connotations has led to the rise of EL as a common alternative in research and practice (Perry et al., 2008) as it implies teachable skills rather than personal attributes (Faupel, 2003). EL is recognised as the preferred term in the UK (Qualter et al., 2007) and is popular with EPs, schools, and Local Authorities (LAs; Weare, 2004).

EL traces its history back to American humanist psychology circles (Park, 1999) and was first attributed to Steiner (1979). It became more widely known in the UK through the Guardian column of psychotherapist Susie Orbach (1994) and the EL charity she later co-founded *(Antidote: The Campaign for Emotional Literacy in the UK).* Within educational psychology, the term was quickly adopted by Southampton EPS in 1998 (Sharp, 2000) and a definition of EL was offered as 'the ability to recognise, understand, handle and appropriately express emotions' (p. 8). Sharp (2001) later suggested a simplified definition of EL: 'using your emotions to help yourself and others succeed' (p. 1). Offering an expanded definition that has clear echoes of EI, Weare (2004) described EL as:

> the ability to understand ourselves and other people, and in particular to be aware of, understand and use information about the emotional states of ourselves and others with competence. It includes the ability to understand, express and manage our own emotions and respond to the emotions of others, in ways that are helpful to ourselves and others. (p. 2)

As is the case with EI, the above definitions of EL emphasise the management of emotions and recognise the importance of both intrapersonal and interpersonal dimensions. In this sense, there is a large degree of conceptual overlap between the definitions (Perry et al.,

2008) and it is important to acknowledge the influence of EI, especially Goleman's (1995, 1998) work, upon proponents of EL (e.g., Weare, 2004). However, some researchers differentiate EL by emphasising that it is more of a 'practice' than an 'ability' (Haddon et al., 2005, p. 6) that can be shaped by social settings and interpersonal relationships (Matthews, 2006). Definitions of EL imply a clear social element (McLaughlin, 2008).

Within the ELSA literature, Sharp's (2000) original definition of EL is still used (e.g., Shotton & Burton, 2018). Underlying the ELSA intervention is the premise that EL is a skill that can be nurtured and developed by recognising the emotions we experience, putting them into words by developing an emotional vocabulary, and understanding and responding well to the emotions of others (Shotton & Burton, 2018).

### 2.2.3. What is the rationale for addressing EL in educational settings?

Burton (2009) argues that key areas of psychological theory provide a strong rationale for addressing EL in educational settings. Maslow's (1970) hierarchy of human needs, for example, provides a framework for understanding how a child's basic needs (e.g., hunger and thirst, safety, and security) and psychological, emotional needs (e.g., sense of belonging, positive relationships) must be met before 'growth' needs (e.g., learning, self-actualisation) can be nurtured. In other words, teaching EL may help children become more effective learners. In addition, Bandura's (1977) social learning theory highlights the positive influence of interpersonal relationships on emotional development, further emphasising the importance of addressing EL in educational settings. Taking into account conclusions drawn by Goleman (1995), teaching EL may also have a positive impact on later personal and career successes.

Sharp (2001) makes the case for addressing EL in educational settings, describing it as a 'powerful added dimension to raising standards, improving behaviour and increasing attendance in a sustainable and humane way' (p. 1). In the UK, the broader field of school-based interventions focusing on the development of social and emotional competencies has been subject to considerable evaluation and offers clear evidence of the importance of

focusing on this within schools (Weare, 2015). Research has indicated benefits in relation to: academic learning, motivation, sense of commitment, and connectedness with learning and with school (Public Health England, 2014); reductions in low-level disruption, behaviour incidents, fights, bullying, exclusions and absence (Adi et al., 2007). A review of randomised controlled trials (RCTs) in the US context indicates benefits in relation to the prevention and reduction of mental health problems such as depression, anxiety, and stress (Shucksmith et al., 2007). In addition, a US-based meta-analysis of school-based interventions found positive impacts on pupil well-being including happiness, a sense of purpose, connectedness, and meaning (Durlak et al., 2011). However, it is important to acknowledge that the reviews did not closely monitor implementation or explore the potential influence of organisational or ecological features on the intervention environment. The wide variation of school-based interventions included for evaluation is a further limitation of the evidence base.

### 2.2.4. Educational policy and EL

Previous research has suggested that in order for children and young people to achieve positive school and life outcomes they must first have good cognitive, social and emotional skills (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2015). In England, educational policy evolved to mirror this holistic view of child development, moving beyond the traditional focus on raising academic attainment to a growing recognition of the importance of teaching social and emotional skills (Burton, 2008). In line with the growing emphasis in educational policy on social and emotional skills, the concept of EL became widely recognised (Burton et al., 2009) and the term has been widely adopted by schools within England.

This fundamental shift, driven by governmental concerns surrounding anti-social behaviour (Humphrey, 2013), was first signalled in policy by the agenda established by *Every Child Matters* (Department for Education and Skills [DfES], 2004). The policy put forward a positive vision for children and young people to: i) be healthy; ii) be safe; iii) enjoy and achieve; iv) make a positive contribution; v) achieve economic wellbeing. These five

outcomes became central to subsequent educational policy in the following years. In 2005, *Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning* (SEAL) was developed as a core part of New Labour's Behaviour and Attendance strategy (Humphrey, 2013). The curriculum resource was designed to support the social, emotional, and behavioural skills of primary and secondary pupils (DfES, 2005; DfES, 2007) and drew on the work of Goleman (1995) in its aim to develop self-awareness, managing feelings, motivation, empathy, and social skills (O'Hara, 2011). The resource was delivered in three waves in schools: whole-school development, small group interventions, and individualised interventions (Hill et al., 2013). It was used by schools until the National Strategies were withdrawn in 2011.

The recognition given to the all-round development of children and young people is evidenced by the heightened focus on using schools and colleges to promote the social and emotional welfare of children and young people. This was made clear by the proposals put forward in *Future in Mind* (Department of Health [DoH], 2015), which formed the basis of *Transforming Children and Young People's Mental Health Provision: A Green Paper* (DoH & Department for Education [DfE], 2017). Within the Green Paper, schools and colleges are positioned at the centre of efforts to intervene early and prevent mental health problems from worsening by providing school-based therapy and support. The key proposals were trialled in trailblazer areas, with the first wave taking place before the end of 2019 (Parkin & Long, 2020). In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Government has promised to accelerate the commitment to improve access to and expand mental health services for children (Department of Health & Social Care, 2021). In light of the Covid-19 pandemic, clinicians and researchers are beginning to discuss the potential impact of Covid-19 on the policy agenda set by the Green Paper (The Royal Society of Medicine, 2021).

The response to the Green Paper consultation (Department of Health and Social Care & DfE, 2018) outlined the intention to introduce a new relationships, sex, and health education (RSHE) curriculum for all pupils in state-funded schools from September 2020. Statutory guidance specifies that by the end of primary school, in line with outcomes for emotional wellbeing, pupils should know how to recognize and talk about their emotions, and judge whether what they are feeling is appropriate and proportionate (DfE, 2019).

## 2.3. The role of the Teaching Assistant (TA)

### 2.3.1. Aim

The ELSA project was designed to help schools support the emotional needs of their pupils from within their own resources (Burton, 2009), through the up-skilling of TAs (sometimes previously referred to as Learning Support Assistants). In line with IPA guidance that a literature review may support the researcher's knowledge about their participants (Smith et al., 2009), this section engages with the wider literature around the TA role. It first traces the development of the role of the TA before narrowing to the deployment of TAs in supporting the emotional and social needs of pupils and considering research into the experiences of TAs working in this area.

### 2.3.2. Development of the TA role

The UK government's commitment to inclusion, in part triggered by the Warnock Report (1978) and the subsequent 1981 Education Act, saw growing numbers of children with SEN being taught in mainstream schools. One way of responding to this was by increasing the use of support staff in schools, namely TAs (Blatchford et al., 2011). The later publication of the Green Paper *Excellence for all children: meeting special educational needs* (SEN; Department for Education and Employment [DfEE], 1997) outlined a range of policies to support the inclusion of pupils with SEN, which led to a further rapid increase of TA positions (Alborz et al., 2009). From an estimated 24,000 full-time equivalent TAs employed in England in 1997 (DfEE, 1997), the figure has increased to over 265,000 full-time equivalent positions (DfE, 2020d). In 2019, the figure comprised 28% of the school workforce in England (DfE, 2020d).

Throughout this period, the role of the TA has undergone significant change and development. Historically, the TA occupied a 'classroom helper' role, supporting the teacher with routine admin tasks and classroom organisation (Groom, 2006), which enabled the

teacher to focus on core teaching tasks. However, with the *National Workload Agreement* of 2003 (DfES, 2003), the role of the TA expanded to encompass direct responsibility for the educational progress of pupils with SEN. Core teaching tasks, such as the planning and delivery of lessons, assessments, and recording of progress, began to be ascribed to the TA (Radford et al., 2013). The primary focus of support, therefore, shifted from directly assisting the teacher to directly supporting an individual pupil, group, or whole class (Radford et al., 2013). With this shift came concerns surrounding the impact of unqualified teaching (Clayton, 1993) and opened a debate over the extent to which TAs should fulfil tasks that were previously the preserve of teachers (Webster, 2011). This was accompanied by concerns regarding the need for training and clear routes to professional development (Alborz et al., 2009).

Russell et al. (2013) noted that the significant change and expansion of the role happened with little public debate or research. Prior to the seminal *Deployment and Impact of Support Staff* (DISS) report (Blatchford et al., 2012), there was a paucity of research into the TA population in general (Clarke, 2019). Following the DISS report, the impact of TAs on academic progress subsequently garnered considerable research attention (Webster & De Boer, 2019) and, for the most part, research has since focused on this area (Clarke, 2019). Despite this, TA deployment remains a contestable area, with studies indicating that TAs play an ambiguous and complex role. Research has indicated that the impact of TA presence on academic progress can vary by the type of support offered. A finding from the DISS report (Blatchford et al., 2012), for example, suggests that TAs providing general classroom support leads to poorer academic performance among pupils with SEN. However, randomised controlled trials examining the impact of structured interventions delivered by well-supported and trained TAs to individual pupils and small groups have shown positive effects on academic performance, with additional progress of up to three to four months in literacy and numeracy over an academic year (National Foundation for Educational Research [NFER], 2014; Gorard et al., 2013).

In terms of current models of deployment, qualitative data from interviews with staff from 60 primary and secondary schools in England indicate three main modes of TA deployment:

whole-class TAs (offering general support to the class); in-class targeted TAs (offering specific support to pupils with SEN), and withdrawal intervention delivery (offering bespoke and/or evidence-based interventions to pupils with additional needs outside of the classroom setting; Skipp & Hopwood, 2019). In addition to these main models, data highlighted the wider scope of the TA role. Further tasks falling within the remit of the TA role included: additional tasks for pupils with SEND (e.g., preparing resources for particular pupils); wider roles within the school (e.g., providing lunch cover), and other general administrative tasks (e.g., putting up displays; Skipp & Hopwood, 2019). This data supports the accepted notion that the TA role is multi-faceted (Syrnyk, 2018).

### 2.3.3. Characteristics and attributes of TAs

Despite the increasing numbers of TAs, Syrnyk (2018) notes that information from the research regarding TAs is mostly descriptive: TAs often have limited qualifications (particularly when compared to teachers), are almost exclusively female and over 30 years of age, regularly work (unpaid) extra hours and generally report being satisfied with their chosen occupation (Blatchford et al., 2009; Webster et al., 2011). Other researchers note that support staff, including TAs, are often recruited from the local community in which the school is situated, which can subsequently aid their communication with pupils and their families (Burton & Goodman, 2011; Groom, 2006).

Fewer studies provide an in-depth analysis of the personal attributes of this population, although some smaller-scale studies have reported qualities deemed to be important to the role. A predominant finding from Year 5 and 6 pupils, for example, was that a TA should be 'kind, caring and helpful' (Bland & Sleightholme, 2012, p. 174). These personal qualities were deemed more important than any qualifications. Focus group data from a mix of primary and secondary TAs indicated that they thought 'adaptability, patience, sensitivity, empathy, teamwork, sense of humour and listening skills as essential for the role' (Dunne et al., 2008, p. 242).

### 2.3.4. The role of TAs in supporting SEMH needs

The aforementioned Green Paper *Excellence for All Children* (DfEE, 1997) gave particular emphasis to promoting the inclusion of pupils with 'emotional and behavioural difficulties' (EBD; p. 77), dedicating a chapter to introducing a range of policies and proposed actions. This publication led to the deployment of an increasing number of TAs to specifically support pupils with needs primarily related to EBD, or - in line with current terminology – 'social, emotional, and mental health' (SEMH; DfE & DoH, 2015). The demand for TAs supporting pupils with SEMH needs has continued to grow (Syrnyk, 2018). However, while research has explored TA deployment and characteristics of the role, evidence pertaining to TAs supporting pupils with SEMH needs remains limited.

Groom and Rose (2005) present one of the first investigations of TAs supporting the inclusion of pupils with 'social, emotional and behavioural difficulties' (p. 5). The study collected both quantitative and qualitative data from key stakeholders from primary schools in one LA in England in order to identify factors that may contribute to the effective practice of TAs working with Key Stage 2 pupils with SEMH needs. The design of the study involved three stages: a survey of headteachers (with 94 responses), a follow-up survey of line managers of TAs (with 20 responses), and 39 semi-structured interviews with line managers, classroom teachers, TAs, governors, parents, and pupils in five schools that had identified interesting practice. Results from the survey of headteachers indicated the personal qualities and attributes that schools seek in TAs: the ability to work as a member of the team, adaptability, patience, and a sense of fairness, nurturing skills, listening skills, ability to work under pressure and understanding and awareness of pupil needs. Combining the data from all three stages, the researchers conclude that successful TA practice is supported by having time to establish individual positive relationships with pupils, working with pupils in class, on a one-to-one basis and across contexts including lunchtimes, and having a range of strategies to deploy.

However, the basis for these conclusions remains unclear as the method of data analysis is not elucidated. Furthermore, these findings drew predominantly on the views of other

stakeholders e.g., 97 headteachers, 20 line managers. Only eight TAs contributed their views via semi-structured interviews, and only three direct quotations from TA interviews are cited in the study. Wren (2017) noted that very few studies have asked TAs themselves about their role, regarding both the nature of their work and their views of their role within schools. Lehane (2016) further highlighted the potentially exclusionary language used by researchers to describe TAs (e.g., as a 'tool' or 'resource') and emphasised the need to see TAs as 'groups of people' (p. 7). Clarke (2019) further noted the need for research that foregrounds TAs' voices and perspectives about their roles.

### 2.3.5. Experiences of TAs supporting SEMH needs

Of the few studies that have explored TA perceptions, even fewer have explored the experience of supporting SEMH within the classroom context. Burton and Goodman (2011) used thematic analysis as a tool to explore the perspectives of four Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators (SENCos) and eight support staff (including three TAs) regarding their roles and practice supporting pupils with SEMH needs in secondary settings. Key findings from semi-structured interviews highlighted that support staff have a highly specialised skillset, including nurturing characteristics, understanding of SEMH, and ability to provide a safe environment for pupils. However, participants reported feeling underappreciated in their roles, expressing concern that other members of staff did not perceive their job to be important and underestimated how challenging it was. This sense was particularly pronounced for support staff, including the TAs. Burton and Goodman (2011) suggest that the lack of professional accreditation and development may have compounded this sense of dissatisfaction in the role. In addition, participants reported experiencing heightened levels of stress from the emotional demands of the role.

A more recent case study presents a more positive experience of TA support for SEMH in a nurture primary school. Syrnyk (2018) explored the perceptions of 19 TAs, 6 classroom teachers, and 2 managers. All participants worked in the context of a school using the nurture approach, which recognises that the emotional needs of children must first be met before they can access learning (Syrnyk, 2018). In line with findings from Burton and

Goodman (2011), participants had a holistic view of pupils. In terms of describing their role, TAs valued the characteristics of empathy, resilience, and patience, again echoing previous research (Groom & Rose, 2005; Dunne et al., 2008). Interestingly, participants emphasised that healthy staff relationships were essential to the success of the role and their sense of job satisfaction. TAs also valued teamwork and felt their role both supported and coincided with teachers in the classroom. Although findings from small-scale studies have limited generalisability, this research points to the merits (e.g., improved confidence) of understanding the nature and parameters of the TA role in supporting SEMH needs and working collaboratively with teachers.

## 2.4. The Emotional Literacy Support Assistant (ELSA) project

### 2.4.1. Aim

This section of the literature review aims to provide an in-depth exploration of the ELSA initiative by outlining the aims of the ELSA project, the training curriculum, and supervision, and a summary of the purpose and requirements of the role. An overview of the evidence base is then provided, before moving on to critically consider research exploring perceptions and experiences of the ELSA role.

### 2.4.3. Aims of the ELSA project

The ELSA initiative was designed to develop the skills of TAs to support pupils' social and emotional wellbeing in order to help schools offer this support from within their own resources (Burton, 2009). It aims to equip TAs to identify pupils' needs and plan and deliver bespoke, individualised support. The ELSA project aims to facilitate positive change for pupils with temporary or long-term emotional needs by helping them to feel better about themselves and about their time in school. This is in line with the understanding that children learn better and are happier in school if their emotional needs are met (Burton, 2009). Within one-to-one or small group intervention sessions, the broad focus of ELSA

work is to help pupils understand their emotions and the feelings of those around them through the teaching of new skills or coping strategies (Osborne & Burton, 2014). The ELSA may identify a specific focus of sessions with the pupil. Sessions may address, for example, the child's self-esteem, relationships with peers, processing significant loss or bereavement, or conflict resolution (Burton, 2009).

### 2.4.4. Training

ELSAs are initially trained by EPs over five full-day sessions, although some LAs choose to extend the training over six days (Burton, 2009). The training course aims to provide a basic psychological understanding of emotional development in children through a grounding in key psychological theory (e.g., Maslow's (1970) hierarchy of needs; Bandura's (1977) social learning theory; Borba's (1989) theory of self-concept). Each training day covers a key area of EL, such as emotional awareness, self-esteem, anger management, social and communication skills, friendship, and therapeutic stories (Burton et al., 2009). As well as providing information about psychological theory and practice, trainee ELSAs have the opportunity to discuss key approaches and consider how they might apply them in their own context (Burton, 2008). To support and consolidate learning, it is recommended that trainee ELSAs consult *Emotional Wellbeing: An Introductory Handbook for Schools* (Shotton & Burton, 2018) which covers all areas of the course (Burton, 2009).

The ELSA training curriculum uses Day 1 of the course to introduce EL and the ELSA role. Day 2 breaks down the concept of self-esteem in order to help ELSAs plan individualised support to address specific needs, and also focuses on counselling skills (e.g., active listening) that will support ELSA-pupil communication. Issues surrounding anger and emotional self-regulation are addressed during Day 3, as well as providing input on how to use puppets to support work with pupils. Day 4 covers issues surrounding social communication with a focus on supporting the social skills of autistic pupils. Day 5 focuses on the area of friendship skills and introduces ELSAs to therapeutic story writing as a tool to help pupils consider their own behaviour and reflect upon alternative strategies (Burton, 2009). Some LAs extend the course to offer a supplementary training day to address bereavement and loss (Burton,

2009). The content of the ELSA curriculum is not intended to be exhaustive, and Burton (2008) stresses that other topics may be covered in subsequent sessions or ELSA conferences.

At the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, guidance from the ELSA Steering Group established that all ELSA training should be postponed until in-person training was again possible (ELSA Network, 2020a). However, in October 2020, the guidance was updated to recommend a 'blended model' of delivery, combining independent, virtual, and in-person learning, as appropriate (ELSA Network, 2020b).

### 2.4.5. Supervision

Supervision is an integral part of the ELSA initiative as it aims to support the confidence and competence of ELSAs (Burton, 2009). To continue working under the ELSA title, ELSAs participate in ongoing half-termly group supervision, facilitated by an EP (Burton et al., 2009). ELSAs ideally receive supervision in a local cluster group of primary or secondary ELSAs with the EP who is linked to those schools (Burton, 2009). Clinical supervision offers time and space to consider the psychology behind different needs. The EP may facilitate discussion using a problem-solving approach (e.g., Solution Circles; Forest & Pearpoint, 1996) to enable the sharing of ideas and good practice, as well as possible resources. ELSA supervision also offers the opportunity to make links and build relationships with fellow ELSAs (Burton, 2009). In addition to clinical supervision, ELSAs are expected to have a line manager in school to provide line management supervision (Burton, 2009).

After the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, guidance published by the ELSA Network (2020a) acknowledged that some ELSAs were still providing programmes of support during that time, whilst contextual constraints (e.g., classroom 'bubbles') meant that others could not continue to offer the same provision. The guidance advised that providing supervision via an online platform was not mandatory but encouraged if it was felt to be helpful (ELSA Network, 2020a).

## 2.4.6. The ELSA role

### 2.4.6.1. Purpose of the ELSA role

In 2007, Southampton EP, Woodcock outlined four key roles of the ELSA. The role of the ELSA is ultimately to improve emotional wellbeing by teaching social and emotional skills that endure after the end of the intervention, working proactively rather than reactively (Woodcock, 2007). ELSA work should also involve the following roles: establishing a safe and therapeutic space in which to work with children; advocating for the child in liaisons with teachers, parents, and other professionals, and advocating for emotional literacy within the wider organisation (Woodcock, 2007).

Rather than becoming a permanent source of support for the pupil, the ELSA aims to be involved on a short-term basis (between six to eight weeks) in order to teach and encourage the development of new skills and offer opportunities for the pupil to consolidate and generalise these skills (Burton, 2009). The ELSA may offer further intervention at a later date if required. As the ELSA is a permanent part of the school structure, it is natural that for pupils who need it, there is ongoing contact between the ELSA and pupil time to enable graduated withdrawal of support (Burton, 2009).

### 2.4.6.2. Qualities of the ELSA role

According to the *Trainers' Manual* (Burton, 2009), the ELSA is expected to be a good listener, and to be able to build relationships of trust with pupils who may not find forming relationships easy. This overlaps with the described qualities of TAs working to support SEMH needs (Groom & Rose, 2005). As well as being approachable and nurturing, ELSAs should be able to think creatively about how to facilitate the development of new skills in the pupils with whom they work. They should be able to work independently and be self-motivated, developing individualised bespoke programmes of work and reflecting on outcomes. In addition, as some pupils may not be as responsive to ELSA work, a high degree of resiliency is required. In comparison to the findings of Groom and Rose (2005) regarding

qualities of TAs supporting SEMH needs, the ELSA role appears to require a higher level of independence and creativity.

#### 2.4.6.3. Requirements of the role

In terms of time, the *Trainers' Manual* (Burton, 2009) recommends that ELSAs have a minimum of a day a week to dedicate to ELSA work, recognising that ELSAs need adequate ring-fenced time for the planning and delivery of regular sessions for pupils who have been referred for support. It is likely, therefore, that ELSAs will have to balance the role with other facets of their job role (e.g., general classroom support, targeted support, additional tasks, and duties).

In addition, it is recommended that ELSAs have a suitable, semi-private place where they can work with pupils. An ELSA will also require a budget to allow them to acquire relevant resources (e.g., books, games) which will help them support certain needs and teach new skills (Burton, 2009).

#### 2.4.6.4. Diversity within the ELSA role

Woodcock (2007) notes that from the beginning, the way in which ELSAs came to be created - from the 'ground up' - resulted in varied ELSA practices. A report commissioned by Hampshire LA used questionnaire data from 243 ELSAs working in the county to describe the scope of the role and the nature of ELSA work (Bradley, 2010). Findings indicated that on average, ELSAs worked with 13 children on a one-to-one basis across the academic year 2009 - 2010, providing an average of 14 30-minute sessions, and 3 groups for an average of 12 40-minute sessions. However, there was wide variation in the findings, which the author attributes in part to the differing needs of children (Bradley, 2010). Some ELSAs work with children in a one-to-one context, while others work with small groups of pupils. Some ELSAs invite parents to participate in sessions or allow the child to bring along a friend to the session (Hill et al., 2013). Space for diverse practice within the ELSA role is valued as it can lead to innovative ideas and creative approaches (Woodcock, 2007). A review of research on

the influence of implementation factors suggests that adapting and modifying an intervention may lead to positive outcomes (Durlak & DuPre, 2008), indicating further that flexible practice may be a particular strength of ELSA work.

### 2.4.7. An overview of the ELSA evidence base

Despite the widespread implementation of the ELSA project, peer-reviewed research into the initiative is limited, currently extending to eight articles: an early evaluative account (Burton, 2008) and subsequent research exploring ELSAs' views towards support and supervision (Osborne & Burton, 2014; France & Billington, 2020); children's perspectives of ELSA support (Hills, 2016; Krause et al., 2020; Wong et al., 2020); parents' perspectives (Wilding & Claridge, 2016), and ELSA and pupil experiences (McEwen, 2019). As a result of the limited evidence base, 'grey' literature such as unpublished doctoral theses and LA-commissioned reports were included for review. Unfortunately, it was not possible to obtain permission to access two relevant doctoral theses (Garwood, 2012; Begley, 2016), so they have not been considered. See *Appendix A: Table of ELSA research* for more details.

It is important to consider the limitations of including unpublished research in a literature review. As unpublished research studies have not been subject to the process of peer-review, internal validity is more difficult to assess (Schmucker et al., 2017). It is important at this point to acknowledge that much of the early ELSA evaluation research was either commissioned by LAs and/or conducted by the ELSA project's creator, all of whom may naturally have a vested interest in its success. It is equally important to acknowledge that all the research included for review has been conducted by EPs or TEPs. However, as 'research and evaluation' is identified as a core function of EP work, it can be argued that EPs are able to conduct quality research (Farrell et al., 2006).

#### 2.4.7.1. Research investigating effectiveness using quantitative methods

Naturally, early ELSA research focused on evaluating the outcomes and impact of the programme. In the first published article relating to the ELSA project (Burton, 2008), initial

evaluation data from surveys indicated that ELSA work had been very well received by teachers and pupils, with ELSAs themselves commenting on how the training had helped them to better support the emotional needs of pupils. However, the questionnaire used as an evaluative tool was limited in its scope, consisting of three multiple-choice questions regarding training and supervision, followed by a chance to add any further comments.

Several unpublished doctoral theses and evaluation reports subsequently commissioned by LAs attempted to explore the effectiveness of ELSA quantitatively, using standardised measures of SEMH, including the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaires (SDQ; Goodman, 1997) and non-standardised measures, such as the Emotional Literacy Checklists (ELCs; Faupel, 2003) both pre- and post- intervention. With regard to outcomes of the intervention, doctoral research found significant improvements on pupil-rated self-efficacy scores (Grahamslaw, 2010), although the researcher acknowledged that these findings cannot be generalised beyond the sample used in the study. Subsequent LA-commissioned reports suggested significant improvements on conduct problems, hyperactivity, peer problems, empathy, motivation, self-awareness, self-regulation, and social skills, as rated by a sample of 60 teachers (with no corresponding improvement for children in a waitlist control group; Burton et al., 2010), and significant improvements on general emotional literacy scores, also according to a sample of 30 teachers (Russell & Mann, 2011). However, other findings within the same studies suggested little or no impact. EL scores given post-intervention by pupils, for example, indicated minimal change (Burton et al., 2010). Pupil-rated and parent-rated scores for emotional literacy also suggested little improvement (Russell & Mann, 2011). Later doctoral research also failed to find significant differences in pupil-rated EL scores (Mann, 2014) or significant intervention effects from single-case experimental design data (Haigh, 2019).

Research into the effectiveness of the ELSA programme has therefore found mixed results (Pickering et al., 2019) and the evidence base remains limited. The difficulty of establishing a clear picture of the impact of the ELSA intervention using quantitative measures has been highlighted (Haigh, 2019). Explanations for this have been offered by researchers. One explanation proposed is the adaptive nature of ELSA work. Without manualised programme

content, interventions vary from child to child, which makes it hard to evaluate the programme (Pickering et al., 2019). Additionally, researchers have highlighted the complex, multi-faceted nature of EL (Haigh, 2019) and have suggested that quantitative measures are not sensitive enough to detect subtle changes in attributes and behaviours (Pickering et al., 2019; Nicholson-Roberts, 2019). Even if changes are detected, there are so many variables involved (e.g., intensity, qualities of the ELSA) that it is difficult to link outcomes with the intervention itself (Pickering et al., 2019). Finally, using only quantitative measures of EL may limit outcomes to those being measured (McEwen, 2019).

#### 2.4.7.2. Research exploring perspectives using qualitative methods

Over recent years, the focus of ELSA research has shifted from using quantitative methods to measure outcomes of the intervention to instead use qualitative methods to explore the views and perspectives of parents, school staff, children and young people (CYP), and ELSAs in a bid to better understand perceived outcomes and the processes underlying them. Qualitative methods can offer important insights and can provide rich and detailed information that quantitative methods may miss. As a result, qualitative methods can serve a 'powerful explanatory function' that can increase understanding of intervention outcomes (Humphrey, 2013, p. 84).

In terms of perceived outcomes, semi-structured interview data from parents of primary school pupils receiving ELSA support has indicated perceived positive outcomes on children's social and emotional development, especially for emotional regulation skills (Wilding & Claridge, 2016). Findings indicated that perceived improvements extended to the home setting, indicating the possibility of a degree of generalisability. Particular emphasis was given to the ELSA-child relationship and the value of the talking process as mechanisms for change. Further data from interviews with 2 pupils and 2 parents analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA; Barker, 2017) led the researcher to suggest perceived positive impacts of the ELSA intervention in the home setting, such as improved sibling relationships.

In addition, a multiple case study of the ELSA project in secondary settings (Nicholson-Roberts, 2019) further supports the idea of the transferability of EL skills. Data from interviews with school staff outline perceived positive outcomes for the school context in terms of a calmer school environment (Nicholson-Roberts, 2019). However, school staff suggested that individual pupil outcomes can be hard to notice in the context of the classroom setting as teachers have little time or capacity to track subtle changes in pupils' social and emotional skills.

Several qualitative research studies have recently focused on exploring children and young people's (CYP) views (Hills, 2016; Balampanidou, 2019; Krause et al., 2020; Wong et al., 2020; Peters, 2020), recognising perhaps that through introspection, CYP are able to access more detailed information about themselves than any other stakeholder (Humphrey, 2013). As a result, their perspectives may offer a more holistic view of perceived outcomes from the ELSA intervention in both home and school settings (Krause et al., 2020).

According to research exploring the perspectives of CYP, ELSA support may build confidence, resilience and self-esteem (Hills, 2016). Thematic analysis used from interviews with nine children (aged between seven and ten years) revealed that the therapeutic relationship and the ability able to talk and think about their feelings may be reasons for the perceived positive impact (Hills, 2016). The personal qualities of the ELSA appeared to play a key role in children's perceptions of the intervention.

A perceived improvement in confidence was a finding echoed in more recent research exploring the perspectives of CYP (Krause et al., 2020; Wong et al., 2020). Krause et al. (2020) used thematic analysis as a tool to analyse interviews with 13 primary and secondary pupils. The researchers concluded that the ELSA intervention had a perceived positive impact on multiple components of wellbeing, such as engagement in and out of school, resilience, achievement, and optimism about the future. Wong et al. (2020) similarly employed thematic analysis as a tool to analyse interviews with 12 primary pupils. Findings suggested further evidence for the positive impacts of the ELSA intervention on various aspects of the social and emotional development of CYP, including self-efficacy, behaviour,

and friendships. However, it is important to acknowledge the possible limitations of these claims, including the possibility that self-report data provided by children may be biased by social desirability (Camerini & Schulz, 2018).

In terms of ELSAs' perspectives, McEwen (2015) notes that some early evaluation research sought additional qualitative information regarding perceptions of impact and outcomes, but restricted ELSAs' views to predetermined questions (e.g., Burton et al., 2009; Murray, 2010). This suggests that findings from early evaluation research were limited. Moving beyond perceived outcomes and underlying mechanisms, exploratory studies have adopted qualitative paradigms to explore the views of ELSAs' in more depth: towards training (Leighton, 2015; Bland & Macro, 2018), support and supervision (Atkin, 2019; France & Billington, 2020), and the ELSA-pupil relationship (Miles, 2015). Implementation studies have also drawn on the views of ELSAs along with other key stakeholders in primary (Fairall, 2020) and secondary (Nicholson-Roberts, 2019) settings.

McEwen's (2019) study aimed to offer a distinctive perspective by using thematic analysis to analyse data from informal interviews with eight ELSAs and seven primary pupils in order to explore their experiences of the programme. The study additionally employed a Q-sort activity to ascertain what ELSAs perceived as the most important aspects of the ELSA programme. *Relationships* emerged as an overarching theme from both ELSA and pupil interviews, and findings suggested that the ELSA-child relationship endured as a coping mechanism for the child long after the official end to the intervention. The Q-sort activity also highlighted the need for the ELSA to be available as an ongoing source of support for the child, which raises implications for the scope and nature of the ELSA role.

Research regarding experiences of the ELSA role, however, remains limited. To date, there does not appear to have been any research that has explored the lived experiences of ELSAs working in primary settings. The next section of the review, therefore, narrows to critically consider what is known from the research regarding perceptions of the ELSA role, firstly from the point of view of key stakeholders, and then from the point of view of ELSAs themselves.

## 2.4.8. Perceptions and experiences of the ELSA role

### 2.4.8.1. Stakeholders' perceptions of the role

Firstly, research has indicated that the ELSAs have unique qualities. Research exploring children's perspectives has consistently indicated that ELSAs are distinctly different from other members of staff. Qualities attributed to the ELSA include kindness and unconditional positive regard (Hills, 2016). Young people interviewed by Peters (2020) described the ELSA as 'fun, friendly, and kind, and someone who listens, understands and explains' (p. 116). Further descriptions offered by children highlight that an ELSA is someone who makes them feel safe and contained, and someone they can trust (Balampanidou, 2019). A theme identified by Wong et al. (2020) was the 'uniqueness of the role', with pupils describing the role of the ELSA as someone who supports their emotional wellbeing and development. Findings highlighted comments suggesting that ELSAs provide both proactive and responsive support to pupils and support them to use EL strategies. The unique nature of the ELSA role was a finding echoed by Nicholson-Roberts (2019). Interviews with key stakeholders (pupils and SENCos) suggested that ELSAs' unique personal attributes and their specific skills enabled them to build successful relationships with pupils. These attributes and skills included a relaxed manner of communication, authenticity, unconditional positive regard, and attunement (Nicholson-Roberts, 2019).

Secondly, research findings (Nicholson-Roberts, 2019; Fairall, 2020) have begun to indicate the emotional impact that ELSAs can experience as a result of the role. Nicholson-Roberts (2019) notes that due to the emotional intensity of the role, with the high levels of empathy and containment required, ELSAs can struggle to find time to reflect and regulate their own emotions (Nicholson-Roberts, 2019). This was echoed by Fairall's (2020) study, with qualitative comments indicating the negative impact of having responsibility for children with complex social and emotional needs on the stress of the role. These findings serve to highlight that, like TAs supporting SEMH needs (Burton & Goodman, 2011), ELSAs may experience a level of emotional stress. However, there appears to be limited research

exploring perceived challenges of the ELSA role which suggests more research in this area would be beneficial.

Finally, recent studies (Krause et al., 2020; Wong et al., 2020; Fairall, 2020) have raised implications for the parameters of the ELSA role. Wong et al. (2020) indicated the possible overreliance of some children on the ELSA, with some children feeling worried or upset about the prospect of ending ELSA sessions. A key implication from this research relates to the boundaries of the ELSA role. The *Trainers' Manual* (Burton, 2009) outlines guidance that interventions should be short-term (see section *2.4.7.1: Purpose of the ELSA role).* However, with ELSAs offering more long-term support to pupils, Krause et al. (2020) suggest there may be a need to review the parameters of the ELSA role. As will be outlined later (see *2.6. Summarising the research rationale*), the rationale for the current study responds to the need to consider the ELSA role in more depth.

#### 2.4.8.2. ELSAs' perceptions and experiences of the role

As has been already highlighted, ELSAs' views of the role were sought as part of early ELSA evaluation research, commissioned by LAs. Bradley (2010), for example, surveyed ELSAs about the nature and scope of the role and provided an opportunity to add further comments at the end of the survey. The author notes that some contributions from ELSAs highlighted the demanding and emotionally difficult nature of the work but overall concluded that ELSAs found the role rewarding and the work valuable.

Doctoral research exploring ELSAs' views towards training (Leighton, 2015) found that concerns that newly trained ELSAs' held around whether they had the right skills and whether they could manage the workload were secondary to their enthusiasm for the role. All the ELSAs who participated in the study via interview and a reflective journal expressed how much they enjoyed their role. Participants felt their role was distinct and valued within the school community. However, it is important to note that the ELSA initiative had been newly introduced in the LA in which the research was located, with participants having

received free ELSA training and resources. This may have influenced the largely positive nature of the findings.

Since then, ELSA interview data from multiple case studies with key stakeholders has highlighted both the reward and challenge of the role. Peters (2020), for example, identified a theme entitled *ELSA feelings* that included ELSAs looking forward to working with the pupil, experiencing happiness from being able to help as well as sadness when the intervention came to an end. The emotional challenge of the role was highlighted in research by Fairall (2020). ELSAs reflected on the difficult feelings experienced and the emotional toll of the role, referencing the high degree of empathy required. Similarly, Nicholson-Roberts (2019) found that ELSAs appeared to feel unconfident in their role, especially just after training.

Research exploring ELSA experiences has highlighted the changing role of the ELSA. Findings from a Q-sort activity employed by McEwen (2019) suggested that ELSAs felt they needed to be available to support children on an ongoing basis after sessions had ended (e.g., 'aftercare' in the form of drop-ins or check-ins). McEwen (2019) concludes that the changing role of the ELSA, from supporting children in a one-to-one basis or group setting to informal check-ins warrants further exploration. This finding links to concerns expressed by Krause et al. (2020) and Wong et al. (2020) regarding a possible overreliance on the ELSA, which further points to the need for an in-depth exploration of ELSAs' experiences of the role.

### 2.4.9. Critique of the ELSA programme

When considering possible limitations of the ELSA programme, there are three fundamental criticisms that warrant brief consideration.

First, in terms of conceptualisations of EL, the *Trainers' Manual* (Burton, 2009) defines EL as 'the ability to recognise, understand, handle and appropriately express emotions' (Sharp, 2000, p. 8). However, it could be argued that this definition risks conceptualising EL as an innate, fixed quality, underpinned by the ability model, rather than emphasising that EL is a 'practice' that can be nurtured and shaped by social settings and interpersonal relationships

(Matthews, 2006). Aside from the problematic conceptualisation of EL, criticisms have also highlighted that EL is difficult to quantify, and it overlaps with a wide range of human characteristics (Boon, 2014).

Second, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of the psychological theories that underpin the ELSA programme. For example, Maslow's (1970) hierarchy of human needs provides a framework for understanding how a child's basic needs (e.g., hunger and thirst, safety, and security) and psychological, emotional needs (e.g., sense of belonging, positive relationships) must be met before 'growth' needs (e.g., learning, self-actualisation) can be nurtured. This theory is used to conclude that teaching EL may help children become more effective learners. However, it is important to acknowledge that the theory has received much criticism for being founded on a lack of empirical evidence (Wahba & Bridwell, 1976). Similarly, the ELSA programme draws on the conclusions made by Goleman (1995) that teaching EL may have a positive impact on later personal and career successes. However, critics have emphasised that his conclusions, packaged for the general public, go beyond the empirical evidence available (e.g., Brackett et al., 2011).

Finally, it is important to consider the possible limitations of the ELSA programme within the wider context of social and emotional learning interventions within school settings. Weare (2015) produced a guidance document entitled 'What works in promoting social and emotional well-being and responding to mental health problems in schools?', which sets out research-informed principles to support school staff to deliver well-designed inventions to promote the social and emotional development of pupils. In line with the ELSA programme, Weare (2015) emphasises the importance of providing more intense, targeted social and emotional support for certain pupils in one-to-one or small group settings. However, Weare (2015) states the equal importance of transferring the responsibility for this support to mainstream teaching staff (e.g., form tutor, class teacher) where possible to support the continued progress of new skills. Given that research has indicated the possible overreliance of the child on the ELSA (e.g., Wong et al., 2020), it may be inferred that the ELSA programme does not adequately recognise the importance of mainstream staff working to promote the continued development of skills post-intervention.

## 2.5. The context of the Covid-19 pandemic

### 2.5.1. Aim

The outbreak of coronavirus disease 2019 (Covid-19) towards the end of 2019 spread across the world at an unparalleled speed (Cheng et al., 2020) and is thought to represent the greatest global health emergency in more than 100 years (Morrison Coulthard & Devlin, 2020). At the time of data collection (November 2020), there had been over 53 million confirmed cases of Covid-19 globally, resulting in over 1.3 million deaths (WHO, 2020). Beyond the severe harm to health and threat to life, the impact of Covid-19 has been felt in all areas of society (Sharp et al., 2020a). Education is thought to be one of the areas most affected by the pandemic, with a briefing by the United Nations (August 2020) stating that Covid-19 has caused the most severe damage to the education system in history. In Spring 2020, educational settings closed their doors to pupils and students in over 190 countries (United Nations, 2020).

This section aims to set the research within the context of the Covid-19 pandemic by firstly providing an overview of the impact of Covid-19 on educational settings in England from March 2020 up until the point of data collection in November 2020. The section then moves on to consider Covid-19 research priorities that have been identified for psychological science in the UK (O'Connor et al., 2020; Morrison Coulthard & Devlin, 2020). An exploration of existing research into the experiences of school staff working in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic then follows on. The literature review ends with a summary of the research rationale, drawing together findings from areas that have been explored in this review.

### 2.5.2. The Covid-19 pandemic and educational settings

The Government announced that all schools should close on 20th March 2020 as the UK went into 'lockdown', although schools were asked to provide on-site provision for children of key and critical workers (such as those working in health and social care, education and

childcare, food production and sale, transport) and vulnerable children (deemed to be those with an EHCP, a social worker, or identified as vulnerable by the LA or education provider; Cabinet Office & DfE, 2020). In England, there are thought to be approximately 500,000 vulnerable children and 3 million keyworker children (DfE, 2020b). According to national survey data from over one thousand senior leaders of mainstream primary and secondary schools (Julius & Sims, 2020), the proportion of keyworker children and vulnerable children attending on-site provision in the 6 weeks following school closures was just 5% and 15% respectively.

School closures at short notice had a profound impact on school communities, with school staff and pupils having to quickly adapt to a new model of teaching and learning (Cullinane & Montacute, 2020). Some school staff, including TAs, continued to deliver in-person provision to children of keyworkers and those deemed to be vulnerable. Other members of staff began to support and teach pupils remotely with little preparation or training (Bubb & Jones, 2020).

The immediate impact of school closures may have affected pupils and their families in both positive and negative ways, with all families likely facing increased levels of stress (O'Connor et al., 2020). Data pertaining to children and young people's wellbeing in England between March and August 2020 gives a 'surprisingly positive picture of the wellbeing and experiences of the majority of children and young people at this time' (DfE, 2020e, p. 16). Clayton et al. (2020) explored parents' perceptions of their children's well-being in the initial period of school closures. Findings highlighted a mixed response, with some parents reporting that their children were benefiting from spending more time at home and increased time with family members. For parents of children at primary school and in the early years, there were largely positive stories about increased levels of closeness which had benefits for the whole family. However, other sources suggest that particular subgroups of children may have experienced lower wellbeing throughout the initial period of school closures (DfE, 2020e). Those children and young people with pre-existing mental health needs may have found themselves without access to their usual resources and provision

(Lee, 2020). During this period, school communities experienced the loss of family members, friends, and neighbours as a result of Covid-19.

On 10th May 2020, the Prime Minister announced that alongside ongoing provision for keyworker children and vulnerable children, some children would return to school in England from 1st June (Sharp et al., 2020a). Guidance from the DfE issued on 12th May specified that those children in key transition years (Nursery, Reception, Year 1, and Year 6) would be prioritised (DfE, 2020a). Secondary schools and colleges were also directed to welcome back Year 10 and 12 pupils to partial on-site provision in order to supplement their remote learning (Sharp et al., 2020a).

On 23rd June 2020, the Prime Minister confirmed a full return for all primary and secondary pupils in England from September (Danechi & Roberts, 2021). Guidance advised schools to ensure certain hygiene practices (e.g., regular hand sanitising, not sharing equipment) and promote social distancing (e.g., splitting classes into smaller groups, separating year groups, forming 'bubbles', asking staff to socially distance and minimise contact with each other; DfE, 2020c).

After remaining closed to most pupils since 20th March 2020, schools fully re-opened to all children and young people in September 2020 (Danechi & Roberts, 2021). Data presented in a *Commons Library Briefing* (Danechi & Roberts, 2021) indicates that on average, pupil attendance in state-funded schools was relatively stable between the start of the autumn term and October half term (between 86% and 90.1%). After half term, there was wider variation in attendance with a general downwards trend. Data collected from 12 October until 16 December indicates that 9-11% of pupils did not attend school for Covid-19 related reasons, including having to self-isolate due to potential contact, further school closures, or having a confirmed case of Covid-19 themselves (Danechi & Roberts, 2021).

### 2.5.3. Covid-19 research priorities

In April 2020, an expert panel specified short and long-term research priorities as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, published in the *British Journal of Psychology* (O'Connor et al., 2020). The paper emphasises the integral role that psychological science can play in helping governments, education sectors, individuals, and families recover from the impact of the pandemic. The paper addresses psychological scientists in a 'call to action' (p. 20) and directs them to key research priority domains, including *work environment and working arrangements,* and *educational practices*. O'Connor et al. (2020) acknowledge that Covid-19 has changed working conditions for almost all employees, with particular challenges for teachers. The authors stress that understanding the impact of Covid-19 on the working environment (especially for certain groups e.g., teachers) is paramount. In addition, the paper underlines the challenges that Covid-19 has posed for the education and wellbeing of children and young people. The authors highlight the importance of exploring the experiences of children, families, and professionals involved in supporting them. Regarding research methods, O'Connor et al. (2020) emphasise the value of collecting qualitative data concerning people's experiences and perspectives in the context of the pandemic. In addition, they note the benefit of employing qualitative methods (e.g., online interviews) to quickly elicit first-hand accounts from participants.

Morrison Coulthard & Devlin (2020) supplement the article published by O'Connor et al. (2020) by outlining further research priorities identified by analysing survey data from the broader community of psychological scientists. The paper, published by the *British Psychological Society* (BPS), echoes the emphasis given by O'Connor et al. (2020) to researching experiences of work, and further suggests the value of exploring the experiences of key workers and staff wellbeing, including the re-examination of roles and functions in light of the pandemic context.

### 2.5.4. Experiences of TAs working in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic

Allen et al. (2020) noted that although research quickly turned its focus to exploring the impact of the pandemic on the wellbeing of various groups (e.g., Fancourt et al., 2020), the experience of education professionals initially received little research attention. This

appears to remain the case for TAs. Moss et al. (2021) noted that much of the public debate has centred around teachers (e.g., their safety concerns), and the voices of TAs have gone unheard.

TAs were among those surveyed in June - July 2020 by Education Support (Savill-Smith & Scanlan, 2020). Of the 3034 UK education professionals surveyed, 50% felt that their mental health had worsened following school closures (Savill-Smith & Scanlan, 2020). Furthermore, many of those surveyed had felt unappreciated by the media (73%), the UK government (65%), and the general public (59%). It is important to acknowledge, however, that the findings do not distinguish between job role and many of the report's conclusions are made on a general level on behalf of 'all job roles within the education profession' (p. 4). It is important to recognise the possible diversity of experience across different roles within the school setting.

To my knowledge, Moss et al. (2021) appears to be one of the few studies that has focused solely on TAs' experiences of working in the pandemic context in the UK. Over 9000 TAs (65% of whom worked in primary settings) responded to an online questionnaire during the second winter lockdown from January – March 2021 (after data collection in the present study). It is important to note that the winter lockdown saw considerably higher numbers of children in school than in the initial lockdown, due to the wider reclassification of those deemed to be keyworkers and children considered to be vulnerable (Moss et al., 2021). Survey findings indicated that 85% of respondents were directly involved in supporting children within the school setting, with just over half (51%) leading a 'bubble' or class independently and just under half (49%) covering teacher absences. Around a third of respondents delivered targeted interventions (34%), offered bespoke support to pupils with an EHCP (34%), and participated in the delivery of online lessons (36%). In addition to this, the TAs surveyed undertook many additional tasks, such as minimising the risk of Covid-19 transmission through cleaning equipment (84%), contacting families (36%), preparing paper copies of learning packs (39%), and supporting children having difficulties with home learning (27%). In spite of this, only a small proportion of TAs felt that their school had become more aware of their role in supporting pupils and families (27%) and felt more connected to their school communities (21%). Qualitative comments from respondents

highlighted a sense of unfair working conditions, indicating that while they were working 'on the frontline', teachers were able to work remotely from the safety of their homes. Furthermore, comments suggested that the widening roles led to increased levels of anxiety and stress, with respondents experiencing risks to their own health and a sense of being overwhelmed.

Moss et al. (2021) concluded that TAs have been essential to the day-to-day running of schools throughout the pandemic, and they name TAs as the 'unsung heroes of this pandemic' (p. 28). The researchers further stress that TAs' voices need to be heard: 'the unique understanding and clear view of what matters most within their communities, which they have gained from working on the frontline, should be respected and recognised' (Moss et al., 2021, p. 4).

This recommendation for future research to consider the voices of education professionals other than teachers (e.g., TAs) in the pandemic context is echoed by qualitative research conducted by Kim and Asbury (2020). They employed a narrative identity framework to explore teachers' experiences of the initial six weeks following school closures in England. Reflexive thematic analysis identified themes from interview data with 24 primary and secondary teachers. Themes included *uncertainty, finding a way, worry for the vulnerable, importance of relationships, teacher identity,* and *reflections*. Interviews with participants were repeated five weeks later (Kim et al., 2020) with four themes remaining the same (*uncertainty, importance of relationships, teacher identity,* and *reflections). Finding a way* had evolved into *practical concerns* and *worry for the vulnerable* had expanded to *worry for pupils*. Although it is important to stress that the limited generalisability of these findings beyond the sample of teachers, the study emphasises the value of using qualitative research paradigms to listen to the stories of education professionals (such as TAs) at this seminal point in time. Kim and Asbury (2020) note that this can lead to new insights into what it means to be working in schools, as well as increasing our understanding of how to support school staff to work in ways that are fulfilling to them and beneficial to their school communities.

## 2.6. Summarising the research rationale

The review explored key areas of literature, including the history of EL, the role of the TA, the role of the ELSA, and the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. The rationale for the current research is drawn cumulatively from these areas.

To date, very few studies have asked TAs themselves about how they view their roles and how they would define the nature of their work (Wren, 2017). Considering TAs make up a quarter of the workforce in schools, there appears to be a gap in the literature regarding TAs' voices and perspectives (Clarke, 2019) leading researchers to call for a focus on TA views (e.g., Lehane, 2016).

Research consulting key stakeholders (e.g., children, school staff) has highlighted the unique qualities of the ELSA role (e.g., Wong et al., 2020), its emotional challenges (e.g., Nicholson-Roberts, 2019), and concerns over the parameters of the role (Krause et al., 2020). A variety of stakeholders' views have been sampled in previous research, but few have fully explored ELSAs' views. In addition, research exploring ELSAs' experiences has called for further exploration of the changing role of the ELSA (e.g., from one-to-one sessions and group work to informal 'check-ins'; McEwen, 2019).

The need to explore ELSAs' experiences has been emphasised within the unique context of the Covid-19 pandemic. Researchers have recognised the integral role TAs play in sustaining school communities throughout the pandemic (Moss et al., 2021) and have called for research to focus on TAs' voices. To date, research exploring the impact of Covid-19 on school staff has largely relied on survey data (e.g., Allen et al., 2020). However, the value of hearing the self-stories of educational professionals at such a seminal point in time has been emphasised (Kim & Asbury, 2020). There has been a 'call to action' for psychologists to collect valuable data regarding 'people's experiences, perspectives, and practices associated with Covid-19' (O'Connor et al., 2020, p. 8). However, to date, there does not appear to have been any research that has adopted a qualitative methods approach to hear TAs' voices working in the pandemic context.

With a rationale drawn from key areas of reviewed literature, the current study addresses these gaps in the literature by exploring experiences of the ELSA role in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), an approach from phenomenological psychology.

# 3. Methodology

## 3.1. Introduction

This chapter provides a rationale for the choice of methodology and research methods used in the study. It begins with a discussion of the ontological and epistemological foundations of the research, and how they contributed to the choice of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) as a suitable methodology to address the research question. Following this, IPA theory and the rationale for IPA are discussed in more detail. The account then moves on to an outline of the method and practical aspects of the research, including recruitment of participants, data collection, data analysis, and ethical considerations. The chapter concludes with a consideration of quality issues, including threats to validity and reliability, reflexivity, and the position of the researcher.

## 3.2. Aims and research question

This study aims to explore the lived experiences of Emotional Literacy Support Assistants (ELSAs) working in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic and how they make sense of their experience. It is hoped that the research responds to the 'call to action' for psychologists to collect valuable data regarding 'people's experiences, perspectives and practices associated with Covid-19' (O'Connor et al., 2020, p. 8). The study aims to provide insight into and understanding of the ELSA role in the context of the pandemic so that others may learn from an in-depth exploration of their experiences. The research has a single exploratory question at the centre, which is as follows:

> *How do ELSAs make sense of their experience of the role in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic?*

## 3.3. Philosophical assumptions of the research

Philosophical assumptions guide a researcher's ontological position, and subsequently their epistemological position, which in turn informs the methodology employed in research (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). Ontology directs researchers towards questions such as 'what is there to know?' or 'what is the nature of reality?' (Willig, 2008). Epistemology, being inextricably linked to ontology, refers to the nature of knowledge and 'the relationship between the knower and the would-be known' (Mertens, 2010, p. 10).

Making clear-cut distinctions between different ontological and epistemological positions risks being overly simplistic (Coyle, 2007) and can be somewhat crude (King & Horrocks, 2010). Concepts and definitions overlap (Carter & Little, 2007), with researchers oftentimes adopting a 'best-fit' position as a result. With this in mind, it is more helpful to consider ontological positions on a continuum, from 'realist' to 'relativist' (Madill et al., 2000). The realist position implies that there is a single reality, and it is the researcher's job to discover and understand that reality (Mertens, 2010). Knowledge of an 'objective' reality is sought from a positivist epistemological stance and quantitative methodologies are predominantly used (Mertens, 2010).

Towards the other end of the continuum, the relativist position assumes that there is no single reality. Multiple realities are influenced by personal, historical, and socio-cultural contexts and are co-constructed through socialisation and language (Gergen, 2001). The researcher who adopts this stance aims to discover meaning within this socially constructed, complex, and multi-layered reality (Robson, 2002). At this end of the continuum, knowledge of multiple realities is generally sought from an interpretivist epistemological position which acknowledges the influence of the researcher's own reality and values.

In the context of the current research, my own ontological beliefs fall towards the relativist end of the spectrum, as I hold to the belief that individuals' realities are relative to their unique social and cultural frames of reference and are open to a range of interpretations (King & Horrocks, 2010). This belief informs my positioning towards an epistemology based on social constructionism, which can be traced in part back to an interpretivist approach (Andrews, 2012). Social constructionism has been described as the 'view that all knowledge,

and therefore all meaningful reality as such, 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' (Crotty, 1998, p. 42). From this position, I recognise that as a researcher, I am interpreting the constructed accounts of participants, and my interpretation is also a constructed account of how participants are making sense of their experience at a specific point in time.

These philosophical assumptions influenced my choice of methodology, which was interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). IPA has been described as having a distinctive epistemological framework (Shinebourne, 2011) within which there is a degree of 'epistemological openness' (Oxley, 2016, p. 55). Oxley (2016) makes the case for approaching IPA from a critical realist epistemological position, as it can account for the concept of the 'double hermeneutic'[1] whilst also acknowledging that language does tell us something about the reality of experience.

Smith et al. (2009), however, state that IPA subscribes to social constructionism, albeit less explicitly than more discursive approaches. My view falls in alignment with the idea that language does not readily provide direct access to the essence of an individual's experience, but rather offers a tool for the individual to construct a version of that experience within their own unique context (Barker et al., 2002). The individual is viewed as a 'conscious actor' who constructs meaning and communicates their lived experience (Langdridge, 2008, p. 1128). Exploring participants' experiences and perceptions within the methodological framework of IPA is therefore compatible with my philosophical assumptions.

As IPA accepts the researcher's preconceptions as a prerequisite to analysis, I have chosen to use a first-person narrative throughout. I judged that adopting the first person makes clear that the analysis is a highly interpretative endeavour and is, therefore, more congruent with IPA than using the third person (i.e., 'the researcher'), which may imply a level of objectivity. I hoped that using the first person would also facilitate my efforts to be

[1] The 'double hermeneutic' describes the way in which the researcher is making sense of the participant, who is making sense of a particular phenomenon (Smith et al., 2009).

transparent and reflexive throughout the process, both of which are integral qualities of the IPA researcher.

## 3.4. Methodology: IPA

### 3.4.1. Introduction to IPA

IPA is interested in the 'detailed examination of personal lived experience' (Eatough & Smith, 2017, p. 1). Its qualitative, inductive methodology, like others within the family of approaches drawing on phenomenological psychology, has an experiential focus and aims to 'examine a topic, as far as is possible, in its own terms' (Eatough & Smith, 2017, p. 1). Necessarily, this involves a high level of interpretation for both the researcher and the participant, as the researcher is tasked with examining how the participant makes sense of their personal and social world (Cohen et al., 2007). IPA is committed to a 'detailed examination of particulars', centring firstly on examining each case in detail, before looking for points of convergence and divergence across cases (Eatough & Smith, 2017, p. 1).

IPA was first articulated in the 1990s in the UK (Smith, 1994, 1996) as a 'psychological experiential research methodology' (Smith & Osborn, 2015, p. 25), before widening its reach to many other disciplines (Oxley, 2015). The approach, which holds to 'the value of subjective knowledge for psychological understanding', is appealing increasingly to researchers across the world from a range of different fields (Eatough & Smith, 2017, p. 1) and has become a dominant qualitative approach to research (Tuffour, 2017).

Although IPA was developed relatively recently, IPA theory echoes much further back to the philosophical traditions of phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography. Although Eatough and Smith (2017) recognise that IPA researchers are not philosophers, they strongly promote researcher engagement with the theoretical underpinnings of IPA.

### 3.4.2. Phenomenology

Phenomenology refers to a philosophical movement that focuses on the study of lived human experience and how that experience is perceived and understood by the person concerned (Murray & Wilde, 2020). Phenomenological research aims to present an interpretation of the nature of a particular lived experience (Van Manen, 1990).

The roots of many phenomenological approaches can be traced back to the work of Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), considered to be the father of phenomenology (Wagstaff et al., 2014). Husserl's rallying cry to 'go back to the things themselves' (Husserl, 1927, as cited in Smith et al., 2009, p. 12) captures the phenomenological aim of exploring how the world is formed and experienced through consciousness, free from the limits of any pre-existing hypotheses (e.g., from science, tradition, or common sense) (Eatough & Smith, 2017). For Husserl, this requires a shift from the 'natural attitude' to the 'phenomenological attitude' by moving through a series of steps ('reductions'), all the while 'bracketing'[2] preconceptions and assumptions to try and get to the very essence of an experience (Oxley, 2016). However, this intention has been accused of being too abstract to be of practical use for researchers exploring actual experiences as it is not easy for researchers to refrain from bringing their own interpretation of the world to the data (Oxley, 2016).

Although Husserlian theory, known as descriptive or transcendental phenomenology, accounts for IPA's commitment to reflection (Wagstaff et al., 2014) and trying to 'bracket' pre-conceptions (Smith et al., 2009), IPA does not attempt to define the very essence of a phenomenon but is less ambitious in its aim of capturing particular experiences as told by particular people (Smith et al., 2009). IPA connects most strongly with the hermeneutic phenomenology of Heidegger (1889-1976) who proposed that the closest we can get to reaching the essence of a phenomenon is through interpretation (Smith et al., 2009). This will be explored in more detail in the following section. Although IPA is concerned with exploring a phenomenon, it is primarily interested in making sense of a particular person's

[2] 'Bracketing' involves putting to one side one's everyway way of seeing and understanding the world in order to concentrate on the essence of the phenomenon (Langdridge, 2008).

experience of the phenomenon as well as how they make sense of it themselves (Eatough & Smith, 2017).

IPA draws upon other key principles of the contextualised, existential phenomenology of Heidegger (1927/1962), who conceived of the human being as a 'being-in-the-world' (*Dasein)* who is 'thrown into' a world made up of objects, relationships, and language (Smith et al., 2009). This also resonates with the work of Merleau-Ponty (1962), who emphasises the inextricable intertwining of the human being and the world ('Man is in the world, and only in the world does he know himself', p. xi). Sartre's philosophy also echoes this understanding of experience as unique to the person's relationship with the world, especially with regard to the influence of the social context in which we are embedded (Smith et al., 2009). IPA engages with this complex and nuanced understanding of experience, recognising the unique personal, social, and historical contexts which influence the meanings that we, as 'beings-in-the-world', attribute to our experience (Shinebourne, 2011). IPA research seeks to illuminate these unique understandings and meanings in the form of fine-grained, interpretative expositions (Murray & Wilde, 2020).

### 3.4.3. Hermeneutics

As well as adopting a phenomenological lens, IPA is influenced by the hermeneutic or interpretative tradition. Although hermeneutics is a much older philosophical movement than phenomenology, finding its origins in the exegesis of biblical texts (Eatough & Smith, 2017), Heidegger (1927/1962) connects both together. According to Heidegger, hermeneutics is a prerequisite to phenomenology. As phenomenology seeks meanings that may be covered or hidden by the phenomenon's 'mode of appearing', the interpretation of a text is a prerequisite and necessary stage to discover and unveil these meanings (Moran, 2000, p. 229, as cited in Smith et al., 2009). Heidegger also emphasised the nature of interpretation: as 'beings-in-the-world', we are inextricably linked to our presuppositions and we interpret new stimuli in light of this (Smith et al., 2009). 'Interpretation is grounded in something we have in advance – in a fore-having' (Heidegger, 1927/1962, p. 191). As a

result, ‘bracketing’ can never be achieved fully, although Heidegger suggests that its use should remain a priority (Smith et al., 2009).

In accordance with its name, IPA is an explicitly interpretative and phenomenological methodology. Shaped by hermeneutic phenomenology, IPA recognises the centrality of the researcher to analysis. The IPA researcher explores how a phenomenon appears (phenomenology) and facilitates and makes sense of this appearance (hermeneutics) (Smith et al., 2009).

IPA acknowledges that the researcher brings their ‘fore-structure’ to their interpretation of the participant’s experiences. Indeed, access to the participant’s lived experience hinges on the researcher’s preconceptions (Smith et al., 1999). Therefore, it is essential for the IPA researcher ‘to work out the fore-structures in terms of the things themselves’ (Heidegger, 1927/1962, p. 165), or as Finlay (2008, p. 17) understands it, ‘to critically and reflexively evaluate how these pre-understandings influence the research’. Reflexivity is considered in more detail at the end of the chapter.

It is also important to note that IPA draws on another key idea propounded by many hermeneutic theorists, including Schleiermacher (1838; 1998). The hermeneutic circle refers to the dynamic relationship between the whole and the parts (Smith et al., 2009). This concept can be used to capture the non-linear ‘method’ of IPA (Smith et al., 2009). It encourages IPA researchers to approach their data in an iterative and dynamic way. Moving back and forth through a range of different ways of approaching the data (e.g., looking at the whole in light of its parts, looking at the parts in light of the whole) can open up new understandings and perspectives for the researcher (Eatough & Smith, 2017).

### 3.4.4. Idiography

Idiography refers to a detailed focus on the individual and their lived experience of particular situations or events (Larkin et al., 2006). Rather than taking a ‘nomothetic’ approach to inquiry, which makes generalisations at a group level (Smith et al., 2009), IPA is

a strongly idiographic mode of inquiry, which instead enables statements to be made about a particular individual (Smith & Eatough, 2011). This foregrounds the unique nature of personal experience, which aligns with contextualised, existential ideas from phenomenology.

IPA's commitment to idiography can be seen in studies with a small number of cases, or even single case studies (Shinebourne, 2011). An in-depth, inductive analysis starts with a single participant's account and only moves on to the next account once a level of closure or 'gestalt' has been reached (Smith, 2004).

## 3.5. Addressing limitations of IPA

In building a rationale for the use of IPA as a research methodology, there are two fundamental criticisms that warrant brief consideration.

Willig (2008) notes that, like many forms of phenomenological research, IPA assumes - perhaps too easily - that language has representational validity i.e., that through language, participants are able to express the essence of the experience itself. Willig (2008) argues that, instead, language offers a way of *constructing* a particular version of an experience and criticises IPA for not adequately recognising the 'constitutive role' of language (p. 67).
In response to these criticisms, Smith et al. (2009) stress that IPA is compatible with social constructionism, although they acknowledge that IPA is less explicitly constructionist than discursive approaches. Nevertheless, IPA's aim to reveal a person's 'relatedness' to a phenomenon through exploring their understanding of the experience in their own culture, language, and locale (Smith et al., 2009) does recognise the integral role of language.

Willig (2008) goes on to question the ability of participants to use language in a way that adequately captures the subtleties and nuances of their experiences, leading her to cast doubt on the suitability of participants' accounts as a basis for phenomenological analysis. Smith et al. (2009) note that 'rich data' is a prerequisite to analysis. This in part stems from the ability of participants to speak in depth and at length about their experiences. Although

this is seen as elitist by some (Tuffour, 2017) and is claimed to reduce IPA's applicability as a research methodology (Willig, 2008), l am reminded of IPA's hermeneutic, idiographic, and contextual aim: not to distil the essence of an experience in the vein of descriptive phenomenology, but to capture particular experiences as told by particular people in their particular contexts (Smith et al., 2009).

## 3.6. Alternative approaches

Based on my philosophical assumptions, I considered several different qualitative approaches before choosing IPA, including thematic analysis, grounded theory, discursive approaches, and other phenomenological approaches. I document the reasons why they were not felt to be appropriate below, before concluding with a summary of my rationale for IPA.

### 3.6.1. Thematic analysis

Thematic analysis, although not tied to an epistemological position, has been described as a complement to constructionist paradigms (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The method can be used to identify, analyse and report patterns (referred to as 'themes') within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and offers a well-structured approach to organising data and findings (King, 2004). Furthermore, thematic analysis is a highly flexible tool that has been deemed to be more accessible for novice researchers (Nowell et al., 2017). However, the flexibility that thematic analysis offers can lead to a lack of coherent findings (Holloway & Todres, 2003). Braun and Clarke (2019) acknowledge that the rise of unreflexive and 'problematic' examples of thematic analysis (p. 590) prompted the generation of a new model – reflexive thematic analysis – in order to further clarify and delineate the approach. Reflexive thematic analysis emphasises the researcher's active role in producing knowledge (Byrne, 2021) and their 'reflective and thoughtful engagement with their data and their reflexive and thoughtful engagement with the analytic process' (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p.594). This new iteration would match well with the philosophical assumptions of the research and promote researcher reflexivity. However, Braun and Clarke (2006) note that thematic analysis can

sometimes have limited interpretative power beyond description. As the current research focused on exploring the meaning made of experiences of the ELSA role, thematic analysis was not deemed to be the most appropriate fit.

### 3.6.2. Grounded theory

Grounded theory approaches aim to generate theory of a particular phenomenon. Constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006) is recognised to be the most widely used version and offers a methodology with a clear epistemological position, 'repositioning the researcher as the author of a reconstruction of experience and meaning' (Mills et al., 2006, p. 26). This view of the researcher, along with the structured protocol that grounded approaches generally offer (Smith et al., 2009) were particularly attractive elements of the methodology. However, the current research aimed to develop an exploratory-level account of the personal meaning made of the experiences of the ELSA role in the context of the pandemic rather than a theoretical-level account of the impact of Covid-19 on the ELSA role. Grounded theory was therefore deemed not to be the most appropriate methodology.

### 3.6.3. Discursive approaches

Discursive approaches are broadly concerned with the role of language in the construction of social reality (Willig, 2008). According to Smith et al. (2009), discursive approaches can be separated into those that centre around power (after Foucault) and those that hold interaction as their primary interest (after Garfinkel and Sacks). Discursive approaches share a strong affinity to social constructionism, rendering them a compatible option in terms of my philosophical assumptions. In the context of the current research, discourse analysis would have offered a structured way of examining the role of language in describing the ELSA's experiences without making inferences, and with more of a focus on the interaction itself than the content of responses (Smith et al., 2009). Ultimately, however, the research question is interested in how participants make sense of their experience, rather than how participants use language to construct a particular account of their experience. Discursive approaches, therefore, were also deemed not to be the most appropriate fit.

### 3.6.4. Other phenomenological approaches

IPA is located within a family of approaches that draw on phenomenological psychology. Others within the family include the descriptive phenomenological method (Giorgi, 1985), and the descriptive 'lifeworld' approach (Ashworth, 2003). These approaches - which align closely with descriptive phenomenology – would be appropriate methodologies to explore the research question. However, I was drawn to the way in which IPA is shaped by a fuller range of phenomenological thinking, particularly Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenology. Like many other novice researchers, I was also drawn to the accessibility, flexibility, and applicability of IPA (Larkin et al., 2006) and the framework provided by Smith et al. (2009).

## 3.7. Summarising the rationale for IPA

Smith et al. (2009) suggest that choosing IPA as a methodology should be primarily due to its consistency with the epistemological positioning of the research question. As previously discussed (see *3.3. Philosophical assumptions of the research)*, IPA aligns with the philosophical assumptions of the research and offers an appropriate way of exploring the research question, which is concerned with the notion of 'experience' and the way in which individuals make sense of their experiences.

In addition, I also considered IPA to align well with my personal and professional values. IPA offers a naturalistic and flexible approach to interviewing, using active listening skills and gentle probing (Wagstaff et al., 2014). I considered the approach to be respectful and supportive to the individual as well as being complementary to my practice as a TEP. I was also attracted to the deep level of thoughtfulness that characterises IPA, and Van Manen's (1990) observation that 'we gather other peoples' experiences because they allow us to become more experienced ourselves' (p. 62) strongly resonated with my personal values.

Adopting an IPA stance to explore the research question also responds to the call for further IPA studies within educational psychology to add to the modest body of IPA research in education (Oxley, 2016). Opportunities to delve into individual experiences in more depth

offer educational psychologists (EPs) valuable ways of providing tailored and holistic support to stakeholders (Oxley, 2016) as well as providing insight and understanding for other individuals working and/or living through similar experiences (Farouk, 2014).

## 3.8. Sample and recruitment

In line with the idiographic approach of IPA, a small sample of four participants was recruited using opportunistic purposive sampling, as the priority of IPA is to 'do justice to each case' (Smith & Eatough, 2011, p. 5). Smith et al. (2009) suggest that a total of between four and ten interviews is appropriate for professional doctoral research, with larger datasets potentially reducing the time to reflect upon and analyse the data. The method of sampling used was purposive, in response to the suggestion that the best information is gathered from those who have knowledge and experience of the topic under investigation (Denscombe, 2014). I aimed to recruit a homogeneous sample by restricting my inclusion criteria to individuals from the same ELSA supervision group who had been working as an ELSA in a primary school context for over a year. By controlling for these factors, I aimed to closely define the parameters of the group and recruit participants for whom the research question would be salient (Smith & Eatough, 2011). This would support the examination of the 'psychological variability' within the group by analysing patterns of convergence and divergence (Smith et al., 2009, p. 50). As Smith et al. (2009) propose that participants should 'represent a perspective rather than a population' (p. 49), controlling for general population characteristics (e.g., age, gender) was therefore not deemed appropriate.

Initially, I considered using the network of EP colleagues within my Educational Psychology Service (EPS) to access potential participants. However, as a TEP, I had co-facilitated 3 half-termly ELSA supervision sessions for a particular supervision group throughout my training placement and decided to undertake opportunistic purposive sampling (as a result of my own professional contacts within the group), with a view to expanding my inclusion criteria to other supervision groups if recruitment difficulties occurred. As the quality of the data hinges on the ability of the interviewer to build rapport with the interviewee (Alderson, 2004), I thought that having a pre-established connection with the participants would

bolster rapport and help them feel more at ease, which would, in turn, help them to share their lived experiences. This choice was also made for pragmatic reasons, as I already had established channels of contact with the potential participants. However, the possible disadvantages of undertaking research linked to my own practice as a TEP must be acknowledged. As I had previous professional involvement with the participants, I was aware that potential participants may experience pressure to participate, and they may expect the interview to resemble supervision. Further disadvantages of purposive opportunistic sampling may include the possibility that a pre-established rapport may negatively impact the participants' ability to disclose authentic experiences and may increase the likelihood of socially desirable responses. In order to address this, I took steps to emphasise that the decision to participate would in no way influence participants' relationship with the Educational Psychology Service (EPS; see *Appendix D: Information sheet*), clarified the nature and boundaries of my researcher role at the beginning of each interview and stressed that there were no correct answers (see *Appendix H: Refined interview schedule*).

I initially contacted potential participants via email. As IPA is dependent on the participant's capacity to speak in depth and at length about their experiences, I initially thought to email those within the group who had regularly engaged with and contributed to supervision sessions, before then deciding to extend the invitation to others within the group. It is important to acknowledge the possible implications of only inviting those who appeared to be more comfortable sharing their experiences in supervision sessions. This may have limited the narratives of those less ready to share their experiences and seek support in a supervision setting. In total, three ELSAs expressed an interest in participating, by email. One of these ELSAs said her ELSA colleague working within the same school would also like to participate in the study. This fourth participant was therefore recruited via snowballing sampling. At this point, I decided to preserve the homogeneity of the group rather than to use referral sampling to recruit further participants from other contexts via EP colleagues. I also decided that limiting the sample to four participants would promote a more idiographic and hermeneutic approach to analysis as well as still allowing for points of convergence and divergence to be drawn between experiences.

In accordance with the study's inclusion criteria, all four participants had worked as ELSAs within primary school contexts in the same borough of the East Midlands for over a year.

Participants were provided with an information sheet (see *Appendix D: Information sheet*) which detailed the aims of the research, requirements of participation, and addressed ethical concerns, such as those pertaining to confidentiality and anonymity. Once the participants confirmed they were happy to participate, they indicated their consent by completing a consent form (*see Appendix E: Consent form*). All four participants who offered to take part were interviewed. In order to protect their anonymity, the participants were given pseudonyms. Throughout the study, they will be referred to by their pseudonyms of Louisa, Carolyn, Karen, and Rachel.

## 3.9. Data collection

### 3.9.1. Semi-structured interviews

Smith et al. (2009) note that 'IPA is best suited to a data collection approach which will invite participants to offer a rich, detailed, first-person account of their experiences' (p. 56). Data for IPA studies can be collected through diaries, focus groups, and interviews (Oxley, 2016). Unstructured interviews are guided by participants' priorities and allow an exploration of unexpected findings (Smith et al., 2009). In this sense, unstructured interviews complement the inductive nature of IPA. However, Smith et al. (2009) acknowledge the high level of skill that an unstructured approach to interviewing requires of researchers, and therefore do not advise novice IPA researchers with little experience to begin with this approach.

Like many IPA researchers, I chose to use individual, semi-structured, in-depth interviews. This approach enables a degree of structure within which pre-identified issues – such as the main research question - can be explored (Denscombe, 2014). It also provides the

researcher with the flexibility to enquire after 'unexpected turns' in the conversation (Kvale, 1996, p. 7) and encourages participants to expand on their answers (Coolican, 2004). The flexibility within this framework is essential as it enables the participant to talk about parts of their experience that have significance for them (Oxley, 2016). Referred to as a 'conversation with a purpose' (Smith et al., 2009, p. 57), I felt that the semi-structured interview would also provide the optimum framework for building an informal and relational approach with the participant. Throughout the interview process, I held in mind the vision of the IPA researcher offered by Eatough and Smith (2008, p. 188): as a traveller who 'wanders along with local inhabitants, asks questions that lead the subjects to tell their own stories of their lived world and converses with them in the original Latin meaning of conversation as 'wandering together with' (Kvale, 1996, p. 4).

### 3.9.2. Interview design

I drafted an initial interview schedule in line with the suggested process put forward by Smith et al. (2009, p. 61). On constructing my schedule, I was aware of the tendency of novice researchers to produce interview schedules that are 'too long, overly extensive and detailed and therefore constraining' (Hefferon & Gil-Rodriguez, 2011). I was also aware of the tendency to use questions to communicate the researcher's 'fore-structure' about the topic, which can begin structuring the data analysis before the interviews have even taken place (Brocki & Wearden, 2006). Consequently, I initially identified nine open-ended questions with accompanying prompts and held the intention of using them to broadly guide the first interview (see *Appendix G: Initial interview schedule*). The questions were designed to cover material pertinent to my research question, without directly asking the research question itself.

The initial interview schedule was refined through discussion with my supervisor before use (see *Appendix H: Refined interview schedule*). Upon reflection, I introduced a first question to capture the interviewee's experience of becoming an ELSA, considering it a means of allowing the interviewee to recount a descriptive event, which I hoped would help them feel at ease with speaking at length and allow them to begin to get a sense of the detail and

depth of response required (Smith et al., 2009). Equally, I felt that the question would help me to build rapport and trust with the interviewee, which is essential to IPA (Smith, 1995). It also felt appropriate to identify a more logical sequence for the schedule, and so the questions were altered to fall into a linear temporal structure (i.e., exploring the start of their experience as an ELSA, moving forwards to working in the context of the pandemic, before ending with exploring future hopes for the role). Upon further scrutiny of the questions, it is possible that my 'fore-structure' - knowing that previous literature indicates the ever-changing and expanding role of the ELSA - had influenced the construction of the question, *'Where do you think your role as an ELSA begins and ends?'*. Identifying that I needed to 'bracket' off this assumption, I removed this question and instead sought to explore the participants' views through a 'light-touch' question: *'How would you define the role of an ELSA?'*

The restrictions of the pandemic context meant that it was not possible to carry out the research in person. In order to respond to the need for researchers to explore the lived experiences of individuals facing this context (Lobe et al., 2020), all interviews were conducted online, using the platform of Microsoft Teams. Researchers have highlighted concerns in relation to the security and confidentiality of online methods of data collection (Lobe et al., 2020). These concerns are addressed in *3.11. Ethical considerations.*

### 3.9.3. Reflections on the pilot interview

This first interview was used to practice my interviewing techniques as an IPA researcher, to reflect on the interview process, and to explore whether the interview schedule was fit for purpose. I was particularly mindful of the delicate tension between 'guiding and being led' (Hefferon & Gil-Rodriguez, 2011). After conducting the interview, I asked the participant about the experience of the interview. As I had a pre-established rapport with the participant, it is possible that she may not have felt able to share her authentic views. The participant responded positively about the questions, though she expressed concern that she may not have got to the root of what I was asking. On reading the transcript, this concern may have been evidenced by the participant clarifying her understanding of the

question (e.g., 'do you mean…?'). Based on these reflections, I provided future participants with broad areas that may arise during the interview in advance to help them to reflect and prepare beforehand: how they came to the ELSA role; how it felt to be an ELSA at the beginning of lockdown, and in the following months up to the present day, and any opportunities or challenges that may have arisen for them in that time. In addition, I added further emphasis to my acknowledgement at the beginning of each subsequent interview that some of the questions I was going to ask may seem very broad, abstract, and possibly self-evident (Smith et al., 2009). I also offered reassurance that there were no correct responses. Instead, I stressed that this interview would offer time and space for them to share their experiences in as much detail as they would like to give.

After reading the transcript, it was apparent that, as an interviewer, I had drawn upon elements of an unstructured interview, enquiring after interesting areas and following 'unexpected turns' (Kvale, 1996), as well as using the interview schedule as a broad guide. Through supervision, I explored the value of changing my positioning as an IPA researcher towards the unstructured end of the continuum of interview styles, which would allow the participant to define the parameters of the topic and reduce the risk of only analysing topics that had been pre-identified in the schedule (Smith et al., 2009). On reflection, it was decided that keeping an interview schedule would support participants who may be more reserved about sharing their lived experiences (Smith et al., 2009). It would also help to support my confidence as a novice IPA researcher, whilst still allowing me to be flexible, reactive and elicit more detail and depth from the participants (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). It was felt that the linearity of the interview schedule appeared a logical and effective way of allowing the participant to tell their story in detail within an interview of approximately an hour. I also offered space for the participant to take the lead, being careful not to fall into the trap of jumping into silences too quickly (Smith et al., 2009). As a result of continuing with the same approach (i.e., using the same schedule as a guide and modifying questions based on participant responses), it was deemed appropriate to use the pilot interview as my first dataset.

Subsequent interviews lasted between 57 and 66 minutes. As the process for producing an interview schedule is iterative (Smith et al., 2009), I was aware of the importance of reflecting on the interview process after each interview to consider my role, including the suitability of my approach and the questions within the schedule. I used a reflective diary to do this (see *3.13. Reflexivity* for more details).

### 3.9.4. Transcription

All interviews were recorded using recording application software (Audacity) and on an audio recorder as a backup. Each interview was transcribed verbatim, with pseudonyms used in place of participant names and generic names used for identifiable pieces of information. I also included any non-verbal utterances, such as laughter, as I recognised that these features may influence my analysis. As IPA analysis does not require transcription of prosodic elements of speech (e.g., stress, intonation), these features were omitted (Smith & Eatough, 2011). Line numbers were inserted to help me locate information more easily. An example of a transcript prior to analysis can be found in *Appendix I: Example transcript extract.*

Transcribing the interviews signalled the beginning of my 'immersion' in the data and began to support my understanding of participants' experiences. For this reason, it felt important to complete the transcription process without any help from an external agency and/or software. I hoped that transcription would support my ability to keep the voice of the participant in mind through subsequent stages of analysis, which is thought to support a more complete analysis (Smith & Dunworth, 2003, p. 609).

## 3.10. Data analysis

### 3.10.1. Rationale for approach to analysis

IPA is an approach that can tolerate different analytical procedures and ways of presenting the data (Smith & Osborn, 2008). It has been acknowledged that there is no right or wrong way to conduct an IPA analysis (Smith et al., 2009), although typically, IPA analysis is an 'iterative and inductive cycle' during which a 'dialogue' is formed between the researcher, the coded data, and their psychological knowledge (Smith et al., 2009, p. 79). Many guides to conducting an IPA analysis have been produced by researchers, encompassing varying levels of analysis and ways of presenting this (Murray & Wilde, 2020). A heuristic framework of analysis was designed by Smith et al. (2009) to support the confidence of the novice researcher, helping them to become more deeply acquainted with the 'stance' from which to approach IPA analysis. With the support of a framework, the novice researcher is more likely to present a valid example of IPA. However, it could be argued that using a step-by-step approach to analysis risks limiting the researcher's creativity and the ability to follow 'unexpected paths' which can extend and deepen the analysis (Coyle, 2007). In response to this warning, I was careful to adopt the framework put forward by Smith et al. (2009) as a guide, as intended by the authors, rather than hold tightly to it as a prescriptive method of analysis.

### 3.10.2. Approach to analysis

The analytical process I followed, based on the guidelines suggested by Smith et al. (2009), is detailed below. The process aims to understand lived experience on an idiographic level, focusing first on an individual transcript 'to do justice to its individuality' (Smith et al., 2009), before moving towards an understanding based on the whole dataset. As a novice researcher, I followed the recommendation set out by Smith et al. (2009) to begin with the interview I found the most detailed, complex, and engaging.

It is important to note that this was an iterative process. An essential part of the analysis was revisiting and reflecting on previous stages in order to make sure that the 'integrity of what the participant had said has been preserved as far as possible' (Smith & Eatough, 2011, p. 15).

*1. Reading and re-reading*

I immersed myself in the data through repeated readings of the first transcript whilst listening to the audio recording, beginning the process of entering the participant's world (Oxley, 2016). Listening to the audio recording enabled me to hold the participant's voice in mind throughout the analysis process. It also helped me to note intonation and emphasis. During these initial readings, I recorded my immediate recollections of the interview in my research diary in order to attempt to 'bracket' them off. I searched the transcript for richer and more detailed sections, as well as contradictions and paradoxes.

*2. Initial noting*

I continued to familiarise myself with the data by engaging in a close, line-by-line analysis of the transcript, noting anything of interest at a very exploratory level. Oxley (2016) notes that these initial notes should be closely tied to the data. Smith et al. (2009) suggest there are different levels to exploratory notation. Firstly, descriptive comments are intended to be purely descriptive, with a focus on the content of the response. Linguistic comments consider how the participant uses language. Finally, conceptual comments interrogate the data in order to focus on the participant's overarching understanding of their experience. This level of coding draws more heavily on interpretation (Oxley, 2016) and employs more psychological terminology than the previous two levels.

I undertook the process of initial notation by first underlining anything within the transcript that appeared important to me, in the spirit of free textual analysis. I then went back to each part I had underlined and reflected on why I had underlined it, being mindful of the above categories of notation. Handwritten notes were made in the right-hand column of the transcript (see *Appendix J: Example of initial notations [Louisa]*).

*3. Developing emergent themes*

This stage of analysis moved on from working with the original transcript to working with the analysis generated by my initial exploratory notations (Oxley, 2016). With this shift, the volume of data reduces, but the complexity is maintained. As themes began to emerge from my own analysis, I sought to produce concise statements to represent these themes (see *Appendix K: Example list of emergent themes with accompanying quotations [Louisa]).*

*4. Searching for connections across emergent themes*

As I moved on, I worked with the names of the emergent themes, mapping, linking, and clustering them together in order to produce a 'structure' of connections within the participant's account. Oxley (2016) notes that this stage requires the most creativity from the researcher, as they consider how emergent themes cast light on each other (see *Appendix L: Example of clustered themes for individual participant [Louisa]).*

*5. Moving to the next case*

Smith (2004) advises only moving on to the next case once 'some degree of closure or gestalt has been achieved' (Smith, 2004, p. 41). When I felt this point had been reached for the first transcript, I then worked through each of the above steps for the remaining transcripts. I tried to 'bracket' off my assumptions based on analysis of the previous transcript(s) in a bid to protect the idiographic commitment of IPA.

*6. Looking for patterns across cases*

Once I had analysed each participant's transcript, I then began to seek connections across the individual transcripts. This stage yields a cross-case analysis that aims to tease out points of convergence and divergence available within the entire dataset (Murray & Wilde, 2020).

### 3.10.3. Narrative account

The process of IPA analysis includes the formal writing up of a narrative account (Smith & Eatough, 2011). The account is an interplay between the participant's experience in their own words, and the interpretations of the researcher, which should be clearly differentiated (Smith & Eatough, 2011). The account should present common elements experienced by the sample, whilst also prioritising and preserving the uniqueness of each participant (Smith, 2004).

## 3.11. Ethical considerations

The research was designed and conducted in line with the British Psychological Society Code of Human Research Ethics (BPS, 2018), the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), and the Data Protection Act (2018), along with the University of Nottingham's Code of Research Conduct and Research Ethics (2020). Ethical approval for the research was granted by the University of Nottingham's School of Psychology Ethics Committee in September (2020) (see *Appendix B: Ethical approval*). My application to the Ethics Committee was subsequently discussed and approved by the Senior Leadership Team of the EPS in the LA where the research was completed (September 2020). It should be noted that ethical research practice extends beyond the scrutiny of ethics committees (Smith et al., 2009) and, in line with the centrality of reflection and reflexivity, I was mindful to maintain a 'continually reflexive attitude' (Oxley, 2016, p. 56) throughout data collection and analysis.

### 3.11.1. Informed consent and right to withdraw

Participants were provided with information via email about the research in a recruitment letter (*Appendix C: Recruitment letter*) followed by a participant information sheet (*Appendix D: Information sheet*) once they had expressed an initial interest in participating in the study. Informed written consent was gained from every participant involved in the study prior to the interview (*Appendix E: Consent form*). With purposive sampling comes the risk that participants may feel obliged to participate and/or may feel that their professional role will be impacted if they choose not to participate. In order to minimize this risk, the right not to participate and the right to withdraw without any consequences was

emphasized in the recruitment letter, the participant information sheet, and the debrief sheet (*Appendix F: Debrief sheet*). In addition, participants were reminded of their right to withdraw at the beginning of the interview (*Appendix H: Refined interview schedule*).

### 3.11.2. Confidentiality and anonymity

Pseudonyms were used in place of participant names and generic names were used for any places mentioned or service names to ensure anonymity. Any personal details were removed from the transcript to protect identities. In the information sheet, participants were made aware that they may recognise some of their anonymised answers in the research study.

At the beginning of the interview, participants were reminded not to disclose identifiable details of children and young people they have worked with. At the end of the interview, participants were offered the opportunity to read through and amend their responses after the interview had been transcribed in order to ensure that they had the chance to remove any details that may have presented ethical concerns to them. Of the sample of four participants, one participant chose to take up this opportunity to review the transcript of the interview and did not make any amendments.

As this research was conducted online, participants were made aware of the potential risk of intrusion by outside agents, for example through hacking, and therefore the possibility of being identified. Data were audio-recorded and stored in accordance with the Data Protection Act (2018).

### 3.11.3. Protection from potential harm

In order to begin to address the potential for psychological harm, participants were made fully aware of the aim and topic focus of the research via the recruitment letter (see *Appendix C: Recruitment letter*) and participant information sheet (see *Appendix D:*

*Information sheet)* so that they were able to make an informed judgement about whether to engage in participation. At the beginning of the interview, I emphasised to participants that they should only share what they feel is emotionally safe to do so. Throughout the interview, I was mindful of paying close attention to the participant's mood and manner in order to notice any changes that may indicate signs of stress or anxiety. Once the interview had finished, participants had an opportunity to reflect upon the interview process. After the interview, a debrief letter was sent to participants via email to remind participants of my contact details in case of any further questions, and to signpost to support services that are available to the participant in the instance where they feel that further support would be of benefit to them.

## 3.12. Quality issues in IPA research

Smith (2011) signals the importance of taking quality and validity issues in qualitative research seriously. Various guidelines have been designed to assess the quality of qualitative research in response to its incompatibility with traditional, universal methods of evaluation (Yardley, 2000). Smith et al. (2009) point to Yardley (2000, 2008) and Elliott et al. (1999) as useful frameworks for evaluation. They can be used irrespective of the theoretical orientation of the qualitative study (Shinebourne, 2011).

Mindful of the importance of demonstrating the quality of IPA research, I adopted Yardley's (2000) work as a framework to evaluate my own practice as a researcher and to stimulate reflection and reflexivity throughout the research process. Whilst holding to this framework, I also heeded the warning given by Elliott et al. (1999), who recognised that rigidly applying guidelines for good practice risks being 'fundamentally at odds with the spirit of qualitative research' (p. 225).

Yardley (2000) identifies four key dimensions for evaluating quality in research: sensitivity to context; commitment and rigour; transparency and coherence; and impact and importance. I offer a brief consideration of these dimensions here, before using these guidelines as a framework for reflection in *Chapter 5. Discussion.*

*Sensitivity to context* refers to the researcher's sensitivity to the socio-political context in which the study is undertaken, the existing literature related to the topic, and the information given by the participants (Yardley, 2000).

*Commitment and rigour* can be demonstrated through a high level of attentiveness to the participant during the interview, and to the data during analysis, as well as through the appropriateness of the sample recruited and the 'completeness' of the analysis (Smith et al., 2009).

*Transparency and coherence* as a quality marker can be evident in a clear written description of each stage of the research process, and the study's alignment with its underlying principles (Smith et al., 2009).

*Impact and importance* refers to whether the reader is reading something of interest or use to them, according to Yardley (2000).

## 3.13. Reflexivity

Within IPA research, it is important to emphasise the central role of reflexivity. IPA accepts that the researcher brings their preconceptions, values, experiences (i.e., their 'fore-structure') to their interpretative activity. As a result, the researcher must demonstrate a critical self-awareness of their understanding of their 'fore-structure'. The researcher is tasked with reigning in their assumptions and interrogating them, whilst also remaining focused on the topic of analysis (Finlay, 2008). This self-awareness is embraced as a key process whereby a researcher stamps their identity upon a study (Wagstaff et al., 2014).

### 3.13.1. Reflective diary

Horrigan-Kelly et al. (2016) distil what reflexivity in IPA might look like on a practical level, noting the importance of examining experiences and knowledge that may act as barriers to deeper exploration during the interview. In order to support my commitment to reflexive practice, I followed Oxley's (2016) advice to keep a reflective diary in order to give voice to my thoughts and feelings throughout the research journey. I captured my reflections before and after each interview, which enabled me to begin to reflect on how my 'fore-structure' may likely shape – or may have shaped – each interview. Excerpts of the research diary are embedded within *Chapter 4. Findings* in order to shed light on my experience of the research process.

### 3.13.2. Position of the researcher

Horrigan-Kelly et al. (2016) also note that reflexivity may involve exploring the influences that caused the researcher to arrive at the research question. My journey into this research area began when my host LA Educational Psychology Service offered me the opportunity to begin supervising a group of ELSAs in September 2019. Prior to this, my knowledge of the ELSA role stemmed from my attendance at an ELSA training day (June 2019) and from an interview with an ELSA (March 2019). Facilitating supervisions of ELSAs virtually after the national closure of schools to most pupils provided me with a growing awareness of ELSAs' experiences of the role in the context of the pandemic. The unique opportunities and challenges of the role were highlighted to me. Throughout the research process, I have continued to facilitate ELSA supervisions, and I have remained mindful of the distinction between my role as a researcher and my role as a TEP.

# 4. Findings

## 4.1. Introduction

This chapter presents a narrative account of the IPA of ELSAs' experiences of the role in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. Four superordinate themes are presented: *stepping up, stepping out; having time and space; living through challenge*, and *knowing worth.* The grouping of superordinate themes and subordinate themes can be seen in Table 4.1.

**Table 4.1.**

*Superordinate Themes and Subordinate Themes Identified for the Group*

| **Superordinate themes** | **Subordinate themes** |
|---|---|
| Stepping up, stepping out | Responding to need |
| | Reaching out |
| Having time and space | Expanding the role |
| | Being led by the child |
| Living through challenge | Holding fears |
| | Working within constraints |
| Knowing worth | Feeling closely supported |
| | Feeling validated |

The focus of this chapter is given to a detailed analysis of these superordinate themes. Although analysis revealed these shared themes, the participants' experiential accounts were distinctive and unique. Therefore, to honour the idiographic commitment of IPA, this chapter begins with a brief presentation of the themes identified for each participant. A brief interpretative commentary is offered to provide context to the reader and set the scene for subsequent analysis of shared themes. Descriptive information (i.e., demographic information about the participants and the settings in which they work) is kept to a minimum to preserve the anonymity of the participants. It was deemed that in order to

further preserve anonymity, the autobiographical information gathered by the first interview question *('Can you tell me about how you came to be an ELSA?'*), which was intended to help the participant feel at ease and enable them to understand the depth and detail required by an IPA interview, was not included for analysis.

It is important to acknowledge that, as IPA is inherently interpretative, the interpretations that follow are one possible reading of the views expressed. Claims made at a group level are, therefore, more cautious in tone when connecting ideas. The analysis presents my attempts to make sense of the sense-making activities of participants (Smith et al., 2009).

Throughout this chapter, transcript extracts are italicised and followed by the line number in brackets. Ellipses in square brackets i.e., […] are employed to represent words that have been omitted from the extract. Necessary contextual information is also inserted in square brackets to support the reader's understanding.

As discussed in *3.13.1. Reflective diary*, the interpretation of findings is interspersed with excerpts from my research diary as a way of offering reflections of my experience as a novice IPA researcher.

## 4.2. Presentation of individual themes

### 4.2.1. Louisa

At the time of the interview, Louisa had been practising as an ELSA for approximately two years in a smaller than the average-size primary school in a rural area. Louisa was the only ELSA working in the setting at that time. Prior to ELSA training, Louisa had noticed that in her TA role, she had naturally begun to offer emotional support to pupils. She raised her need for support to the leadership in school and emphasised her passion for mental health. As a result, she was '*the one that was picked'* (25) for the role when the opportunity for training arose.

Analysis of the interview with Louisa highlighted six superordinate themes related to her lived experience of the ELSA role. Each superordinate theme had two or three subordinate themes (please refer to *Appendix J: Example of initial notations; Appendix K: Example list of emergent themes with accompanying quotations;* and *Appendix L: Example of clustered themes for individual participant* for an audit trail for Louisa). Table 4.2. details the key themes identified for Louisa.

**Table 4.2.**

*Superordinate Themes and Subordinate Themes Identified for Louisa*

| **Superordinate themes** | **Subordinate themes** |
|---|---|
| The time is now | Stepping up |
| | Space to help |
| | The Zeitgeist |
| Expansion into new territory | Going above and beyond |
| | New opportunities |
| Building connection | Building connection |
| Feeling an affinity with the role | Fitting the ELSA mould |
| | Protecting the role |
| Acknowledging challenge | Experiencing opposition |
| | Working within constraints |
| Knowing worth | Feeling valued by others |
| | Boosted confidence |

*The time is now*

Throughout the pandemic context, Louisa saw and sought opportunity: for action, for connection, and for creativity. Her proactive approach to the role was striking – other than being '*assigned'* a list of families to contact (219), Louisa's role was attuned to responding to the needs of her school community proactively and intuitively (e.g., setting up a webpage dedicated to emotional wellbeing). This saw her support the needs of those in school, such

as the headteacher, staff, children, as well as parents and families at home. She noted the space the context gave her to do this: *'it was a time for ELSAs to […] go 'yey, I can help! (laughs) in a way that perhaps you, you can't always because you're constrained within the normal working week'* (340-343).

*Expansion into new territory*

Louisa's proactive approach to the role saw her experience of the role expand *'above and beyond'* (296) her previous ELSA work. The *'really different circumstances'* (309) presented Louisa with new opportunities and new responsibilities. Louisa emphasised the opportunity the pandemic context presented: *'it was a time when things were turned on their head but actually you could approach things a bit differently'* (715-717).

*Building connection*

Louisa's account emphasises the value of connection with families in her community in the pandemic context. Through talking to families *'on a daily basis*' (32), Louisa explained how she was able to *'really connect'* (320) and *'really bond'* (290) with parents on the phone. It seemed that, for Louisa, this played to her strengths as an ELSA: *'I think I'm just able to connect and kind of like, I sit there and think 'I get it''* (1029-130). It also led to a sense of satisfaction in the role: *'I actually really enjoyed it and had some lovely conversations with them… with families'* (320-321).

*Feeling an affinity with the role*

The privilege Louisa felt towards the role was palpable throughout the interview; through her strong belief in the relevance and value of ELSA work, her deep sense of reward from seeing children respond and flourish and her dreams for future possibilities in her ELSA role. Louisa's affinity with and attachment to the role was captured by the metaphor: *'it's kind of like my baby'* (995). The sense of ownership of and pride towards the role further came through when Louisa described how she was increasingly able to '*stick up'* (499) for the role in contexts where a minority of teachers questioned its effectiveness.

*Acknowledging challenge*

The '*hurdles and walls'* (1105) Louisa faced also extended to practical constraints. Prior to March 2020, for example, Louisa reported being allocated just one hour a week for 1:1 ELSA work, although this appeared to be much more flexible until September 2020. Louisa's empathy for staff decision-making within a tight school budget was held in fine tension with her sincere desire to see more time given to ELSA within school.

*Knowing worth*

Despite the constraints Louisa experienced, it appeared, for Louisa, that the role in the context of the pandemic brought personal growth *('I really gained a lot of confidence'*; 317-318) through pursuing new opportunities and new connections in her community. It also served to remind her of the poignance and worth of her role ('*that sense of feeling that this is important […] emotional wellbeing, mental health – it is important';* 1061-1065).

**Excerpt from research diary (24.3.21):**

<u>On analysing the first transcript:</u> 'I'm enjoying the creativity that close line-by-line analysis affords. Writing down fresh thoughts and ideas whenever I revisit the text is an invigorating experience and makes the process feel dynamic and 'alive'. Interrogating the text at a conceptual level, knowing that my interpretations are encouraged, feels particularly liberating. Given the richness of this text, with all its nuance, poignance and points of interest, I understand the merit of a single-case IPA study.

This experience is also providing me with my first opportunity to practise the 'playfulness and imagination' required for successful analyses (Smith et al., 2009, p. 40). As I thought about Louisa's experience - the 'expansion' from new

opportunities in new contexts, along with the 'closing in' brought by new and improved connections with those around her - I was reminded of the Hoberman sphere, the isokinetic ball structure that can expand but can also contract by folding down into a fraction of its expanded size. I'm enjoying the creativity of this, but it causes me to reflect: does this illumine or impose? Does this say more about the participant or more about me?

At the same time, I am experiencing an uncomfortable shift from 'listener' to 'interpreter'. I was drawn to the platform that IPA research gives to its participants, and my experience of the interviews was defined by active listening, gently guiding, but ultimately giving space for the participant to share what they felt was important to them. The shift to interpretation feels worrying – am I still listening? Does my interpretation remain close to the transcript? This concern drives me back to the earlier stages of analysis to check my notes and revise emergent themes. I feel that the iterative nature of analysis is key to supporting the rigour of IPA and my feelings of concern – although uncomfortable – are supportive to this process.'

### 4.2.2. Carolyn

At the time of interview, Carolyn had been working as an ELSA for approximately two years in a smaller than average-size primary school in an urban area. She was one of two ELSAs working within the setting at that time. Analysis of the interview with Carolyn highlighted five superordinate themes related to her lived experience of the ELSA role. Each superordinate theme had two subordinate themes. Please refer to Table 4.3. for a summary of themes identified for Carolyn.

**Table 4.3.**

*Superordinate Themes and Subordinate Themes Identified for Carolyn*

| Superordinate themes | Subordinate themes |
|---|---|
| Moving forward | Growing the role |
| | Knowing change |
| A freeing time | The pressure is off |
| | Time to talk |
| Supporting the school community | Above and beyond |
| | Checking in |
| Business as usual | Nothing new |
| | Untouched by the pandemic |
| Feeling upheld | An established part of the school |
| | Closely supported |

*Moving forward*

The headteacher had mentioned the ELSA course to her in a conversation, and Carolyn expressed her interest. She explained the appeal: *'it was a new opportunity for me, to myself. Another avenue to learn and gain experiences and something else to do! And I get bored if I keep standing still'* (15-18). A sense of a 'forward momentum' was apparent at other points in Carolyn's interview: for example, in her attitude towards change and transition in the context of the pandemic ('*I just take it in my stride'*; 485) and her desire to further the role ('*we've tried to extend it by doing, like, mental health awareness, training and things like that'*; 606-609).

*A freeing time*

In contrast to this, Carolyn's role in the context of the pandemic felt largely characterised by a rare chance to slow down and enjoy time in school with the children without the usual pressures or demands. This new freedom also translated to more time for ELSA work. Whilst

typically, Carolyn indicated that she had one afternoon per week for her role, during the pandemic she had permission to use her time freely (*'the Head… has said you could use as much of those two days for ELSA as needed';* 436-437).

*Supporting the school community*

More time for the ELSA role enabled Carolyn to check in with children she had previously worked with in an ELSA capacity, offer ELSA support to other children in school, offer virtual ELSA sessions to a child via Zoom, and support parents. For example, Carolyn explained: *'I spent a lot of time through the lockdown talking to him [a pupil] and his mum […] which was a new thing for me to do'* (208-211). For Carolyn, the quality of time and interaction with children as well as parents appeared to be of particular importance, and the increased freedom meant that she could be guided by the child's needs.

*Business as usual*

According to Carolyn, the challenges of the role were unchanged by the pandemic. She reported: *'my biggest challenge […] the thing that… bothered me most as an ELSA is how many children… haven't got a place that they call home'* (502-504). From the full return to school in September, it appeared that the legacy of the pandemic seemed to be manifest only in the wearing of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). Of her experience of the role at the time of interview, Carolyn noted: '*I don't feel that it's different now to what it was before lockdown. I feel that I've gone back to how we were'* (386-388). There was a marked emphasis in Carolyn's account between the anticipated effects of the pandemic and how this played out in reality: *'I know our Head was concerned of the effect it would have on our children, and I think, well, everybody was weren't they, but it's not had the impact on the children that – the negative impact that I thought it would'* (154-156).

*Feeling upheld*

Carolyn's gratitude for the way in which others supported and valued the ELSA role prior to and throughout the pandemic context was particularly striking. She noted: *'I'm so pleased that the Head […] has got the trust in me to do the role and… and… it makes me feel valued'* (669-671). This was also indicated by the way in which teaching staff recognise the expertise of the ELSA role within school: *'quite a few teachers ask us […] what do we think? What can we suggest?'* (599-601).

### 4.2.3. Karen

At the time of interview, Karen had been working as an ELSA for approximately eighteen months in a smaller than average-size primary school in an urban area. She was one of two ELSAs working within the setting at that time. Karen expressed her interest in training to be an ELSA to the headteacher after it was mentioned to her, and Karen's motivation to '*enhance the role'* (22; 803) by pursuing any opportunity for new knowledge or experience bookended her interview. Analysis of the interview with Karen highlighted five superordinate themes related to her lived experience of the ELSA role. Each superordinate theme had one or two subordinate themes. Please refer to Table 4.4. for a summary of themes identified for Karen.

**Table 4.4.**

*Superordinate Themes and Subordinate Themes Identified for Karen*

| **Superordinate themes** | **Subordinate themes** |
|---|---|
| Holding on to success | The reward of the role |
| | Coming back to positive outcomes |
| Fearing the unknown | Carrying worry for the children |
| | Carrying worry for self |
| Being led | Deferring to the headteacher |
| | Responding to the child's leading |
| Assuaging fears | Nothing new |
| | Reassurance of returning |
| A shared role | A shared role |

*Holding on to success*

The sense of reward and value that the ELSA role brought to Karen was tangible throughout the interview. Regular references were made to the positive outcomes of the children she had worked with throughout the pandemic context, and language such as '*my success story'* (112) was used to convey a sense of her pride. She summarises it: '*I want a better word than positive (pause). I can't tell you how we feel about this role, you know?*' (728-730).

*Fearing the unknown*

Karen's depth of passion for the role was matched by the sincerity of her worry for the children when schools first closed in March 2020. Prior to this, Karen was being allocated approximately one afternoon a week for her role and was regularly working with three children; two of whom had been receiving ELSA support for eighteen months. Karen spoke in great depth about the experiences of these two children and her experiential account centres around their stories, conveying a deep sense of investment (*'I can't tell you how… over the moon, I am with him [yes] you know, for him really'*; 447-448). The depth of Karen's fear saw her focus and commit to what she knew in order to protect the children and herself, with safety remaining a key priority *('it was just making sure that all children are kept safe, myself, you know, I kept myself safe'*; 842-844).

*Being led*

Karen's fear about the effect of suddenly stopping ELSA provision on these children saw her approach the headteacher for direction and guidance about how she might continue her ELSA role. She indicated: *'once the Head said we could ring or I was able to see that child in school, then I think that made me feel better in myself*' (827-829). Her experience of being guided was also indicated by her approach to ELSA work with children: *'I just listen, I don't do a lot of work with them [the children] […] it's mainly just letting them talk'* (306-309).

*Assuaging fears*

Karen's account of the ELSA role in the pandemic context returned frequently to the reassurance felt when *'the children came back into school… and the role started back up again'* (598-600). Despite her fears, she also emphasised the way in which the role stayed the same. For example, on talking about supporting a pupil throughout lockdown, Karen noted: *'well, it was really the same'* (365).

*A shared role*

For Karen, it seemed that her professional identity as an ELSA was experienced conjointly with her ELSA colleague. Throughout the interview, Karen often spoke on behalf of them both ('*we've just taken it [the role] and run with it',* 915) and referenced the shared qualities and mutual support that defined their relationship *('it's just knowing that [the other ELSA] is there, you know, supporting me and she's – I'm the same for her*'; 772-774).

### 4.2.4. Rachel

At the time of interview, Rachel was one of two ELSAs working in a larger than average-size primary school in an urban area. It was apparent that Rachel's role as an ELSA was a natural progression from a rich history of offering pastoral support to children in school. She explained that her ELSA training had been a natural next step on from the pastoral TA role she had begun several years before. Analysis of the interview with Rachel highlighted five superordinate themes related to her lived experience of the ELSA role. Each superordinate theme had one or two subordinate themes. Please refer to Table 4.5. for a summary of themes identified for Rachel.

**Table 4.5.**

*Superordinate Themes and Subordinate Themes Identified for Rachel*

| **Superordinate themes** | **Subordinate themes** |
|---|---|
| Into action | Stepping up |
| | Being part of a collective |
| The same mission via different means | The same mission via different means |
| Dealing with unknowns | The importance of knowledge |
| | Not being able to see |
| Reaching out | Reaching out |
| Feeling the cost | Knowing loss |
| | Working within constraints |

*Into action*

As the school closed, Rachel's account was characterised by a sense of springing into collective action with language such as '*enlisting'* (273) and repeated use of the phrase '*what we did was'* (e.g., 274). It appeared that Rachel felt busier than ever and was driven by a natural concern for the children: '*at first there was a lot of running around'* (295); '*it was very much just non-stop phone calling really for us'* (314-315). This extensive work of supporting families throughout school closures was represented by a '*massive folder*' (303) which Rachel looked at during the interview in disbelief: '*I mean I'm looking at it and I'm thinking I can't believe we did all that'* (525-526).

*Dealing with unknowns*

Prior to March 2020, Rachel's role was entirely dedicated to pastoral work, providing ELSA support as well as holding safeguarding responsibilities within the school. From the beginning of her interview, Rachel's '*holistic approach'* to working (19) was very clear, with many references to close working with parents, the SENCo, as well as other external agencies. This approach, coupled with her experience, indicated an extensive knowledge of

families within the school community. This seemed important to her: *'knowledge is key'* (1264). It was understandable, therefore, that Rachel's experience of the role in the context of the pandemic involved a sense of fear around not being able to know what was going on: '*I felt very much like, what about all these kids that we have no idea if they're being looked after properly?'* (588-561). She further explained: *'I sort of worried about people that might have been having a rough time and we didn't know'* (613-616).

*Reaching out*

Rachel's experience of the ELSA role in the pandemic context was therefore characterised by attempts to reach out to families. She sent notes and letters to children receiving ELSA support, and supported parents via phone calls: *'a lot of it was like it's teaching, telling parents as well not to be too hard on themselves'* (539-540). Rachel explained the challenges of phone contact: '*some of the ones you know that you're the keenest to get hold of, you know, you really struggled [to reach]'* (559-562).

*The same mission via different means*

Rachel described her approach to the ELSA role in the pandemic context as involving a high level of adaptability: *'you're trying to support them [the children] in the same way as you always would be - you're having to constantly adapt what you're doing to what's happening in the world'* (938-941). Rachel's role in the context of the pandemic was multi-faceted: '*so you found yourself wearing a number of hats really'* (492-493). The scope of the role appeared to be extensive, with Rachel identifying times where her concern for the children saw her go above and beyond her previous role.

*Feeling the cost*

Beyond the safety and wellbeing of the children, Rachel's concern also extended to their loss of opportunity for new experiences: *'there's still loads of stuff missing isn't there, for all these children - nothing is normal for them, at all'* (909-911). Rachel also explained the *'real challenge'* (754) of experiencing an outbreak of Covid-19 in the school setting.

**Excerpt from research diary (12.4.21):**

On analysing the subsequent transcripts: 'I'm beginning to be concerned about the consequences of interviewing participants in a 'professional' capacity for an IPA study. The final transcript especially (belonging to Rachel) has made me reflect on possible distinctions between our 'professional' and 'personal' selves and how this may manifest itself in the way we speak about our experiences. In this last transcript, for instance, the participant uses the pronoun 'we' rather than 'I' throughout her responses, giving the sense of speaking on behalf of her colleagues and/or school community rather than for herself. What does this mean for my research? IPA is ultimately interested in 'identity in all its guises, manifestations, and complexities' (Smith, 2004, p. 49), and this study is exploring experience through a 'professional' lens. Continued reflection around how we might present our 'professional' selves and experiences seems important to me.'

## 4.3. Presentation of superordinate themes

Through a combined analysis of participants' individual themes, four shared superordinate themes were highlighted: *stepping up, stepping out*; *having time and space*; *living through challenge*, and *knowing worth*. For the purposes of the present study, related themes from three or more participants were deemed to be a shared superordinate theme. Inter-related subordinate themes were specified to capture different expressions of the superordinate theme. For further details of the combined analysis, please see *Appendix M: Emergence of shared superordinate themes.*

The superordinate themes and their inter-related subordinate themes are presented at the beginning of the chapter, in line with guidance by Smith et al. (2009; see *4.1. Introduction* for Table 4.1: *Superordinate Themes and Subordinate Themes Identified for the Group)*. The transcript extracts that have been used to illumine each subordinate theme have been chosen because they are felt to be salient expressions of the theme in question. For full lists of quotations for each theme, please refer to *Appendix N: Lists of quotations for shared superordinate themes.*

**Excerpts from research diary (25.4.21; 28.4.21):**

On mapping connections between transcripts: 'To me, moving from the particular to the shared feels contrary to how I have understood the ethos of IPA i.e., as a methodology committed to idiography. Following the guidance from Smith et al. (2009) has seen me analyse each transcript on its own terms, trying as much as possible to 'bracket' off my preconceptions from previous analyses to 'do justice' to the individuality of each participant (p. 100). This commitment to the individual has strongly resonated with my values as a novice researcher. Mapping connections between transcripts feels like a 'jolt' and I'm reticent to try and move beyond the particular to higher-order constructs. Smith et al. (2009) recognise that this stage may involve a 'reconfiguring and relabelling of themes' (p. 101). After I have endeavoured to analyse each transcript on its own terms, relabelling themes in relation to others seems to undo or unravel IPA's commitment to idiography. At the same time, a presentation of four separate single case studies is beyond the scope of this research, and more importantly, I do not believe it to be in alignment with IPA. So then, in building a cross-case analysis, how do I endeavour to best protect the idiographic within the shared?'

Upon writing the analysis: 'Deciding the point at which to begin writing up the analysis of shared superordinate themes is not at all self-evident. I do not sense the distinction between the process of analysis and the writing up of findings, as implied by some IPA studies (e.g., 'Following the completion of a systematic case-by-case analysis, five superordinate themes emerged': Crowley, 2019, p. 170). My current experience is still defined by the movement and elasticity of the data, which is quite an unnerving feeling. I am acknowledging my extremely misplaced hopes of an experience of analysis reminiscent of a game of Tetris i.e., defined by finding pieces that might 'click' satisfyingly together. The analogy used by Smith et al. (2009) of a magnet attracting other pieces implies similarly that I might expect there to be an undeniable and natural 'fit' between themes. Given my immersion in the data and my appreciation for the richness of each experiential account, I realise that a 'straightforward' experience of analysis would likely risk oversimplifying the complexity and nuance of themes. The experience of analysis for me has been more like working with a kaleidoscope. As I begin the analysis, I can see a wonderfully rich array of colours through the lens, but the shapes are disparate and jumbled. As I turn the lens, the colours and shapes begin to come together in ever-changing reconfigurations and patterns. The lens is still turning as I consider: does this configuration bring out the best in each participant? Does this frame capture the richness and beauty of the data? I am trying to reconcile myself to begin writing without 'setting' the frame and I'm encouraging myself to continue 'trying out' slightly different frames throughout the writing process. Should I even be writing the analysis using the present/present continuous tense to convey the ongoing dynamism of the data? (e.g., *'four themes are emerging'*). I think this analogy conveys the extent to which IPA feels like a strongly interpretative endeavour.'

## 4.4. Superordinate theme 1: *Stepping up, stepping out*

This superordinate theme outlines the ways in which participants acted to support the needs of the school community in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. It is comprised of two subordinate themes: *responding to need* and *reaching out.*

### 4.4.1. *Responding to need*

Participants reported ways in which they responded to the needs of their school communities during the initial period of school closures (i.e., from March 2020 until June 2020). For all participants, this involved supporting vulnerable children and children of key workers in the school setting, including the provision of one-to-one ELSA support. For most participants, offering remote ELSA support to children at home also formed part of their experience. Responding to the needs of the school community saw participants go *'above and beyond the role'* (Louisa: 297) to meet the practical and pastoral needs of families staying at home, as well as those of their colleagues within school.

Two participants perceived a need for a proactive approach. Louisa quickly recognised the skills she had and the part she could play: '*I felt like I was in a position to be able to help'* (706). There is a sense in Louisa's account that she felt 'primed' for a pandemic context, with her skills making her a valuable part of the school community: '*yeh, I felt like, um, it was a time for ELSAs to come alive, almost (laughs) and go 'yay, I can help!' (laughs)* (340). The metaphor of coming '*alive'* evokes a sense of awakening and invigoration.

Louisa's proactive approach to the role was striking – other than being '*assigned'* a list of families to contact (219), Louisa's role appeared to be largely self-directed and influenced by her sense of need within the school community. She described how she saw a need for a school webpage dedicated to emotional wellbeing and reported the headteacher's response:

> *'he – the headteacher did personally thank me for that [the website] and said 'I've always wanted something like that' he said, 'and I've just never known how to go about it! (laughs)*

*and then I just came along and just sort of said 'can I do this please?' (laughs) so he was really pleased about that'* (407-412).

Like Louisa, Rachel's account of the role was characterised by action, but this appeared to be experienced collectively, together with her fellow ELSA and the SENCo. Rachel described her experience of the initial weeks following school closures:

'*I just spent the whole time on the phone - so what we did was set up a system where we did welfare calls all the time between myself [the other ELSA], and the SENCo. So, we did, erm… we set - you know, we would touch base, we would see how they were coping with - seeing if they could access the work, so it was a lot of - at first there was a lot of running around, you know, do they need a work pack? Do they need this? So, it was all about communication and touching in - touching base with children that were struggling at home'* (286-299).

The emphatic language throughout Rachel's account (e.g., *'the whole time', 'all the time'*) highlights the sense of busyness and action that characterised Rachel's experience of the role. The *'non-stop phone calling'* (313) was driven by a natural concern for the children and saw Rachel work with others in the school to respond to the pastoral and practical needs of families.

Karen's response involved first seeking direction and guidance before acting. Her worries for the children who had suddenly stopped receiving ELSA provision saw her *'approach the Head'* (477) for direction regarding what she should do. She described her experience:

*'and once the Head said we could ring or I was able to see that child in school, then I think that made me feel better in myself… because, you know, in the back of my mind, I was thinking, you know, what is going to happen to those children?'* (827-831).

### 4.4.2. *Reaching out*

For participants, the ELSA role in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic involved forging wider and deeper connections. Three participants reported a natural shift from supporting children to supporting parents by reaching out on the phone (Louisa and Rachel) or every morning at the school gates (Carolyn).

Rachel described her experience of offering support and encouragement to parents, deploying her ELSA skills in a new context:

> *'a lot of it ended up talking to parents of how they could cope with it really, you know a lot of stuff we would send out would be almost like saying… to the parents that you're doing a great job, don't try and do too much, just try and do this much work a day, so a lot of it was like meeting parents' needs dealing with lockdown as well, so you found yourself wearing a number of hats really'* (484-493).

As indicated by the metaphor of *'wearing a number of hats'*, it appears that Rachel's focus of support broadened to parents and families in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. Louisa's account echoed this new dimension of the role:

> *'so, it was sort of… dealing with, still playing the ELSA role in a way but dealing with different things and actually to the point where there were a couple of phone calls with parents who actually got upset on the phone, um, because they were feeling overwhelmed and pressure supporting them as well at a time when they were finding it difficult*' (257-264).

Louisa described how the pastoral support she offered to parents over the phone also had benefits for her. The following extract suggests that reaching out to parents may have fulfilled a need for connection in her also:

> *'she, she really appreciated it, and we really bonded in that phone call, and at the end of it, you know, she said 'oh thank you so much, I really appreciate that' and, um, I felt like I'd done so much more than just ringing up to check up on the kids, you know, and actually really helped her as well... but it was above and beyond the role in a way, but I didn't have a problem doing it and felt, felt a sense of, um, satisfaction at the end of it, that I'd helped somebody'* (290-299).

The participants' connections with parents appeared to be a way of offering pastoral support, encouragement, and reassurance, but also seemed to be a way of enriching their connection with the children. For example, Carolyn described her experience of going out to the school gates with her fellow ELSA colleague and the headteacher every morning since

the return to school for all children in September. She emphasised the value of acquiring new information from parents:

> *'parents are telling us, just little things when they drop them off, that perhaps are not important enough to have come in and told us, but because we're chatting with them as they hand the children over, especially the younger ones, you're finding out little things that you can then talk to the child about in the day, you know, makes you just aware'* (809-816).

However, the focus in Karen's account remained strongly on sustaining her connections with the children she had been working with as an ELSA. She noted:

> *'the other child, the one I was talking about, he wasn't in, so I rang him every week, and had a conversation… with, with him, asking him how he was, what you've been doing, whether he'd done any more to his book, just, just really, just general talking. Um… and I think because I did that, the rel- the relationship kept, it kept it together, if that makes sense'* (262-272).

This extract suggests that Karen's fears around the child regressing prompted her to keep in contact with the child to protect her established bond with him. It appears that Karen's protective instinct towards the child saw her reach outwards.

This theme captures the importance of connection across the participants' accounts. Overall, it seems that the experience of constraint and isolation saw participants recognise the need for connection – in the families they were supporting, but also in themselves. As a result, participants sought new ways of building new connections and strengthening existing ones in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic.

**Excerpt from research diary (02.05.21):**

<u>On writing up the analysis of superordinate themes:</u> 'I have a growing awareness of the possible tension held between the uniqueness of

accounts and the process of writing up shared themes. I am mindful of the importance of guarding against 'collapsing' or 'flattening' unique accounts, but I'm experiencing the challenge of producing statements that feel equally true for all participants. I am aware that statements may either risk being too broad and descriptive to speak to the 'psychological essence' of experience or too narrow to adequately and accurately capture what participants recounted. This possible tension seems important for me to hold in mind as I proceed with the writing process.'

## 4.5. Superordinate theme 2: *Having time and space*

Three participants described a greater sense of time and space within the role. This theme is divided into two subordinate themes: *expanding the role* and *being led by the child*. Participants reported a sense of 'slowing down' within school and the freedom to create and learn. Comments by Carolyn and Louisa introduce the theme:

> *'It felt as if the pace of life was slower because there were less children in the school. And so, you weren't under the pressure'* (Carolyn: 356-358).

> *'I don't want to say it was lovely because that sounds a bit inappropriate in a way under the circumstances, but in some ways it was… because, because, there were no pressures to achieve a curriculum and actually, as long as – we were told as long as they did a Maths and an English lesson every day, the rest of the day were free for us to do with them whatever we wanted'* (Louisa: 664-671).

### 4.5.1. *Expanding the role*

This theme outlines the ways in which the ELSA role expanded into the increased sense of time and space in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. Three participants described the freedom they had to pursue training opportunities and share new knowledge with their

school communities. Karen, for example, reported her experience of seeking training opportunities to *'enhance the role'* (22). Carolyn explained how, along with her ELSA colleague, she used the opportunity to learn and follow her interests whilst working from home:

> *'some online… like it linked to university, but we did quite a few wellbeing type things on there as well, both of us, and we could compare notes, so on the day we were working from home, we'd dip into something like that and did different things'* (754-761).

Similarities can be drawn with Louisa's experience:

> *'another positive… about that time was that I actually had a bit more time, um, because we weren't on - I wasn't, um, working on a rota in school for my, all of my working days, I had more time to research and, um… I did, I did, um, some research and a little bit of an online training course on bereavement… um, and, you know, bought - got some resources as well so did a bit of research, we bought the invisible string book and then a workbook to go with it… um, but I was able to reflect really and a lot of the resources that I have I uploaded on to… um, school Teams system where we can share files'* (649-660).

For Louisa, the increased sense of time and space enabled her to share existing resources and create new ones to support staff in school. She recounted the ways in which she sourced and printed off resources for teachers to pick up in the staffroom, and left resources (e.g., self-esteem boosters, gratitude journals) around the sides of classrooms for pupils to use. It appears that Louisa positioned herself as a 'whole-school resource' in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, creating resources to benefit children and staff alike. Louisa summarises the freedom to pursue a different approach to the role:

> *'it was, it was a time when things were turned on their head but actually, you could approach things a bit differently and, and it enabled me to help with that [creating resources for classrooms]'* (694-701).

For Carolyn, the role in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic also saw her widen her 'reach'. Carolyn noted that usually there is a *'list of people waiting for ELSA sessions'* (344-

345), but during this time, the reduced pressures within the school setting led her to revisit children she had previously worked with:

> *'the children that I'd ever seen in the two years of being an ELSA… I picked them up if they were in school, and we had some lovely, relaxed chats about all sorts of things! So, it was quite nice… in that aspect'* (290-294).

### 4.5.2. *Being led by the child*

Participants also reported the effects of increased time and space on their interactions with children during the initial period of school closures. Carolyn, for example, noted that, as there were fewer children in school, she had more time to spend with those that *'needed'* her (425). She proceeded to explain her child-centred approach in more depth:

> *'And then we had two days that the Head… has said you could use as much of those two days for ELSA as needed. So I had lots of time, and that was really good, because… you know, children that might have been worried about something, just a small thing, you were able to spend time with them and somebody who wanted to talk a lot, either were thinking 'oh it's nearly home time, or something' because you could start it in the morning, and give as long as they wanted, so the relaxed side of the ELSA then was really good'* (435-445).

The extract highlights the 'informal' ELSA provision that was facilitated by the increased time and space within school. For Carolyn and Karen, a sense of time and space appeared to be valued as central, permanent features of the ELSA role:

> *'you know, [the other ELSA] and I don't rush, you know, we just let the child talk. I mean, most of the time, we don't, I mean, I don't - we just listen, I just listen'* (Karen: 305-308).

Earlier in her account, Karen described the way in which she was guided by a particular child throughout the period of school closures:

> *'when he came back in… September, I carried on seeing him… um, sort of previous to lockdown I'd sort of suggested maybe seeing him for every other week? And he wasn't, he*

*wasn't really very keen. He said, 'oh, I'd rather carry out carry on seeing you once a week'. So, I didn't push it, I left it…and just carried on seeing him'* (242-248).

## 4.6. Superordinate theme 3: *Living through challenge*

Participants also described the challenges of the role in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, in various forms. This theme consists of two subordinate themes: *holding fears* and *working within constraints*.

### 4.6.1. *Holding fears*

This subordinate theme relates to the participants' experiences of coping with and responding to fear in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. On being asked about their experiences from March 2020, when schools closed, all participants reported their immediate concerns for the children. For Karen, the depth of her worry for the children with whom she had been working was palpable:

> *'I, I do think the lockdown was quite tricky in our role as an ELSA when it first happened because we didn't know how we were going to talk to the children, whether they would be alright, you know how, whether stopping… seeing us all that time… you know, would have any effect on them, I don't know, it was quite worrying, it was quite worrying, but then, I suppose once we got back, you know, the children came back into school…and our role started up again, then, I suppose looking back, yeah, it was, it was very worrying. It was very worrying. Yeah, it was very worrying. I have to say, I think'* (592-603).

Karen seems to describe an experience characterised by worry; a feeling that is emphasised by the repetition of *'it was very worrying'.* The depth of worry around the effect of withdrawing her support may indicate the strength of her investment in and attachment to these children, given that she had been working with two of them for eighteen months. Her fear follows on from her feelings of powerlessness:

> *'I don't think we really knew… which way to turn, how to help the children we - we just didn't really know what to do'* (586-588).

The fears of other participants extended to families within the community who may have been struggling. This fear was particularly striking in Rachel's account. She explained:

> *'I felt very much like what about all these kids that we have no idea if they're being looked after properly, we don't know if they're ok, we don't know if they've had any education, and how do we know that? […] so, I sort of worried about people that might have been having a rough time and we didn't know… whereas in school we tend - you know, don't you, because they're being seen every day'* (577-616).

In her role, Rachel was used to having a *'massive overview'* (127) of families within the school, but almost overnight, Rachel's oversight was prohibited by the lockdown context. Rachel's worry compelled her to action:

> *'I felt busier than ever quite honestly because you're naturally worried about some of these children… that are in that home environment, are they gonna be okay?*' (315-319).

Rachel's fear for her personal safety was manifest even more acutely as she recounted her experience of returning to the school setting:

> *'the first two or three weeks when I came into school, I was absolutely petrified of being in school, and near the children'* (389-391).

Personal safety was also a concern for Karen:

> *'it was just making sure that all children are kept safe, myself, you know, I kept myself safe'* (842-844).

However, in the accounts of some participants, fears around the anticipated effects of Covid-19 gave way to reassurance and relief. Carolyn, for example, was quick to emphasise that Covid-19 did not have the anticipated effects that everyone thought it would:

> *'I know our Head was concerned of the effect it would have on our children, and I think, well, everybody was weren't they, but it's not had the impact on the children that - the negative impact that I thought it would'* (154-158).

This is echoed in Rachel's account. She began to indicate the possibility that the anticipated effects of Covid-19 on children's social and emotional wellbeing were a consequence of projecting adult's fears onto children:

> *'I thought that I was going to have to clear the decks because I would literally be dealing with children who didn't want to come back to school because of coronavirus, and it turned out like that, so maybe that's implying that an adult's fears onto what a child might feel'* (677-683).

### 4.6.2. *Working within constraints*

This subordinate theme outlines the way in which participants responded to the constraints of the role in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. Three participants reported contextual constraints. These included wearing Protective Personal Equipment (PPE) and operating in 'bubbles', therefore not being able to access usual support structures. Participants also described the challenges presented by using new technologies, not being able to run clubs and activities, and in one case, working with unsupportive members of staff.

Carolyn described her experience of the challenges posed by using new technologies to work with a child who remained at home during school closures:

> *'in person, you get a feeling, you can see the body language more… says me talking with my hands… um, you can see their body language more. Um, in Zoom calls, sometimes the screen freezes, you can't read the facial expressions and things like that. Um, and… you know, because we have a room that we do the ELSA in and we've got a cupboard with all our things in and … if somebody says something, you can just open the cupboard door and get it out, get something out, you think, 'oh, yes' whereas if you're on a Zoom from home or whatever, you can't produce things like that'* (244-250).

Carolyn's description of the limitations of virtual contact highlights the importance of high-quality interactions for her in the ELSA role. However, Carolyn's gratitude for any form of contact with the children was evident: *'we are fortunate that we've got the Internet'* (280-281). Louisa was also quick to recognise the positives of having to adapt, noting the benefits of moving ELSA sessions outside: *'you have all the benefits, um, to your wellbeing of being outside as well'* (957-958).

Participants' acceptance of change within the role was striking. Carolyn summarises her approach:

> '*you have just got to transition between things. And you just take it in your stride. Well, I just take it in my stride, I don't know if you've got to, but I do!*' (482-486).

A tone of acceptance was also present in Rachel's account. Whilst she mourned the loss of missed opportunities for children and the challenge of the role in this context, she also recognised the need to accept the constraints and move forward. She explained:

> *'for me so I think you're very much - you've got the basis of what you're doing, but you have to adapt to - you know there's no point me saying oh you can go and do this, this and this because they can't, so I've got to come up with other ways for having to deal with situations I think…'* (943-950).

Rachel summarised her adaptability in continuing with ELSA work via different means:

> *'So, um… yeh, it's a real challenge working as you are, but again it's like anything, the minute you start doing it, it just becomes the norm doesn't it, before you know it, it's the norm again'* (811-816).

Aside from the constraints imposed by Covid-19, Louisa spoke of constraints that have continued throughout the pandemic, including limited time and the challenge of a minority of staff members who question the effectiveness of ELSA work. Perhaps knowing that these

are constraints that can be improved and overcome, Louisa's approach to these constraints saw her work to overcome them:

> *'I can only achieve so much in an hour a week, so I have raised this with the people that I talk to about ELSA and um, that concern has been acknowledged'* (764-775).

> *'if a teacher challenges… challenges it, I'll try and be really tactful in the way that I answer, um… but, but I find I mean am getting better at that actually, sticking up, sticking up for myself and sticking up for what I believe in'* (497-501).

Louisa's affinity with the role and ambitions for its future were evident in her account: *'the role is – could be endless'* (852).

## 4.7. Superordinate theme 4: *Knowing worth*

This theme outlines participants' experiences of feeling upheld and supported in the role in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. It is comprised of two subordinate themes: *feeling closely supported* and *feeling validated.*

### 4.7.1. *Feeling closely supported*

For three participants, the experience of the role in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic was entwined with a sense of close support from colleagues. Louisa, for example, was keen to emphasise that her colleagues are *'very, very supportive'* (541), especially the younger teachers who *'embrace'* and *'appreciate'* what she does (434). Karen and Carolyn's experience of the role in the pandemic context was especially bolstered by the supportive relationship they had built with their fellow ELSA in their school settings. Karen summarised the relationship:

> *'we do a lot of supporting of each other, um, because, you know, it's quite an emotional role, and if there's anything that maybe we're a bit unsure of tackling, you know, we always talk*

*about the children, and, you know, it's just between ourselves, you know, never in front of anybody else'* (219-224).

Karen later referred to her ELSA colleague as a *'sounding board'* (765) and conveyed the reassurance of this source of support:

'*it's just having, it's just knowing that [the other ELSA] is there, you know, supporting me and she's - I'm the same for her, we support each other in that in that role'* (773-776).

It appears that this support structure was integral to Karen's experience of the role throughout the initial lockdown period of school closures. In her account, she often spoke on behalf of her ELSA colleague, using the pronoun *'we'*, therefore seeing the role as a conjoined effort.

This sense of close support is echoed in Carolyn's account, as she characterised the support from an ELSA colleague in terms of its cathartic value:

*'And we've… always had each other to bounce ideas off - to support each other, and… because sometimes you just need that offload, don't you?* (568-571).

As well as support from fellow ELSA colleagues, participants emphasised the support given to them by the headteachers in their setting. For Carolyn and Karen, a high level of support from the headteacher appeared to have always been their experience. Carolyn noted the continued support throughout the initial period of school closures and highlighted the sense of care offered to her by the headteacher:

'*Our wellbeing is really important to her [the headteacher]. Um, not only for the children but for the staff as well, um… she really cares about everybody's wellbeing. And she - she uses the ELSAs for the wellbeing of the children. But she's got lots of things in place for our wellbeing as well'* (516-521).

Carolyn later described the level of protection the headteacher offers, with reference to time and room allocations:

> *'She's [the headteacher] so supportive of what we do. And you need the Head to be supportive and she, she blocks every Friday afternoon, she's - the calendar's blocked out, we use a - I use a room and [the other ELSA] does hers on a Tuesday in the same room, so all our resources are in a locked cupboard in there. And Tuesday afternoon, Friday afternoon, they are blocked out on the calendar. That room is for the ELSAs only, and nobody else can use that room… um, which everybody knows, you know, it's for ELSA…* (636-646).

For Louisa, however, it appears that the Covid-19 pandemic marked an increase in the level of support and recognition she received from the headteacher. She explained:

> *'I do feel like his, his [the headteacher's] acknowledgement of what we were going through and… um, the effect it had on everybody's wellbeing really, really hit him actually, um… to the point where yeh, he now values ELSA so much more, I, I believe – than before'* (375-380).

She later explained her hopes for the headteacher to translate the value placed onto the role into more time resource for ELSA in the future:

> *'It feels to me that the headteacher is going to do what he can… under the circumstances, to give me more time'* (809-811).

However, in contrast to the feelings of support, Karen noted that the divergence of experiences between ELSAs across different settings. This was a difficult feeling to navigate:

> *'that wasn't easy either, you know, other schools were managing to keep in touch. And we weren't, you know, not with the ones - not with the children that weren't in school, anyway, you know, I found that quite tricky - I found it quite difficult'* (517-521).

### 4.7.2. *Feeling validated*

This subordinate theme outlines the feelings of validation experienced by participants within the school setting. Participants frequently reported the ways in which they were encouraged in their role by school staff, parents, and by seeing children progress because of their ELSA work. For example, Louisa commented on her reaction to being told by a teacher that she should be a full-time ELSA:

> *'I take that as a real compliment, um, because that's acknowledging that what I do is worthwhile, that it's that it's needed, and actually, um, they [the teacher] haven't said so-and-so over there would be really good - they should be a full-time ELSA, they said I (laughs) should be a full-time ELSA and so I take that as a compliment (laughs)'* (598-603).

She also noted her observation of her colleagues using the wellbeing resources she had created during school closures:

> *'I saw some teachers in the staff room going through and then photocopying bits, and I thought 'oh look! They're, they're actually using what I've put there'* (692-698).

For Carolyn and Rachel, the role appeared to be an established part of the school structure. Rachel described the continued way in which teachers reached out to herself and her ELSA colleague remotely during school closures:

> *'they [the teachers] would just you know email myself and XX and just sort of say 'oh, I've just spoke to so and so and they're really struggling with…' you know if it was something emotional-related, they would sort of us hand it to us, the same as they would if we were in school'* (1147-1154).

The sense in which teachers 'handed' or 'passed' issues over was echoed in Carolyn's account:

> *'if there's a falling out at playtime, sooner than the teacher's doing it, they pass it to us and we deal with those sorts of things - friendship issues, um… whereas a teacher was doing that before, because they've seen the work we've done with ELSA, they just pass it straight to us, because we're more experienced (laughs) in that sort of thing apparently!'* (721-728).

Participants also reported the gratitude and appreciation given to them by parents they had been serving. The effects Louisa experienced from contact with parents were palpable:

> *'It felt really good actually because I felt like, um, I was really using my skills… um, I really gained a lot of confidence, because prior to that, I hadn't really had a lot of, um, contact with parents actually'* (316-319).

Louisa later returned to this sense of validation by describing how she had recently ended her work with one pupil:

> *'I spoke to Mum a couple of days ago, um, just to agree with her that it was ok to end ELSA with the child, and she completely agreed, and she thanked me for what I'd done with him, and, said, you know, 'he's so different and he approaches things so – he is so much more confident now' and everything and… who doesn't want that in their job? You know, at the end of the day, I can sit there and think – I did good today! (laughs) so it's important to me to have a job, um, that does add value'* (985-1014).

Throughout Karen's account, she made repeated references to positive outcomes of the children she had worked with, making the worthiness of ELSA work a central feature in her experience:

> *'I can't tell you how… over the moon, I am with him, you know, for him really, not, you know, I'm glad I was able to help him… that (pause) I don't know, if you saw… I can't really explain how I even feel, I'm - it's very emotional, to be honest, to see him like that. You know, moving from such a low ebb that he had… to how he should be as a year - as a child, you know, as a year 6 child'* (447-453).

Overall, participants spoke of the deep sense of satisfaction and reward experienced within the role. Louisa summarised this:

> *'I feel a real sense of achievement about it [the role], um… it's kind of like my baby, and I do – you know I do my sessions… I'm planning the sessions myself and I'm working out what I'm going to do with them, I'm finding the relevant resources. And then when I do see results, there's nothing better than that'* (995-1001).

In Louisa's case, the sense of validation reinforced her convictions for and affinity with the role. The metaphor of *'my baby'* highlights the way in which ELSA work is a personal and meaningful endeavour, over which she feels a high degree of ownership and protection.

## 4.8. Summary of findings

The findings reveal the lived experiences of the ELSA role in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. The superordinate themes that were identified from within the data were: *stepping up, stepping out; having time and space; living through challenge,* and *knowing worth.*

Following school closures, the ELSAs acted to support the needs of their school communities. This saw them go 'above and beyond' the role to work intuitively and proactively to build and maintain connections with children and their families. Interestingly, the busyness of this period holds a tension with an increased sense of time and space that characterised the school setting for most participants. The freedom that this afforded saw ELSAs use their skills to widen their reach to other children and staff within school, as well as to families at home.

Although the themes that emerged were largely positive, it was clear that working as an ELSA in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic was also a time of personal and professional challenge. Participants reacted in different ways to the fears they held around the children being at home, as well as to their practical worries for their own safety. Reactions to the constraints imposed by the pandemic also varied from gratitude to acceptance, through to a desire to overcome them.

The challenges faced in the role were offset, however, by the striking way in which participants expressed the appreciation and value they felt from others, as well as the reward experienced from ELSA work.

# 5. Discussion

## 5.1. Introduction

In order to address the research question and embed the current research within a wider context, this chapter begins by framing the findings of the study in relation to existing literature presented in *Chapter 2. Literature Review*. As it is expected that IPA takes the researcher to 'new and unanticipated territory' (Smith et al., 2009, p. 112), it is anticipated that the IPA researcher will draw upon and introduce new literature in the discussion. In line with this guidance (Smith et al., 2009), some literature is introduced for the first time in this chapter. Key quotations from *Chapter 3. Findings* are sometimes used throughout the account to remind the reader of the nature of particular themes. A review of key limitations and consideration of the quality of the current research then follows on. The chapter concludes with implications for theory and practice, and recommendations for future research.

## 5.2. Addressing the research question

The present study has used IPA, an approach from phenomenological psychology, to explore the lived experiences of ELSAs working in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. The current research sought to hear ELSAs' voices at this seminal point in time, responding to the 'call to action' for psychologists to explore people's experiences in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic (O'Connor et al., 2020). The research question was:

> *How do ELSAs make sense of their experience of the role in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic?*

IPA led to the identification of four superordinate themes: *stepping up, stepping out; having time and space; living through challenge, and knowing worth.* Whilst there is a degree of overlap between these themes, they will be considered individually in relation to the research question.

### 5.2.1. *Stepping up, stepping out*

#### **5.2.1.1. *Responding to need***

Participants described the large number of ways in which they responded to the needs of both those in school and those at home in the initial lockdown period following school closures. This sense of 'stepping up' to support the needs of the school community is echoed in the report published by Moss et al. (2021), which heralded TAs as 'the unsung heroes of the pandemic' (p. 3). Based on survey data of over 9000 TAs in the context of the second winter lockdown (January – March 2021), Moss et al. (2021) concluded that TAs were integral to the running of schools, comparing them to the 'mortar of the brickwork of schools' (p. 10). They further suggested that TAs worked selflessly and adeptly as they responded to challenges presented by the pandemic context. Similarly, the ELSAs surveyed in the present study went '*above and beyond the role'* (Louisa: 297) and wore '*a number of different hats'* (Rachel: 493). Literature indicates the well-established notion that the TA role is multi-faceted (e.g., Syrnyk, 2018) and the report by Moss et al. (2021) implies that, through a range of additional tasks, the multi-faceted nature of the role may have been augmented by the challenges presented by the pandemic. In line with the findings detailed by Moss et al. (2021), the ELSAs sampled in the current research were directly involved in supporting children and delivering targeted interventions within the school setting in the pandemic context.

This subordinate theme places particular emphasis on the proactive and intuitive approach that most participants appeared to bring to their ELSA role in the pandemic context. It appears that participants recognised the unique skills they could bring to the context as a result of their role (e.g., '*I felt like I was in a position to be able to help'* [Louisa: 706]). The high levels of resiliency, creativity, independence, and motivation required for the ELSA role are set out by Burton (2009) and are echoed across the participants' accounts. The context of the Covid-19 pandemic appeared to present challenges that demanded an even greater level of these qualities, and it seemed that most participants felt that they had the skills to be able to respond.

This subordinate theme also refers to the experience of collective action (e.g., *so what we did was set up a system where we did welfare calls all the time between myself, [the other ELSA], and the SENCo* [Rachel: 286-288]). This experience of teamwork reflects the findings from case study data exploring the perceptions of 19 TAs working to support SEMH needs (Syrnyk, 2018). Findings indicated that the sample felt their role coincided well with colleagues and emphasised the value of teamwork.

#### 5.2.1.2. *Reaching out*

For the participants interviewed, the experience of the ELSA role in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic involved forging wider and deeper connections with families in their school communities. It appears that this was much more commonly experienced by the ELSA participants in the present study than by the TAs surveyed by Moss et al. (2021), of whom just over a third (36%) reported making contact with families.

It appeared that, in some cases, participants quite naturally began to deploy their ELSA skills in a new way to support, encourage, and reassure parents (e.g., *'so a lot of it was like meeting parents' needs dealing with lockdown as well'* [Rachel: 490-492]). Previous research has indicated the unique qualities of the ELSA role. Nicholson-Roberts (2019), for example, concluded from interview data with key stakeholders (pupils and SENCos) that ELSAs have distinctive personal attributes and skills, such as a relaxed manner of communication, authenticity, unconditional positive regard and attunement. Nicholson-Roberts (2019) further suggested that these skills enabled ELSAs to build successful relationships with pupils. Research exploring the perceptions of TAs supporting SEMH needs has also echoed the highly specialised skill set that such a role requires, including nurturing characteristics, understanding of social and emotional needs (Burton & Goodman, 2011). This subordinate theme from the present study suggests that ELSAs' experiences of the role involved a natural shift to deploying this specialised skill set in this new way with parents in the school community.

For some participants, 'reaching out' to parents enhanced their connections with children (e.g., '*you're finding out little things that you can then talk to the child about in the day, you*

*know, makes you just aware'* [Carolyn: 814-816]). Participants appeared to make sense of their role in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic by vicariously supporting the child through the pastoral support they offered to parents. Woodcock (2007) presents advocating for the child in liaisons with parents as one facet of the ELSA role. It appears that the pandemic context saw participants fulfil this element of advocacy in new and unprecedented ways.

Findings also highlighted the way in which some ELSAs moved to an online form of ELSA support or used the phone to keep in touch with the children themselves (e.g., *I rang him [the pupil] every week, and had a conversation… with, with him, asking him how he was, what you've been doing, whether he'd done any more to his book, just, just really, just general talking* [Karen: 264-268]). This suggests the value that participants may place on the talking process as a mechanism for change in ELSA work, as indicated by previous research (Wilding & Claridge, 2016). The study, drawing on interview data with 7 parents, also highlighted the importance of the ELSA-child relationship to the perceived outcomes of the intervention (Wilding & Claridge, 2016). This was also emphasised in McEwen's (2019) study, with *relationships* emerging as an overarching theme from both ELSA and pupil interviews. McEwen (2019) concluded that the ELSA-child relationship may endure as a coping mechanism for the child beyond the formal end of intervention sessions (McEwen, 2019). It appears that, for some participants in the present study, 'reaching out' to those children not in school was an important process and may further reflect the strength of the ELSA-child relationship.

This theme also points beyond the pastoral support offered to parents and children to the value of connection for the participants themselves. For all participants, reaching out was driven by a natural concern for the welfare of children and families in their communities. However, participants also reported the benefits that 'reaching out' offered to them (e.g., *'we really bonded in that phone call'* (Louisa: 290-291). Research has suggested the protective effects of social connections on mental health throughout periods of stress (e.g., Khan & Husain, 2010) and it appears that offering this source of support to families may have served a supportive function for the ELSAs themselves.

### 5.2.2. *Having time and space*

#### **5.2.2.1. *Expanding the role***

This theme outlines the sense in which participants' experiences of the ELSA role widened and 'grew' into the space and time that the pandemic context afforded. An increased sense of freedom was present across participants' accounts, which strikes an interesting contrast with the action and busyness that characterises the previous superordinate theme: *stepping up, stepping out.*

For most participants, the initial period of school closures gave them opportunities to pursue new knowledge via online training courses to support them in their role (e.g., '*some online… like it linked to university, but we did quite a few wellbeing type things on there as well'* [Carolyn: 754-756]). It is essential for ELSAs to receive support that develops their psychological knowledge and understanding as it is unlikely that ELSAs will have received psychological training further to the ELSA training course (ELSA Network, 2017). In this context, participants independently sought opportunities for professional development to support their ongoing practice as ELSAs.

In some cases, this new psychological knowledge and theory translated into whole-school support (e.g., '*a lot of the resources that I have uploaded on to… um, school Teams system […] and then shared it with everybody within the school'* [Louisa: 658-662]). Throughout the initial period of school closures, some participants reported the ways in which they were able to offer wider support, either directly to other children within their 'bubbles', to children who had previously received ELSA support, or through creating resources for staff to use in their lessons. This links to another facet of the ELSA role as outlined by Woodcock (2007): advocating for emotional literacy within the wider organisation. It appears that this was a further element of the role that participants fulfilled in a new way in the initial period of school closures. In some cases, participants' instincts were naturally oriented towards a *'holistic approach'* to working (Rachel: 19), which involved working closely with other agencies or with whole classes.

This sense of expansion, however, may point beyond the increased sense of time and space. As one participant noted: *'it was a time when things were turned on their head but actually, you could approach things a bit differently'* (Louisa: 694-700). This has echoes of the wider need expressed within society to use the so-called 'Great Pause' to reflect, review and rethink how we live and work. This narrative was linked heavily to the sphere of education. For example, a Guardian article entitled '*Coronavirus shows us it's time to rethink everything. Let's start with education'* (Monbiot, 2020) argued that it was time for the 'Great Reset'.

#### 5.2.2.2. *Being led by the child*

An increased sense of time and space was also manifest in the way in which participants described their interactions with children. For some participants, it appeared that the increased freedoms allowed them to work in their preferred way: '*you could […] give as long as they [the children] wanted, so the relaxed side of the ELSA then was really good'* (Carolyn: 435-445). This implies a freedom to work in a more informal and natural manner throughout the initial period of school closures, being guided by the needs of the children as and when required.

The freedom of the context also enabled some participants to *'pick up'* (Carolyn: 291) children who had previously received ELSA support. This links to the findings from a Q-sort activity employed by McEwen (2019), which suggested that ELSAs provided support on an ongoing basis after sessions had formally ended (e.g., 'aftercare' in the form of drop-ins or check-ins). This led McEwen (2019) to conclude that further research might explore the changing role of the ELSA for the child when intervention sessions end. The subordinate theme of the present study adds to the finding that ELSA support may continue after the official end of the intervention session and may further indicate the strength of the ELSA-child relationship that is formed (McEwen, 2019).

For some participants in the present study, adopting a child-centred approach influenced the length of the ELSA intervention (e.g., '*I didn't push it, I left it…and just carried on seeing him*' [Karen: 246-248]). This raises implications for the possible overreliance of the child on

the ELSA. Guidance from the *Trainers' Manual* (Burton, 2009) suggests that an ELSA intervention is intended as short-term, lasting between six to eight weeks, however, findings from a recent study (Krause et al., 2020) suggested that ELSAs are increasingly offering longer-term support to pupils. Wong et al. (2020) further indicated the possible overreliance of some children on the ELSA, with some children feeling worried or upset about the prospect of ending ELSA sessions. The finding from the present study suggests a further need to explore the outcomes and impact of long-term ELSA interventions.

Overall, this subordinate theme highlights the delicate balance between the importance of building a bond with the child, based on attunement and the possibility of overreliance. The findings of the present study add to the emerging need to review the way in which ELSA interventions are designed and delivered to children, and the way in which endings are planned and navigated.

### 5.2.3. *Living through challenge*

#### **5.2.3.1. *Holding fears***

Participants commonly reported the fears they held for children as schools initially closed (e.g., *'it was very worrying'* [Karen: 602]). In a pre-pandemic context, Fairall (2020) found that having responsibility for children with complex social and emotional needs created a level of emotional stress for ELSAs. It appears that, for some participants, this feeling may have been compounded by the pandemic context (e.g., '*I felt very much like what about all these kids that we have no idea if they're being looked after properly?*' [Rachel: 577-579]).

For some participants, their fears extended to their own safety (e.g., '*I was absolutely petrified of being in school*' [Rachel: 390]). This echoes the findings of Moss et al., (2021) who report that surveyed TAs on the frontline felt vulnerable in the school setting, particularly regarding the risk of exposure to Covid-19. Moss et al. (2021) noted that TA comments indicated they were taking risks to their own health and experiencing an increased level of anxiety and stress in the pandemic context. Furthermore, respondents' comments indicated a sense of unfairness, explaining that while they were working 'on the

frontline', teachers were able to work remotely from the safety of their homes. This sense of unfairness was not mirrored in the present study as most participants were keen to emphasise the supportive relationships they had built with colleagues.

As children returned to schools, however, participants largely reported a sense of surprise and reassurance. Two participants explained how they anticipated a great number of children would struggle to return to school. Their experiences of fear, however, quickly gave way to reassurance. Although research has indicated concerns for the wellbeing of particular subgroups of children in the pandemic context (DfE, 2020e), other research exploring family life in the pandemic context has suggested that children benefited from spending more time at home and increased time with family members, leading to a greater level of closeness (Clayton et al., 2020).

#### 5.2.3.2. *Working within constraints*

For the participants interviewed, working as an ELSA in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic presented several challenges, including the wearing of PPE, operating in 'bubbles', and not being able to run clubs and activities as usual. The ways in which participants responded to these challenges, however, were characterised by a determination to accept and work through them, or even overcome them (e.g., '*so I've got to come up with other ways for having to deal with situations*' [Rachel:947-950]).

The determination to adapt and continue with the role in the context of constraint is resonant with previous literature exploring the qualities of TAs working to support SEMH needs. Focus group data from a mix of primary and secondary TAs indicated that they thought adaptability was essential to the role (Dunne et al., 2008, p. 242). In addition, results from a survey of headteachers indicated the personal qualities and attributes that schools seek in TAs further emphasised the importance of adaptability and the ability to work under pressure (Groom & Rose, 2006). The subordinate theme in the present study also captures participants' willingness to adapt and find creative and new ways to fulfil the ELSA role in the midst of contextual constraints.

### 5.2.4. *Knowing worth*

#### **5.2.4.1. *Feeling closely supported***

The experience of most participants involved a sense of close support from their colleagues, with particular emphasis on the support received from fellow ELSAs within their respective settings. In line with findings of previous research (Syrnyk, 2018), participants valued teamwork, and this appeared to be central to their sense of job satisfaction. Three participants interviewed were one of two ELSAs within their schools, and the sense of collaboration and close working with their respective ELSA colleagues throughout the initial period of school closures was clear. Of these three participants, two emphasised the value of this support structure to their work, especially in relation to managing the emotional intensity of the role.

Drawing on the findings of previous research offers several ways of illuminating the supportive function of this relationship. First, previous research has suggested the unique, shared qualities of ELSAs (e.g., Wong et al., 2020). Participants in the current study noted that other ELSAs were *'like-minded'* (Louisa: 66). This may indicate that ELSAs have the skills and are well-positioned to both offer and receive peer support. Second, research has highlighted the influence of positive and negative shared experiences on the quality of social bonds (Busia & Griggio, 2020). It appeared that the shared nature of ELSA experience facilitated an unrivalled depth of support from their ELSA colleagues.

Interestingly, however, neither the support of ELSAs from other school settings within participants' supervisory groups nor the support of the participants' supervisors (line managers within school or EPs) featured in participants' accounts. Theory suggests that one of the three overarching functions of supervision is to sustain and support the supervisee (Hawkins & Shohet, 2007). Relationships with other members of the supervision group are additional sources of support (Hawkins & Shohet, 2007). However, one participant in the current study explained how supervision highlighted the divergence of experiences between ELSAs across different settings, with some ELSAs having quickly moved to online support. This was a difficult feeling to navigate: *'I found it quite tricky'* (Karen: 520).

#### 5.2.4.2. *Feeling validated*

Findings from the present study indicate that feelings of validation were a common experience for participants working in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. Sources of validation included feedback from colleagues and parents, as well as seeing positive outcomes from their ELSA work with children (e.g., *she [child's mother] thanked me for what I'd done with him, and, said, you know, 'he's so different''* [Louisa: 989-992]). This finding strikes a contrast with the findings from TAs surveyed in the context of the subsequent winter lockdown of 2021 (Moss et al. 2021). Only a small proportion of TAs (27%) felt that their school had become more aware of their role in supporting pupils and families. This may have been because they already felt valued prior to the lockdown, however qualitative data suggested otherwise (Moss et al., 2021). Participant comments expressed feelings of being undervalued and inadequately managed by school leadership.

In terms of research exploring experiences of TAs working to support SEMH needs, Burton and Goodman (2011) noted that there was a pronounced sense that TAs felt that other members of staff did not perceive their job to be important and felt underappreciated in their roles. As suggested by Burton and Goodman (2011), offering professional accreditation and development may affect the experience of the ELSA role and others' perceptions towards it. It certainly appears that within the body of ELSA research, ELSAs' experiences of the role are much more positive. For example, Bradley (2010) reported that overall ELSAs found the role rewarding and the work valuable. Moreover, Leighton (2015) found that a sample of newly trained ELSAs felt their role was distinct and valued within their respective school communities. Peters (2020) also cites the reward of the role, identifying a theme entitled *ELSA feelings* that included ELSAs looking forward to working with the pupil, experiencing happiness from being able to help as well as sadness when the intervention came to an end. This subordinate theme from the present study adds to existing research that suggests that, overall, the ELSA role is well supported and valued within school settings.

## 5.3. Limitations of the study

From a critical perspective, there are several key limitations of the present study. First, it is important to state that the current research only represents the perceptions of experiences of this particular group of ELSAs and cannot be generalised to the wider ELSA population. Generalisability was not an aim of the research, but this limitation should nevertheless be acknowledged. It is also important to acknowledge that the sample size of this study is at the lower end of what is advised for an IPA study undertaken by a postgraduate researcher (Smith et al., 2009). Although such a sample may be a limitation for other qualitative approaches to research, within the context of IPA, a small sample can enhance the depth and quality of analysis (Smith et al., 2009).

There are other potential limitations of the sample. First, it is important to note the possible disadvantages of sharing a pre-established rapport with participants. Although I deemed this to a benefit to the research process, it is possible that our rapport prevented the participants from sharing their authentic experiences of the role and increased the likelihood of socially desirable responses. Second, the ELSAs who opted to participate gave their interviews in their own time, either after the school day or in one case, on their day off. This may indicate that the ELSAs who participated were particularly invested in the role. It may equally indicate a sense of practical as well as psychological 'capacity', which meant that participants felt able to speak at length about their experiences. This may in part account for the largely positive nature of the shared superordinate themes. In addition, there was a limited number of different contexts in which the ELSAs sampled worked (three different contexts rather than four). As homogeneity is an aim, this was not deemed to be a limitation at the time of recruitment, however, there is a possibility that this may have influenced the findings related to the individuals.

As is the case with all research using interviews, it is uncertain as to whether the interviewer is gaining an accurate insight into participants' thoughts or feelings, or whether the participant is using 'complex strategies of self-presentation or social masks' (Reynolds & Lim, 2007, p. 20). How reality is experienced may be very different to how it is articulated (Charmaz, 2002). As referenced in an excerpt from my research diary (see *Chapter 3.*

*Findings),* there may be a discrepancy between participants' actual experiences and their projected experiences, as told through a 'professional' lens. It may also be that ELSAs felt exhorted to give a positive account of their experience. Although I took great care to clarify the distinction between my researcher role and TEP role at the beginning of each interview (please refer to *Appendix H: Refined interview schedule),* participants' accounts may have been further influenced by my position of TEP. It may have been that participants responded more positively because of their pre-established relationship with me, or more widely with the EPS.

It is also important to consider that participants' accounts of the role in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic were partially retrospective. The salience of their experiences of the role following school closures in March 2020 may have been affected by memory. Participants' fears may have been more acute had the interviews taken place earlier (e.g., in the initial weeks following school closures). However, the value of the research lies in the exploration of participants' constructions and sense-making at the time of interview. The design of the study only involved one interview with each participant at a particular point in time. It would perhaps have been useful to interview at a second point in time to explore how the experience of the role evolved over the subsequent period of school closures from January 2021 to March 2021. Due to time constraints, this was not possible.

## 5.4. Assessing the quality of the research

Having acknowledged key limitations of the present study, this section uses the four broad dimensions for assessing the quality of qualitative research (Yardley, 2000) as a framework to give an account for the quality of the current research. See *3.12. Quality issues in IPA research* for an introduction to the dimensions.

*Sensitivity to context*

Sensitivity to context refers to the researcher's sensitivity to the socio-political context in which the study is undertaken, the existing literature related to the topic, and the information given by the participants (Yardley, 2000). This dimension was demonstrated

throughout the research process in several ways. First, the choice of IPA, a methodology that foregrounds the lived experiences of participants, was based on the need for sensitivity to context. Second, sensitivity to context was also demonstrated through an awareness of the existing literature. Key areas of relevant literature were used to orient the study, and an in-depth understanding of the key areas of philosophy underpinning IPA facilitated a well-informed IPA 'stance' throughout the process. Third, sensitivity to context was observed through an in-depth awareness of the nature of data collection. I understood the importance of active listening, showing empathy, offering reassurance, and putting the participants at ease. This was shown in participants' comments made at the end of their interviews. Feedback indicated the enjoyment participants had experienced in reflecting on their role and their achievements.

Sensitivity to context continued into the data analysis. The process of full immersion into the data and attending to a line-by-line analysis of participants' accounts supported this. Perhaps most importantly, the research shows sensitivity to the data by including many verbatim extracts from participants' accounts, ensuring that priority is given to their voices. However, it is recognised that when using IPA, the interpretation presented represents the researcher's reading of the data. It is acknowledged that there could be alternative interpretations of the data.

*Commitment and rigour*

*Commitment and rigour* can be demonstrated through a high level of attentiveness to the participant during the interview, and to the data during analysis, as well as through the appropriateness of the sample recruited and the 'completeness' of the analysis (Smith et al., 2009). In the present study, commitment was demonstrated through the data collection by closely attending to what the participant was saying during the interview. A high level of interest was shown in participants' responses, using active listening, ensuring that participants felt at ease. Commitment was also shown in the data analysis through the high level of care and thought given to following and revisiting stages of analysis specified by Smith et al. (2009). Insight into the experience of analysis is provided by way of including relevant excerpts of my research diary (see *Chapter 3. Findings).* Rigour was also

demonstrated throughout the current research by carefully selecting a homogeneous sample and following emerging areas of interest throughout interviews in order to probe the participants' experiences. Finally, rigour was also shown by the level of engagement with the idiographic, as shown by the introduction to each participant and their individual themes (see *4.2.1. Louisa,* for example).

*Transparency and coherence*

*Transparency and coherence* as a quality marker can be evident in a clear written description of each stage of the research process, and in the study's alignment with its underlying principles (Smith et al., 2009). The current research attempted to achieve transparency by giving a clear descriptive account of each stage of the research. For example, the research explains the recruitment and selection of participants (see *3.8. Sample and recruitment*), the construction of the interview schedule (see *3.9.2 Interview design*), and the approach to data analysis (see *3.10.2. Approach to analysis*). The research also sought to highlight tensions and contradictions within the data in a coherent manner. Finally, the current research sought to adhere to the underlying philosophy of IPA; the focal topic of the analysis is inherently experiential as it explores how participants make sense of their experiences of the ELSA role in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic.

*Impact and importance*

*Impact and importance* refers to whether the reader is reading something of interest or of use to them, according to Yardley (2000). The current research responded to the call to collect valuable qualitative data about experiences associated with Covid-19 (O'Connor et al., 2020). The findings offer an in-depth exploration of experiences of the ELSA role. As Oxley (2016) emphasises, IPA studies are beneficial to the EP profession as they enable the 'spotlight' to be shone on a particular group of individuals. IPA studies provide an opportunity for EPs to delve into individual experiences in more depth, which supports the tailored and holistic provision offered to stakeholders (Oxley, 2016). Findings also provide insight and understanding for other individuals working and/or living through similar experiences (Farouk, 2014).

## 5.5. Implications for EP practice

The current research presents experiences of the ELSA role in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. The findings provide valuable insight for other ELSAs working through similar experiences. They are also of particular relevance to EPs involved in the training and supervision of ELSAs. Following the announcement of school closures in March 2020, EPs were expected to work from home and offer remote support to stakeholders (AEP, 2020). First and foremost, the research forms one way of increasing EPs' understanding of a 'frontline' role at such a seminal point in time and has the potential to inform the support, supervision and training offered by EPs to ELSAs. However, it should be noted that the following implications may be context-specific and therefore are offered with a degree of caution.

First, these findings may have implications for the supervision offered by EPs to ELSAs in the locality and potentially in other contexts. For one ELSA in particular, hearing about the diversity of ELSA practice in group supervision sessions was a difficult experience to navigate. This highlights the importance of the supportive function of supervision as outlined by Hawkins and Shohet (2007). Given the accepted diversity of the role (Bradley 2010; Woodcock, 2007), support for ELSAs may involve a regular acknowledgement of the value of diverse practice, different insights, and approaches. Furthermore, constraints of the role related to the context of the Covid-19 pandemic were a common experience for participants. However, some constraints experienced were not specific to the pandemic context (e.g., time constraints). These findings suggest the importance of supervisors' continued awareness of the challenges ELSAs may bring to supervision and the difficult feelings that comparison to other ELSAs may engender.

In addition, the findings may have implications for the ELSA training curriculum. Participants reported an 'expanded' version of the role, which saw them widen their reach to support those in and outside of school. Findings further suggest that participants became more visible within and integral to their respective school communities. The raised profile of the

ELSA role may have the potential to lead to increased responsibilities. It appears that there may be a place, therefore, for ELSA training to cover practical aspects of the role in more depth, such as how to establish boundaries within the work and to manage the expectations of others so as not to become overburdened or overwhelmed. At the same time, it remains important for the ELSA training course to continue to emphasise creativity and imagination regarding the scope of the role (Woodcock, 2007).

Furthermore, this study highlights the value of support from fellow ELSAs. Findings indicated that co-working and collaborating with fellow ELSAs was a strong source of support for participants working in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. For the one participant who was the only ELSA in her setting at the time of interview, the prospect of working alongside another ELSA was seen as highly positive. The wealth of expertise and experience of participants was striking. Going forward, these findings highlight the importance of using the forum of supervision to build rapport and relationships between ELSAs. A further implication may involve consideration of how ELSA peer support may be developed outside of the formal supervisory context. In addition, the findings may suggest a rationale for recommending more than one TA for ELSA training per setting.

Beyond the ELSA training curriculum and the supervision offered by EPs to ELSAs, this study carries implications for wider EP practice. The methodological framework of IPA values the individual, provides a platform for the individual to share their experiences, and gives space to value and reflect on these. It also underlines the importance of recognising the unique personal, social, and historical contexts which influence the meanings that individuals attribute to their experience (Shinebourne, 2011). It is possible, therefore, that EP practice may draw upon and be inspired by the core values of IPA. Adopting an IPA 'posture' or 'stance' may be supportive in many areas of EP practice. For example, it may support 'pupil voice' work. It may also support the work of EPs working to address issues surrounding equality and diversity in school settings and the local community.

## 5.6. Recommendations for future research

This study has illuminated areas that would benefit from further exploration and evaluation in future research.

As has been previously suggested, the findings of the present study emphasise the need for further exploration of the parameters of the ELSA role. It appears that the pandemic context may have enabled participants to fulfil elements of the ELSA role in new ways, such as advocating for the child through contact with parents and other professionals and advocating for emotional literacy within the wider school community. Further research might focus on exploring the possible widening of the ELSA role and its development in order to consider further implications for the training and supervision of ELSAs. The use of an online survey drawing on quantitative and qualitative data from a larger sample of ELSAs nationwide may be a useful way of approaching this topic.

Furthermore, the study has echoed previous findings that some ELSAs are increasingly working longer-term with children (Krause et al., 2020). This highlights the potential need to explore and evaluate ELSA interventions that last beyond a term. The findings of the current study also emphasise the need to review the way in which endings are planned and navigated. Research may focus on the outcomes for the child and implications for the ELSA-child relationship in these contexts.

# 6. Conclusion

The current research aimed to explore the lived experiences of ELSAs working in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. The study hoped to offer insight into how the ELSAs made sense of their experiences of the role in this context. Using IPA as a methodological framework revealed four shared superordinate themes, which were: *stepping up, stepping out; having time and space; living through challenge,* and *knowing worth.*

Results suggested that participants played an integral role in their school communities in the initial period of school closures. It appears that participants went above and beyond the role to respond to the needs of those within their respective communities, in and outside of the school setting. While the first weeks of school closures were characterised by a sense of proactive and intuitive action for participants, they also reported the benefits of an increased sense of time and space. This new freedom enabled participants to seek new ways of developing and expanding the role.

Alongside the 'growth' of the role was the gravity of the Covid-19 pandemic context. This was felt across participant accounts, with fears for the welfare of children and their families experienced in conjunction with fears for their own safety as they worked within the school setting. The resilience of participants working throughout the pandemic context was palpable as they adjusted to new constraints and proceeded to support the social and emotional needs of children and their parents in new and creative ways. The largely positive nature of the themes may be in part accounted for by the support, appreciation and validation that formed a notable part of participants' experiences. This emphasises the importance of close supervisory and support structures to the ELSA role.

Implications of the research findings were discussed with particular consideration given to the ways in which EPs supervise and train ELSAs. Recommendations for future research were also suggested, with a focus on exploring the breadth as well as the boundaries of the role. It is hoped that the findings and discussion of themes have illuminated the experiences

of the ELSAs interviewed and echo the sense that TAs have been the ‘unsung heroes of the pandemic’ (Moss et al., 2021).

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# Appendices

Appendix A: Table of ELSA literature

| Source | Author(s) | Year | Topic | Method/methodology | Findings | Participants | Peer-reviewed? |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| EThOs | Atkin | 2019 | ELSA's views about support offered to them | Q-methodology | Peer support is vital to the ELSA role. ELSAs have effective support from a number of sources. The school well-being worker is the primary source of support who gives regular supervision. | 30 ELSAs | No |
| EThOs | Balampanidou | 2019 | Primary school children's perspectives of the ELSA programme | Semi-structured interviews – grounded theory | Development of theory entitled 'the uniqueness of the ELSA approach makes the difference in children's lives'. Four overarching themes included: the structure of the ELSA; child-centred sessions; the impact of the ELSA on CYP learning and SEMH, and rationale why ELSA helps | 8 Key Stage 2 children | No |
| EThOs | Barker | 2017 | Pupils' and parents' perspectives of the ELSA programme | Semi-structured interviews – interpretative phenomenological analysis | Ppts felt the intervention impacted positively on children's confidence, coping strategies and skills in managing and expressing emotions. Important elements of the intervention were a need for informed consent, fun, making the child feel special, space to talk and problem solve. | 2 primary school pupils and their parents | No |
| EThOs (Full text unavailable) | Begley | 2016 | Pupils' and ELSAs' experiences of the ELSA programme | Interviews – methodology drew on interpretative phenomenological analysis | Findings were described under five headings: communication as emotional discharge; experiential learning and awareness; exploratory, challenging talk; flexibility and stable, attuned attachment. | 3 young people (14-15 years) and 3 ELSAs | No |
| ELSA Network website | Bland & Macro | 2018 | Impact of ELSA training | Semi-structured interviews – thematic analysis | Five themes: increased understanding of supporting children's needs, child-centred practice, training delivery, whole-school approach, and challenges | 4 ELSAs | No |

| Source | Author(s) | Year | Topic | Method/methodology | Findings | Participants | Peer-reviewed? |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| ELSA Network website | Bradley | 2010 | Scope and nature of ELSA work across an academic year (2009-2010) | Questionnaires | On average, ELSAs worked with 13 children on a one-to-one basis, providing 14 sessions of 30 minutes, although wide variation. On average, ELSAs worked with 3 groups of children. Wide variation in sessions. Wide variation in children receiving ongoing support. Wide variation in time allocated by schools to role. Approximately half of participants had additional roles within school. | 243 ELSAs | No |
| Google Scholar | Bravery & Harris | 2009 | Impact and outcomes of ELSA programme | Semi-structured interviews, online questionnaires | Time allocated to ELSA varies widely. Majority of participants consider ELSA to positively impact behaviour, wellbeing and relationships. Most ELSAs feel their work is valued. Most ELSAs rate their in-school support as very good. | Interviews – 21 ELSAs Questionnaires – 17 headteachers | No |
| Scopus | Burton | 2008 | Descriptive account of how an EPS has trained TAs to support emotional needs of pupils | Narrative evaluative account | Early evaluation data suggest that ELSAs are helping CYP to engage more effectively with education. | - | Yes |
| ELSA Network website | Burton, Osborne & Norgate | 2010 | Impact of ELSA intervention | Pre- and post- measures of emotional literacy and behaviours, completed by teachers and pupils | Teacher-rated measures indicated significant improvement in empathy, self-awareness, social skills. Pupil-rated measures – no significant main effects or interactions. | 198 teachers 178 pupils | No |
| ELSA Network website | Burton, Triall & Norgate | 2009 | Effectiveness and impact of ELSA on CYP | Pre- and post-questionnaires | Teacher scores indicated a perceived improvement for the child – sig decreases in emotional problems, peer problems, conduct disorder. Parent scores – sig decrease in SDQ scores, | 107 teachers 52 parents | No |

| Source | Author(s) | Year | Topic | Method/methodology | Findings | Participants | Peer-reviewed? |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | | indicating perceived improvement for the child. | | |
| Google Scholar | Dodds & Blake | 2015 | Investigating effectiveness of the ELSA programme | Questionnaires, online survey, interviews | Training was 'effective' in helping ELSAs support the development of children's EL.<br>ELSAs have a positive effect on schools as a whole. | 30 SENCos or headteachers<br>97 ELSAs | No |
| EThOs | Fairall | 2020 | Factors that influence implementation of the ELSA programme | Mixed methods – questionnaire and interviews with stakeholders – thematic analysis | Facilitative factors for implementation: a mental health ethos, link EP support, shared responsibility for mental health across school staff, endings which acknowledge ELSA-child attachment.<br>Barriers to implementation: lack of school-wide understanding and support, difficulties distinguishing between ELSA and other SEMH provision, lack of equality in referrals, pupil overdependence on ELSA. | Interviews – 15 ELSA stakeholders (including ELSAs, SENCos, members of SLT, teachers, EPs) | No |
| ERIC | France & Billington | 2020 | Experiences and views of ELSAs in one county of group supervision | Interviews – thematic analysis | Six themes: session format; learning in the moment; applying learning from supervision sessions; communication, relationships and emotional support; schools' approach to ELSA, and challenges. | 5 ELSAs | Yes |
| EThOs (Full text unavailable) | Garwood | 2012 | ELSAs' perspectives of impact of ELSA training and experiences of training and supervision | Mixed methods – questionnaires and interviews | Questionnaires - group supervision impacted positively on SAs' self-efficacy<br>Interviews - participants were empowered through the mechanisms of the programme. | Questionnaires - 26 ELSAs | No |
| EThOs | Grahamslaw | 2010 | Impact of ELSA project on ELSAs' and | Questionnaires, focus groups | ELSA project was found to have a positive impact on ELSA and children's self-efficacy beliefs. | - | No |

| Source | Author(s) | Year | Topic | Method/methodology | Findings | Participants | Peer-reviewed? |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | children's self-efficacy | | | | |
| EThOs | Haigh | 2019 | Impact of ELSA programme | Mixed methods – Emotional Literacy Checklist, interviews | Visual analysis of SCED graphs suggests a positive intervention impact in some contexts, but no clear impact due to limitations. | | No |
| Google Scholar | Harris | 2020 | ELSAs' understanding of emotional literacy and their views on the use of stories | Mixed methods – online questionnaire, interviews | Participants use stories as a relationship building tool. Stories were viewed as an effective way of communicating with children. Participants had a broadly consistent view of EL. | Questionnaires – 212 ELSAs Interviews – 12 ELSAs | No |
| Google Scholar | Hill et al. | 2013 | Evaluating perceived impact according to children, ELSAs & headteachers | Semi-structured interviews – thematic analysis | Three themes: organisational factors, practical experience of children, creating positive change. | 2 children, 3 ELSAs, 2 headteachers | No |
| Scopus | Hills | 2016 | Primary school children's perspectives on the ELSA project | Mixed methods – quantitative questionnaires and semi-structured interviews | Importance of therapeutic relationship, having a space to talk and think about feelings, building resilience, confidence and self-esteem – all factors that contributed to perceived positive impact of ELSA programme. | Questionnaires - 53 children | Yes |
| ERIC | Krause et al. | 2020 | Pupil's perspectives of the impact of the ELSA programme on wellbeing | Semi-structured interviews – thematic analysis | Themes: feelings and emotions, engagement, resilience, hopes and aspirations, and relationships. Perceived positive impact on multiple components of wellbeing. | 13 primary and secondary pupils | Yes |
| EThOs | Leighton | 2015 | ELSAs' perceptions of ELSA training | Semi-structured interviews, reflective journals – inductive thematic analysis | Training provided ELSAs with a greater understanding of emotions. Ppts felt more competent post-training. Obstacles from senior management and colleagues. Challenge of working with parents. | 7 ELSAs | No |

| Source | Author(s) | Year | Topic | Method/methodology | Findings | Participants | Peer-reviewed? |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| EThOs | Mann | 2014 | Mixed methods evaluation of ELSA programme – ELSAs' perceptions of the role and training | Mixed methods – Emotional Literacy Checklist and SDQ, focus groups and questionnaires – thematic analysis | Not possible to determine impact of ELSA. Themes: pressures and challenges of role, role, training experiences, pre-existing knowledge of emotional wellbeing, professional skills and knowledge. | 5 TAs, 5 pupils – experimental group | No |
| ERIC | McEwen | 2019 | ELSAs' and children's experiences | Semi-structured interviews (including Q-sort activity for ELSAs; comic-strip activity for children) – thematic analysis | ELSA-child relationship is central to both ELSAs' and children's experiences of the programme. ELSAs' themes: attributes of the ELSA, quality of the relationship, implementation factors, confidence. Children's themes: quality of relationships, attributes of the ELSA, confidentiality, enjoyable sessions, informal drop-in sessions. | 8 ELSAs & 7 children | Yes |
| EThOs | Miles | 2015 | ELSAs' perceptions of the ELSA-pupil relationship | Semi-structured interviews – thematic analysis | Seven themes: giving time to pupils; having a two-way relationship; respect and understand the child as an individual; trust; confidentiality; the pupil talks while the ELSA listens, and flexibility. | 12 ELSAs | No |
| ELSA Network website | Murray | 2010 | Evaluation of ELSA impact | Pre- and post- measures, as rated by ELSAs | 77% of children had an increased score of emotional literacy on the ELC (Faupel, 2003) after 6 weeks of the ELSA intervention. | Unknown number of ELSA ppts | No |
| EThOs | Nicholson-Roberts | 2019 | How ELSA project operates in secondary schools | Multiple case study – including interviews – thematic analysis | Intervention length was longer than guidelines. ELSA-pupil relationship was key. Unique ELSA qualities. ELSA-teacher and ELSA-parent communication was limited. Emotional impact on ELSAs was challenging. | Interviews – 7 ELSA stakeholders (including ELSAs, school staff, pupils) | No |
| ERIC | Osborne & Burton | 2014 | ELSAs' views on supervision | Questionnaire | Majority of ELSAs felt their needs were being met in supervision. Supervision | 270 ELSAs | Yes |

| Source | Author(s) | Year | Topic | Method/methodology | Findings | Participants | Peer-reviewed? |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | | was a useful time to discuss cases, share ideas and problem-solve. | | |
| EThOs | Peters | 2020 | YP's experiences and understanding of the ELSA programme | Multiple case study design: semi-structured interviews, drawing tasks, diaries, focus group | ELSA qualities and the ELSA-YP relationship is important to the YP experience. ELSAs described difficulties ending the intervention. | Interviews - 4 YPs and 3 ELSAs | No |
| Google Scholar | Pickering et al. | 2019 | Critique of the ELSA evidence base | - | Some evidence to suggest that ELSA can be effective, but what makes a particular ELSA intervention successful remains unknown. | - | No |
| EThOs | Rees | 2016 | ELSAs' self-efficacy and trait-emotional intelligence pre- and post- training; ELSAs' perceptions of their future role | Multi-methods – questionnaires and focus group – thematic analysis | Four main themes: systemic issues, improved knowledge and understanding, benefits of ELSA for children and TAs, low self-efficacy and confidence. | Questionnaires – unknown | No |
| EThOs | Ridley | 2017 | Analysis of content of ELSA supervision | Recording of three supervision sessions – thematic analysis | 11 main themes & 46 subthemes. ELSA main themes: the nature of ELSA work, the sharing of ELSA work, developing thinking, skills and approaches to ELSA work, working with systems, the support offered by the group. EP main themes: developing thinking, EP development of ELSAs' skills, EP support of the individual and the group, management of the group supervision session, management of the ELSAs' work. | Three supervision groups (ELSAs and EPs) | No |
| ERIC | Wilding & Claridge | 2016 | Parental perceptions of ELSA impact | Semi-structured interviews – thematic analysis | A majority of parents thought ELSA impacted positively on social and emotional development – transferring from school to home context. Parents thought home-school communication | 7 parents | Yes |

| Source | Author(s) | Year | Topic | Method/methodology | Findings | Participants | Peer-reviewed? |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | | could be better. Agreed and measurable targets and outcome and plans for next steps would also improve the programme. | | |
| ERIC | Wong et al. | 2020 | Primary school children's perspectives and experiences of ELSA support | Semi-structured interviews – thematic analysis | Four core themes: positive relationships, unique qualities, facilitates skill development, and positive impact. | 12 Key Stage 2 pupils | Yes |

Databases searched: SCOPUS, ERIC, PsycInfo, EThOs
Additional sources: ELSA Network website, Google Scholar
Search terms: "ELSA", "emotional literacy support assistant"

# Appendix B: Ethical approval

The University of Nottingham
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The University of Nottingham
University Park
Nottingham
NG7 2RD

T: +44 (0)115 8467403 or (0)115 9514344

SJ/tp

Ref: **S1278**

Monday 21st September 2020

Dear Nicholas Durbin and Kate Endersby,

**Ethics Committee Review**

Thank you for submitting an account of your proposed research **'Experiences of the Emotional Literacy Support Assistant role in the context of theCOVID-19 pandemic: an interpretative phenomenological analysis.'**

That proposal has now been reviewed by the Ethics Committee and I am pleased to tell you that your submission has met with the committee's approval.

Final responsibility for ethical conduct of your research rests with you or your supervisor. The Codes of Practice setting out these responsibilities have been published by the British Psychological Society and the University Research Ethics Committee. If you have any concerns whatever during the conduct of your research then you should consult those Codes of Practice. The Committee should be informed immediately should any participant complaints or adverse events arise during the study.

Independently of the Ethics Committee procedures, supervisors also have responsibilities for the risk assessment of projects as detailed in the safety pages of the University web site. Ethics Committee approval does not alter, replace, or remove those responsibilities, nor does it certify that they have been met.

Yours sincerely

*Professor Stephen Jackson*
*Chair, Ethics Committee*

## Appendix C: Recruitment letter

Dear _____

**RE: Research Opportunity – exploring experiences of the ELSA role in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic**

I am a Trainee Educational Psychologist working for X Educational Psychology Service. As part of my Doctorate in Applied Educational Psychology at University of Nottingham, I am carrying out research exploring experiences of the ELSA role in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. This research is being supervised by Dr Nick Durbin at the University of Nottingham. I am contacting you as you have been an ELSA for more than a year in a primary school setting. I would very much appreciate your help.

The purpose of this research is to explore perceptions and experiences of the ELSA role during the Covid-19 pandemic, with a focus on gaining a greater understanding of current experiences of the role and exploring possible implications on the initial ELSA training programme and ongoing supervision offered to ELSAs by Educational Psychologists (EPs).

You do not have to participate in this study. A decision not to participate will not affect your role or relationship with the Educational Psychology Service in any way. However, if you choose to become involved in this research opportunity, you will participate in a one-to-one interview with me, which would take place virtually, over an MS Teams video call in October/November 2020, at a time convenient to you. The interview is expected to last between 45 – 90 minutes and will be audio recorded and saved anonymously as a file using the managed environment of Office365, in order to comply with legal and ethical regulations. I will then transcribe the interview. Your name will not appear anywhere in the transcript. You will be given a made-up name, and generic names will be given to any other people or services mentioned in the interview. Any personal details will be removed from the transcript to protect your identity. Once I have transcribed the interview, you will be offered the chance to check the transcript and make amendments if you wish. The recording of the interview will be destroyed following the completion and publication of the research. The anonymised transcript will be kept for a minimum of 7 years.

The research would be carried out in line with the ethical guidelines of the British Psychological Society (2014) and relevant legislation, including General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the Data Protection Act (2018), which includes ensuring the confidentiality of data and the right to withdraw from the research at any point. As a participant, you would be provided with an information sheet detailing the purpose and nature of the research and given an opportunity to provide written consent.

If you are interested in taking part in this study, please contact me by email or by telephone so I can arrange to provide more detailed information on the study, obtain your consent to participate and arrange a date for interview.

Thank you in advance.
Kind regards

Kate Endersby
Trainee Educational Psychologist
Katharine.endersby@nottingham.ac.uk

Supervisor:
Dr. Nick Durbin
University of Nottingham

Appendix D: Information sheet

**School of Psychology**

Information Sheet

*Title of Project:* Exploring experiences of the Emotional Literacy Support Assistant role in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic: an interpretative phenomenological analysis.

*Ethics Approval Number or Taught Project Archive Number:*

*Researcher(s): Kate Endersby [katharine.endersby@nottingham.ac.uk]*

*Supervisor(s): Dr Nick Durbin [nicholas.durbin@nottingham.ac.uk]*

This is an invitation to take part in a research study exploring experiences of the ELSA role during the Covid-19 pandemic. The study aims to gain a greater understanding of current experiences of the ELSA role, and explore the possible implications of these experiences on the initial ELSA training programme and ongoing half-termly supervision offered to ELSAs by Educational Psychologists (EPs).

You have been invited to participate as you have been in the ELSA role for more than a year in a primary school setting. If you choose to become involved in this research opportunity, you will be asked to have a one-to-one interview with the researcher to explore your views and experiences of being an ELSA in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. The interview would take place virtually, over an MS Teams video call, arranged at a time convenient to you. The interview is expected to last between 45 – 90 minutes and will be audio recorded and saved anonymously as a file on a password-protected laptop. I will then transcribe the interview. You will be given a made-up name, and generic names will be given to any other people or services mentioned in the interview. Once I have transcribed the interview, you will be offered the chance to check the transcript and make amendments if you wish. The recording of the interview will be destroyed following the completion and publication of the research.

As the study involves the perspectives of a small sample of ELSAs, there is a chance that you will recognise some of the things you said in my research study. Your name will not appear anywhere in the study. You will be given a made-up name, and generic names will be used in place of any names of other people or services mentioned in the interview. Any personal details will be removed from transcript to protect your identity.

As this research is being conducted online, I am obliged to make you aware that there is always a potential risk of intrusion by outside agents, for example through hacking, and therefore the possibility of being identified.

You do not have to take part in this research, and you are free to withdraw at any point, without giving a reason. This will not affect your role or relationship with the Educational Psychology Service in any way.

Your name will not appear anywhere in my research and what you say will be only used for my research and any subsequent publication that stems from this. There will be an opportunity to

receive details of the findings of the study at a later date (before August 2021) by contacting me via email (katharine.endersby@nottingham.ac.uk). If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to ask me now.

If you have any complaints about
the study, please contact:
Stephen
Jackson (Chair of Ethics Committee)
stephen.jackson@nottingham.ac.uk

Appendix E: Consent form

**School of Psychology**

Consent Form

*Title of Project:* Exploring experiences of the Emotional Literacy Support Assistant role in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic: an interpretative phenomenological analysis.

*Ethics Approval Number or Taught Project Archive Number:*

*Researcher(s): Kate Endersby [katharine.endersby@nottingham.ac.uk]*

*Supervisor(s): Dr Nick Durbin [nicholas.durbin@nottingham.ac.uk]*

The participant should answer these questions independently:

- Have you read and understood the Information Sheet? YES/NO
- Have you had the opportunity to ask questions about the study? YES/NO
- Have all your questions been answered satisfactorily (if applicable)? YES/NO
- Do you understand that you are free to withdraw from the study? YES/NO
  (at any time and without giving a reason)
- I give permission for my data from this study to be shared with other researchers provided that my anonymity is completely protected.
  YES/NO
- I give permission for the interview to be recorded via MS Teams and a digital recording device.
  YES/NO
- Do you agree to take part in the study? YES/NO

"This study has been explained to me to my satisfaction, and I agree to take part. I understand that I am free to withdraw at any time."

Signature of the Participant:

Date:

Name (in block capitals)

I have explained the study to the above participant and he/she has agreed to take part.

Signature of researcher:

Date:

## Appendix F: Debrief sheet

*Title of Project:* **Exploring experiences of the Emotional Literacy Support Assistant role in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic: an interpretative phenomenological analysis.**

*Ethics Approval Number or Taught Project Archive Number:*

*Researcher(s): Kate Endersby [katharine.endersby@nottingham.ac.uk]*

*Supervisor(s): Dr Nick Durbin [nicholas.durbin@nottingham.ac.uk]*

*Research Ethics Committee (Psychology) [lp-ethics@exmail.nottingham.ac.uk]*

Dear _____

Thank you very much for agreeing to be involved in my research study. The information that I have gathered from this process will help me to explore experiences of the ELSA role in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic.

I will now transcribe this interview, and I will contact you by email to offer you the chance to check the transcript and make amendments if you wish.

The data from this interview will then be analysed and written up in my research study. Your name will not appear anywhere in my writing.

If, for any reason, you don't want your information to be included as part of the study, please contact me via my email address (see top of letter). The interview recording will be stored on a password-protected laptop and will be destroyed after the research viva has been completed. The anonymised transcript will be destroyed approximately 7 years.

If you feel that during the interview, thoughts and feelings have arisen that you would like to discuss further, please consult of the services below:

| | |
|---|---|
| **Samaritans** | **116 123** (free 24-hour helpline)<br>www.samaritans.org.uk |
| **Mind** | www.mind.org.uk<br>Click on the 'Get help now' box |

In addition, you could also contact the Nottinghamshire Mental Health Helpline (0300 555 0730), which is available 9-5pm Monday-Friday for anyone who needs emotional support or information about what help is available locally for support with mental health.
Thank you again for your participation.

Yours sincerely

Kate Endersby

Trainee Educational Psychologist
University of Nottingham

If you have any complaints about
the study, please contact:
Stephen
Jackson (Chair of Ethics Committee)
stephen.jackson@nottingham.ac.uk

## Appendix G: Initial interview schedule

Main questions can be found in bold below. Prompts/questions to go deeper may include: *How? Why? What were you thinking when? How were you feeling when?* (Smith et al., 2009).

1. ***Please could you tell me about your role as an ELSA at the moment and what this entails?***

2. ***If we go back to the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, I wonder if you could tell me a bit about this time and what it felt like to be an ELSA?***

3. ***Can you tell me about what your ELSA work looked like throughout the pandemic?***

4. ***Can you talk about any opportunities that arose in regard to your ELSA role during the pandemic?***

5. ***Can you talk about any challenges you experienced as an ELSA during the pandemic?***

6. ***Can you describe how others (e.g., school staff/parents) related/interacted with you as an ELSA throughout the pandemic?***

7. ***Where do you think your role as an ELSA begins and ends?***

8. ***What does being an ELSA mean to you?***

9. ***What do you think being an ELSA looks like in the future?***

Ending:

- *Is there anything I should have asked you, but I didn't?*
- *How have you found this interview?*
- Talk through the debrief sheet
- Tell them what will happen next and express thanks to the participant

## Appendix H: Refined interview schedule

Pre-amble: Introduction and rapport building with the participant

- Outline what we will talk about/that the interview will last for approximately an hour
- Outline the right to withdraw
- Explain confidentiality
- Acknowledge the sensitivity of the Covid-19 context and guide them to only share experiences of the role that they feel emotionally safe about talking about
- Remind participants not to disclose identifiable details of children and young people they have worked with
- Clarify nature of my role today as different to my TEP/ELSA supervisor role – emphasise that they are separate – reassure confidentiality in this sense with relation to supervision
- Explain there are no right answers – this is about your story and your experience – importance of speaking freely
- Ask whether they are still happy to talk to me
- Informal chat/rapport building

Main interview questions can be found in bold below. Prompts/questions to go deeper may include: *How? Why? What were you thinking when? How were you feeling when?* (Smith et al., 2009).

1. ***Can you tell me a bit about how you came to be an ELSA?***

2. ***Can you describe your early experiences of ELSA work? How did that feel?***

3. ***If we move forwards to the start of the Covid-19 pandemic in March this year, I wonder if you could tell me a bit about this time. What did your role as an ELSA look like?***

4. ***Can you tell me about how it felt to be an ELSA at this time?***

5. ***As the months have passed by since March, has your ELSA role changed?***

6. ***Moving forward to the present day, can you tell me a bit about your experience as an ELSA at the moment?***

5. ***Can you talk about any opportunities that have arisen for your role during the pandemic?***

6. ***Can you talk about any challenges you have experienced as an ELSA during the pandemic?***

7. ***Can you describe how others (e.g., school staff/parents) related/interacted with you as an ELSA from the start of the pandemic onwards?***

8. ***How would you define the role of an ELSA?***

9. ***What do you think being an ELSA might look like in the future?***

-

Ending:

- Are there any further comments you want to add about your work as an ELSA during the Covid-19 pandemic?
- How have you found this interview?
- Talk through the debrief sheet
- Tell them what will happen next and express thanks to the participant

Appendix I: Example of transcript extract (Rachel)

Key:
R: Researcher
I: Interviewee

R: Yes, that - as you say - that adapting and I'm interested in that phrase you used as well, you were 'wearing a number of hats'?

I: Yeh, definitely, definitely, I mean because it was a learning curv - I mean I'm going through the file now and thinking like all that stuff that we did and we found and we sent out, looking at it all I'm thinking goodness me, erm… (laughs) it's quite - I mean I'm looking at it and I'm thinking I can't believe we did all that erm… [and what is your] you know we're sending some notes out to children we've been working with, we found these - it was a great big smile for you or something, and we decided we'd post a little letter out to all the children we were currently working with and you know, just to remind them that we were still there, and they could still contact us, we encouraged them if they wanted to, they could send us work that they'd done or… you know, but a lot of it was like it's teaching, telling parents as well not to be too hard on themselves if the kids doing two or three hours a day, that was enough type of thing, [yes, yeh]

R: And so, what, what are your thoughts kind of looking at that file now, and seeing that? All of that work?

I: It just seems like an age ago… already, erm… but I suppose at the time it was all you could do, wasn't it because none of us could really go out and do anything, it was just like accessing as much… and I think as well, speaking to different families, you realise I've got kids that were literally working the school day, you know, all day long, and doing extra and doing online things with peo- with … some parents really driving that versus kids that will have done nothing, they'll be some kids that did no work at all, and some of the ones you know that you're the keenest to get hold of, you know, you really struggled, you know, you know that they're the ones that are going to struggle coming back…

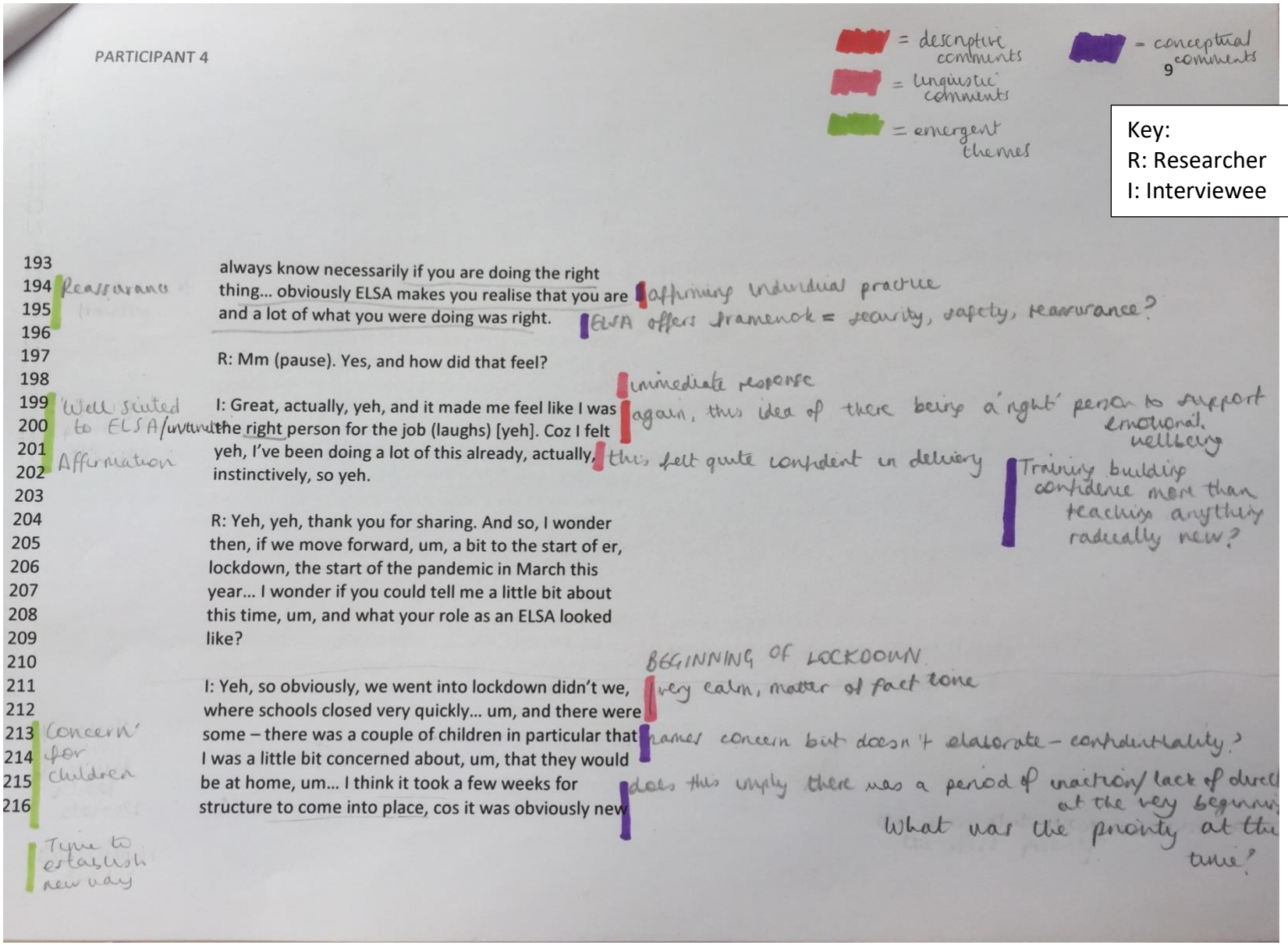
R: And how did that feel as an ELSA? To have that struggle of getting hold of certain families?

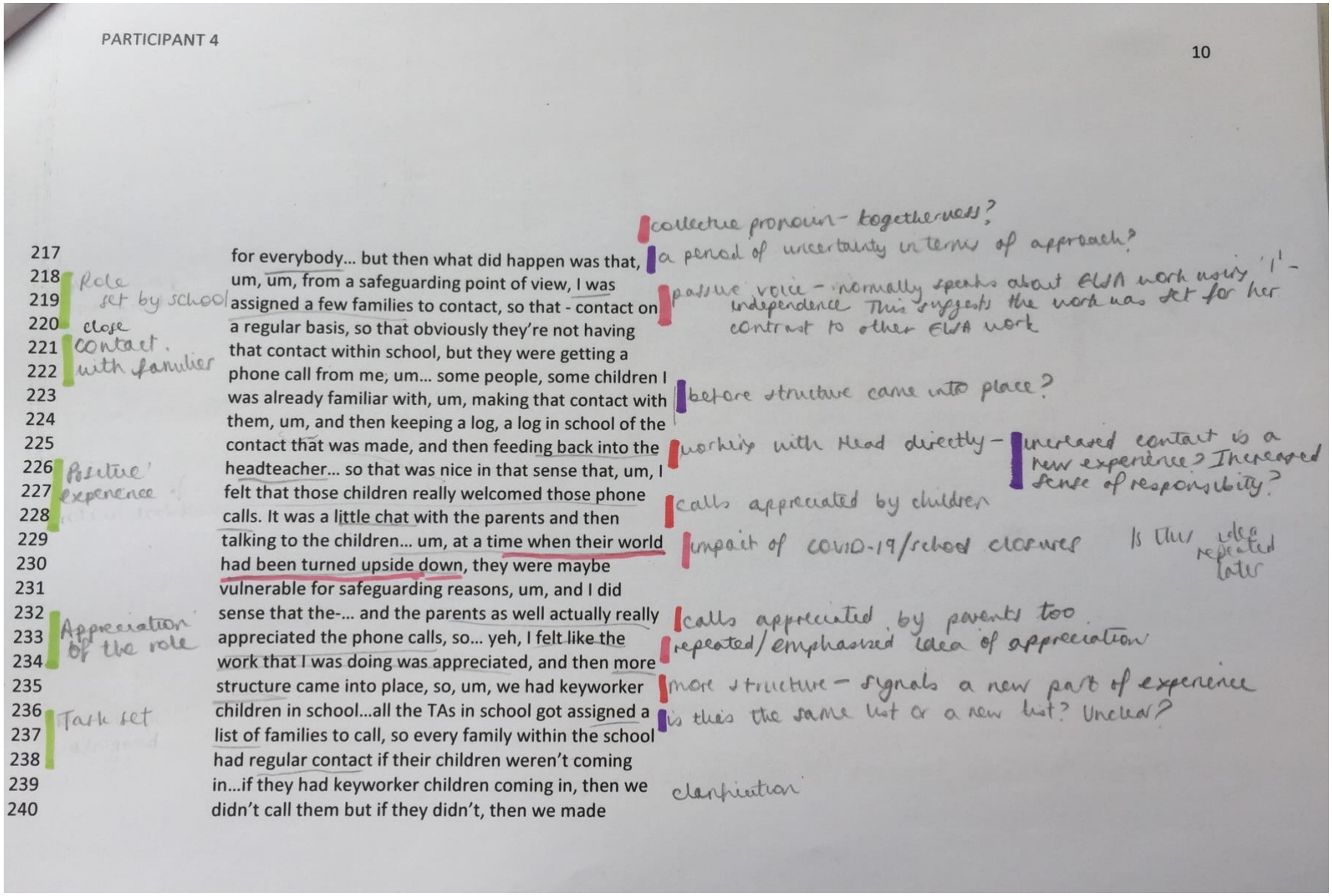
I: It was just frustrating really, because you know you can only… I mean - I think… most of the ones I wanted to speak to I managed to - I think there was a few odd ones that

were on the SENCo list that were - you were a bit more concerned about, then I think the SENCo probably spoke more to them… erm… yeh, I mean… some - I tell you, I tell you what I struggled with a lot was that I knew that I was you know - we'd made a list of people we thought the vulnerable children were, so we'd took all the children that were on our ELSA books at that time, we took all the children from the SEND register, and we made the initial calls and we touched base and we saw who needed help and who didn't, but I suppose it was like well that's just a list of… who we know are vulnerable. I felt very much like what about all these kids that we have no idea if they're being looked after properly, we don't know if they're ok, we don't know if they've had any education, and how do we know that? I mean I know it's not technically our responsibility, I mean we were making sure that, you know, when they set up the classes, someone was touching base with every single child, but I… I think… if I had been a parent and I hadn't rang in, I'm sure a lot of them probably felt abandoned, because even though… I think that might be how some people felt, because even though the school website, the school was communicating all the time via emails on the website, they were sending work, but I

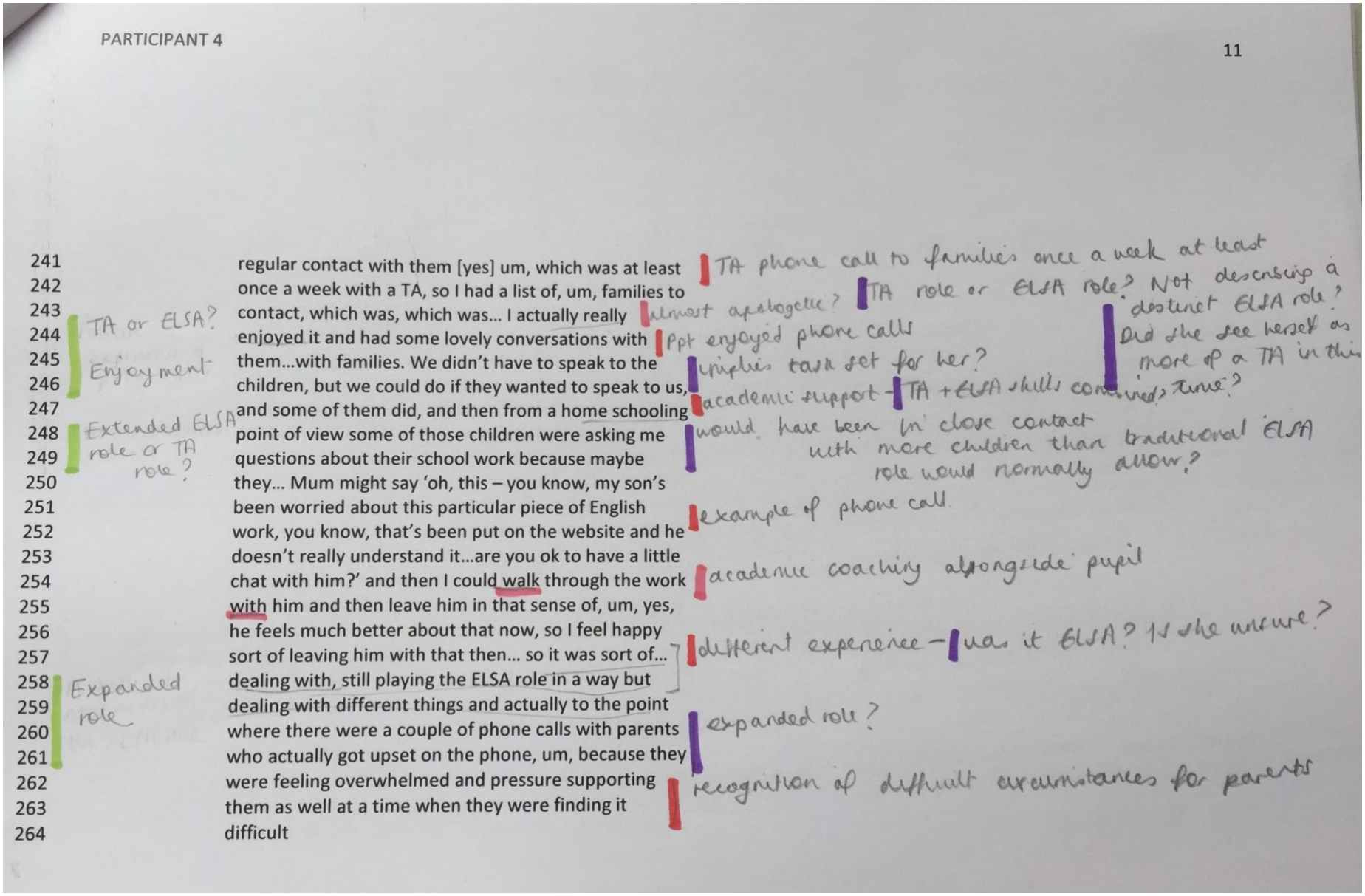
suppose for some people, if you can't access that very well, or if there was a parent who for all we know can't read very well or hasn't got the technology or hasn't got any Wifi or hasn't got any data, and they've just - maybe they haven't got a laptop or maybe haven't got - have only got a phone to do all that work on, how… you know, I should think they might have thought, well I've heard nothing from school - no one this, that, so I sort of worried about people that might have been having a rough time and we didn't know… whereas in school we tend - you know, don't you, because they're being seen every day, so I felt for me well it's ok, I've got the list of that I was working on but what about all the kids that I was ready to start working with that in the summer term, it was like by the time we broke up, um… it was nearly Easter wasn't it, so I was due to start working with the children but of course I cou- I couldn't [yes], so I know that they've got issues, so I tried to make a point of thinking well maybe I should check in on them as well, but I hadn't… so it was those sort of things, do you know what I mean [yes] that something is in a …. And how they've then been managing. So, it was very much the unknown, yes

Appendix J: Example of initial notations (Louisa)


PARTICIPANT 4
= descriptive comments
= conceptual comments
= linguistic comments
= emergent themes
9
Key:
R: Researcher
I: Interviewee
always know necessarily if you are doing the right thing... obviously ELSA makes you realise that you are and a lot of what you were doing was right.
Reassurance
affirming individual practice
ELSA offers framework = security, safety, reassurance?
R: Mm (pause). Yes, and how did that feel?
immediate response
I: Great, actually, yeh, and it made me feel like I was the right person for the job (laughs) [yeh]. Coz I felt yeh, I've been doing a lot of this already, actually, instinctively, so yeh.
Well suited to ELSA/ role
Affirmation
again, this idea of there being a 'right' person to support emotional wellbeing
this felt quite confident in delivery
Training building confidence more than teaching anything radically new?
R: Yeh, yeh, thank you for sharing. And so, I wonder then, if we move forward, um, a bit to the start of er, lockdown, the start of the pandemic in March this year... I wonder if you could tell me a little bit about this time, um, and what your role as an ELSA looked like?
BEGINNING OF LOCKDOWN
I: Yeh, so obviously, we went into lockdown didn't we, where schools closed very quickly... um, and there were some – there was a couple of children in particular that I was a little bit concerned about, um, that they would be at home, um... I think it took a few weeks for structure to come into place, cos it was obviously new
very calm, matter of fact tone
names concern but doesn't elaborate – confidentiality?
Concern for children
does this imply there was a period of inaction/ lack of direct
at the very beginning
What was the priority at this time?
Time to establish new way




217 for everybody... but then what did happen was that,
218 um, um, from a safeguarding point of view, I was
219 assigned a few families to contact, so that - contact on
220 a regular basis, so that obviously they're not having
221 that contact within school, but they were getting a
222 phone call from me, um... some people, some children I
223 was already familiar with, um, making that contact with
224 them, um, and then keeping a log, a log in school of the
225 contact that was made, and then feeding back into the
226 headteacher... so that was nice in that sense that, um, I
227 felt that those children really welcomed those phone
228 calls. It was a little chat with the parents and then
229 talking to the children... um, at a time when their world
230 had been turned upside down, they were maybe
231 vulnerable for safeguarding reasons, um, and I did
232 sense that the-... and the parents as well actually really
233 appreciated the phone calls, so... yeh, I felt like the
234 work that I was doing was appreciated, and then more
235 structure came into place, so, um, we had keyworker
236 children in school...all the TAs in school got assigned a
237 list of families to call, so every family within the school
238 had regular contact if their children weren't coming
239 in...if they had keyworker children coming in, then we
240 didn't call them but if they didn't, then we made



regular contact with them [yes] um, which was at least once a week with a TA, so I had a list of, um, families to contact, which was, which was... I actually really enjoyed it and had some lovely conversations with them...with families. We didn't have to speak to the children, but we could do if they wanted to speak to us, and some of them did, and then from a home schooling point of view some of those children were asking me questions about their school work because maybe they... Mum might say 'oh, this – you know, my son's been worried about this particular piece of English work, you know, that's been put on the website and he doesn't really understand it...are you ok to have a little chat with him?' and then I could walk through the work with him and then leave him in that sense of, um, yes, he feels much better about that now, so I feel happy sort of leaving him with that then... so it was sort of... dealing with, still playing the ELSA role in a way but dealing with different things and actually to the point where there were a couple of phone calls with parents who actually got upset on the phone, um, because they were feeling overwhelmed and pressure supporting them as well at a time when they were finding it difficult

TA or ELSA?

Enjoyment

Extended ELSA role or TA role?

Expanded role

TA phone call to families once a week at least

almost apologetic?

TA role or ELSA role? Not describing a distinct ELSA role?

Ppt enjoyed phone calls

implies task set for her?

academic support – TA + ELSA skills combined, time?

Did she see herself as more of a TA in this

would have been in close contact with more children than traditional ELSA role would normally allow?

example of phone call.

academic coaching alongside pupil

different experience – was it ELSA? Is she unsure?

expanded role?

recognition of difficult circumstances for parents

R: Mmm (pause). Yeh, can you tell me a little bit more about that, kind of supporting parents?

I: Um... well, there was one particular family, um, where I'd called her at a bad time, um, we always, we would always text, um, before we called and we would say 'we will be contacting you tomorrow' so they always had advance notice, but we didn't give a specific time because I would have a big list of families to call so I, so I didn't commit to a specific time to call them, and I just caught her at a moment where she said 'I'm really sorry' and I said 'do you want me to go?' and she said 'no no, it's ok', um, and she was a little bit tearful on the phone, and I said 'do you want to talk about it? It's fine, you know, I, you know, we all feel like this at times, it's a really difficult time, so I was just trying to empathise with her, um, and relate to what she was going through, so she was saying her family and her children and feeling everything and I think her business had been affected by coronavirus, um, so again I was just trying to - through my own experiences and talking about my family a little bit as well, I just tried to sort of relate to her situation and say 'yes, I've got a teenager

example
outlining school practice
replaying conversation with parent
indicating a parental need for support?
Deploying skills with parents
validating feelings
using ELSA skills/approach with parents
supporting emotional wellbeing of parents
PTO
differences with ELSA approach - supporting adults, using own experiences to promote shared experience

connection / mutual benefits

Appreciation

New territory

Job satisfaction

Different version of the role

ELSA beyond school

as well, I know how difficult that can be' and that sort of thing, um, and she, she really appreciated it, and we really bonded in that phone call, and at the end of it, you know, she said 'oh thank you so much, I really appreciate that' and, um, I felt like I'd done so much more than just ringing up to check up on the kids, you know, and actually really helped her as well [yes].. but it was above and beyond the role in a way, but I didn't have a problem doing it and felt, felt a sense of, um, satisfaction at the end of it, that I'd helped somebody...but there was another example as well with er, with somebody who was actually a nurse on the front line and I had an opportunity to thank her for the work that she was doing [yes] ... she was um, that was, that was like a real honour to be able to do that, and she was, um, not emotional but tired, you know she was just tired really, and... so I was able to talk to her, and yeh (pause). Yeh, so some different, from that normal ELSA role within the school [yes, yes] which it would be wouldn't it due to the really different circumstances that we were under.

R: Mmm (pause). And so I wonder then kind of thinking back, um, to that time in all of its differences, um, how

said with happiness and joy

shared benefits - more of a sense of equality here

appreciation of the role

value of phone calls -

new territory of supporting parents' wellbeing

you can tell how much the ppt gained from this practice

mutual benefits?

ppt shows admiration for 'frontline' worker

Does she also see herself as a 'frontline' worker?

modesty - did she encourage/support the parent and is omitting?

ELSA beyond the school? Interesting word choice!

not framed negatively - the circumstances are different.

did being an ELSA in that time feel in comparison to your normal role?

I: It felt really good actually, because I felt like, um, I was really using my skills... um, I really gained a lot of confidence, because prior to that, I hadn't really had a lot of, um, contact with parents actually, and it was very much about the children, um... and through talking on a daily basis to families and parents, and really connecting with them... gave me a lot of confidence. They all really appreciated the contact that was being made and the support that was being given [yes] and so I have so much more confidence now actually talking... to parents, and obviously around sensitive issues, because what we've all been through has been a very, um, difficult and sensitive time, um... so I feel, yeh I feel much more confident with that now, I felt like the profile of ELSA was, was raised, um... I feel like the headteacher acknowledges the value of it so much more now [yes]. Um, for example, in lockdown there was a, um, oh, I'm trying to think... I've actually got some notes I'm just going to quickly have a look [oh yes, sure] (pause). There was an issue with a particular family that was raised, so the headteacher asked me,

Opportunities to grow

Real connection

Close contact with families

Appreciation of role

Increased confidence

Increased value of role

lockdown was a chance to put ELSA skills into practice

said in a surprising way. Due to time constraints? Not having the chance to do full ELSA role in the past

much more regular contact/close contact with families

emphasis on connection - genuine connection

offered almost as an explanation for new confidence?

appreciation of the role

'confidence' is repeated

the context and new task gave rise to new skills.

Recognition of ELSA role or ppt's work personally?

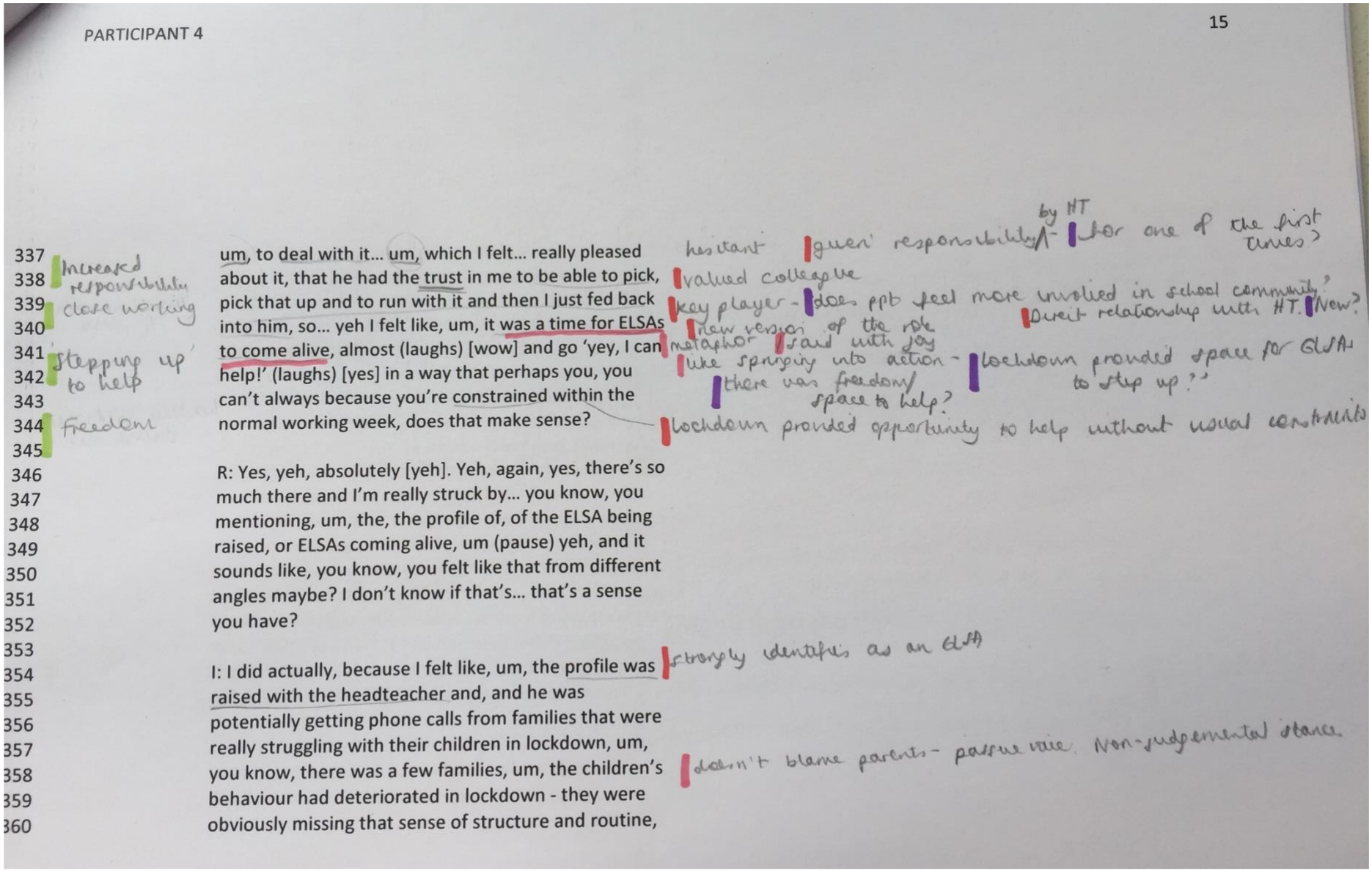
ELSA role more valued by HT

preparedness - conscientiousness - enthusiasm for the role

school concern

ppt goes to retrieve notes

Feels like it was a context where ppt thrived - making real connection offering valued support to families



um, to deal with it... um, which I felt... really pleased about it, that he had the trust in me to be able to pick, pick that up and to run with it and then I just fed back into him, so... yeh I felt like, um, it was a time for ELSAs to come alive, almost (laughs) [wow] and go 'yey, I can help!' (laughs) [yes] in a way that perhaps you, you can't always because you're constrained within the normal working week, does that make sense?

R: Yes, yeh, absolutely [yeh]. Yeh, again, yes, there's so much there and I'm really struck by... you know, you mentioning, um, the, the profile of, of the ELSA being raised, or ELSAs coming alive, um (pause) yeh, and it sounds like, you know, you felt like that from different angles maybe? I don't know if that's... that's a sense you have?

I: I did actually, because I felt like, um, the profile was raised with the headteacher and, and he was potentially getting phone calls from families that were really struggling with their children in lockdown, um, you know, there was a few families, um, the children's behaviour had deteriorated in lockdown - they were obviously missing that sense of structure and routine,

361 um... and, um, we were then able to invite them in
362 along with the keyworker children, which was really
363 good. Um, so then, ELSA – so when the keyworker
364 children were in school, ELSA picked - ELSA in school
365 picked back up again (laughs) [yes, yeh] so then I was
366 able to take on some new children... so was still, um, in
367 that lockdown time, if you like... these children,
368 because of their difficult, um, behaviours they were
369 displaying or it may have been – there was, there was
370 um, er, a parental separation with one particular child,
371 so she was able to come in and then I was able to have
372 chats with her about what had happened, um, and... in
373 a sense, because of the thing were kind of – I know, I
374 know the teachers were doing home schooling, um...
375 but from a headteacher point of view, I do feel like his,
376 his acknowledgement of what we were going through
377 and... um, the effect it had on everybody's wellbeing
378 really, really hit him actually, um... to the point where
379 yeh, he now values ELSA so much more, I, I believe –
380 than before.
381
382 R: Mmm, mmm. And how – it sounds an obvious
383 question, but how do you know that? How do you

close working

Traditional role within school

Valued role

who? ELSA with HT? Implies team – joint responsibility?

qualifies ELSA with 'in school' | This suggests ppt does think she was doing ELSA work previously

almost a distinction between ELSA within school, ELSA beyond school

separation of child from behaviour

implying teachers were doing homeschooling so they don't have a raised view of the ELSA at home?

HT understands more

qualifier – emphasising own POV

HT values ELSA more

was ELSA not highly esteemed previously?

Appendix K: Example list of emergent themes with accompanying quotations (Louisa)

| | **Emergent theme** | **Line** | **Quotation** |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. | Identity as an ELSA | 6 | *Um, well I've been an ELSA for 2 years now* |
| 2. | Instinctive practice | 7 | *and I think what happened was, in my role as a TA in school, I was starting to, um, emotionally support pupils more and more, um, and in particular the older pupils within the school, and some quite sensitive issues such as self-harm… um, so I sort of felt like I was doing the best job that I could* |
| 3. | The need for new knowledge | 12 | *I raised it as a concern that I felt like I needed some more support, training, to be able to deal with these um, difficult and sensitive issues. Um, you know I did wonder within myself whether I was saying or doing the right things* |
| 4. | Passion and desire to help | 19 | *I just, I just, I raised it, I raised it with um, senior people within the school, and, and, really tried to get across - and with the SENCo as well - tried to get across my passion for mental health, and wanting to support pupils, um, and the fact that I was open to training.* |
| 5. | Privilege of role | 24 | *So I think all of those factors probably helped me be the one that was picked, when the opportunity arose um, for an ELSA within the school, and um, I'm not completely sure but hopefully um, the Head and people within the school, when that opportunity came up… yes it is needed, it is valid, and she would be a good person for the role.* |
| 6. | Holistic view of children | 37 | *Ooh, I, uh, just think we're all whole people, we're not – we're not robots that fit into boxes, so when the children come into school and they're expected to come in, sit down, be quiet, get on with your work, that can be really difficult for some children* |
| 7. | Understanding and empathy for children | 41 | *they may have had a really difficult morning, they might have difficulties going on at home, they might have friendship issues, it's not as black and white and straightforward for some children to be able to just come in, sit down and do what's expected of them, and those children don't always have the support that they need at home unfortunately,* |
| 8. | Value of role | 48 | *so I think it's a really, really valid and valuable role within primary schools. The right people to be in a position to be able support those pupils, um, in the right way* |
| 9. | Mental health in society | 52 | *and I think it's becoming more and more evident, it's becoming more and more recognised, and, and, thankfully society as a whole, mental health, I think, is more understood and acknowledged, um, which, which helps* |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 10. | Holistic view of children | 57 | *so it's about seeing that child as a whole person, and, um, a person that may have stuff hiding on the inside, may have stuff going on, um, so yeh, that's part of it for me, yeh.* |
| 11. | Shared qualities of the role | 65 | *I loved the training because it felt like you were sat amongst like-minded people, so um, unfortunately not everybody feels the same way about mental health, or the role of an ELSA within a school, um, so to actually sit amongst people that did care about mental health and people's emotional wellbeing… you know, to meet those like-minded people was really good* |
| 12. | Progression | 72 | *obviously the training was great, um, and… it just made you feel like you were on the path to doing something, make a difference and be able to do things to help people* |
| 13. | Discovering what works | 86 | *what I tried to do was to do quite small sessions initially with some children, um, that were sort of highlighted as, as needing it and, and quickly realised that wasn't actually working, and I needed to do longer sessions, so it was about managing the demand for it and my time, um, so I do half hour sessions now, which is much more appropriate* |
| 14. | Reassurance | 99 | *The ELSA training made me realise that actually a lot of what I was doing was right anyway, and it reminded me of some key things,* |
| 15. | Discovering the right approach | 113 | *well, after the training I was then able to reflect on that, and think 'no I'm not here to fix them, or to fix their problems, I'm here to support them and to guide them to find their own way through, and their own way to try and help themselves' [yes] so yeh, it was reflecting on my practice I suppose, and reflecting on those things and reminding myself of those key things…* |
| 16. | Continual learning | 125 | *so yeh, being able to use different, um, strategies [yes] … and learning as I went really (laughs)* |
| 17. | Counter-intuitive approach | 144 | *um, because I'm a mother and I wanted to sort of like swoop in, and, and wave a magic wand and make everything better again, um, so actually not being able to do that and, and having to think more carefully about how I approached things…um, I did find that quite difficult, yeh, I still do to be honest... um, the temptation is still to come in and wave a magic wand (laughs)* |
| 18. | Continual learning | 152 | *which isn't the right approach, so I do still have to remind myself of that on a regular basis,* |
| 19. | The ELSA approach | 160 | *I guess it's thinking about the way that you approach things and the way you're talking to the children, um, and you can use obviously things like 'I wonder if…' um, in those, that sort of language when you're talking to them.* |
| 20. | Balance between guiding and intervening | 166 | *I guess it's thinking about the way that you approach things and the way you're talking to the children, um, and you can use obviously things like 'I wonder if…' um, in those, that sort of language when you're talking to them.* |

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|---|---|---|---|
| 21. | Core features of the ELSA approach | 181 | *Um, I think… in the most part, it is sitting… with the correct body language in a, in a safe, private place, eye to eye, and looking at that child and really empathising with them, giving them that time and that space… you care about them, and you want to help them* |
| 22. | Reassurance | 192 | *but you don't always know necessarily if you are doing the right thing… obviously ELSA makes you realise that you are and a lot of what you were doing was right* |
| 23. | Well suited to the role | 199 | *Great, actually, yeh, and it made me feel like I was the right person for the job (laughs) [yeh]. Coz I felt yeh, I've been doing a lot of this already, actually, instinctively, so yeh* |
| 24. | Affirmation | 201 | *Coz I felt yeh, I've been doing a lot of this already, actually, instinctively, so yeh* |
| 25. | Concern for children | 213 | *and there were some – there was a couple of children in particular that I was a little bit concerned about, um, that they would be at home, um…* |
| 26. | Time to establish a new way | 215 | *I think it took a few weeks for structure to come into place, cos it was obviously new for everybody…* |
| 27. | Role set by school | 218 | *I was assigned a few families to contact, so that - contact on a regular basis, so that obviously they're not having that contact within school, but they were getting a phone call from me* |
| 28. | Contact with families | 221 | *but they were getting a phone call from me, um… some people, some children I was already familiar with, um, making that contact with them* |
| 29. | Positive experience | 226 | *so that was nice in that sense that, um, I felt that those children really welcomed those phone calls.* |
| 30. | Appreciation of the role | 232 | *and the parents as well actually really appreciated the phone calls, so… yeh, I felt like the work that I was doing was appreciated* |
| 31. | Task set | 236 | *all the TAs in school got assigned a list of families to call, so every family within the school had regular contact if their children weren't coming in…* |
| 32. | TA or ELSA? | 240 | *then we made regular contact with them [yes] um, which was at least once a week with a TA, so I had a list of, um, families to contact* |
| 33. | Enjoyment | 243 | *… I actually really enjoyed it and had some lovely conversations with them…with families.* |
| 34. | Extended ELSA role or TA role? | 247 | *then from a home-schooling point of view some of those children were asking me questions about their schoolwork* |
| 35. | Expanded role | 257 | *so it was sort of… dealing with, still playing the ELSA role in a way but dealing with different things and actually to the point where there were a couple of phone calls with parents who actually got upset on the phone,* |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 36. | Deploying skills with parents | 279 | *I said 'do you want to talk about it? It's fine, you know, I, you know, we all feel like this at times, it's a really difficult time, so I was just trying to empathise with her, um, and relate to what she was going through, so she was saying her family and her children and feeling everything and I think her business had been affected by coronavirus, um, so again I was just trying to - through my own experiences and talking about my family a little bit as well, I just tried to sort of relate to her situation* |
| 37. | Connection | 290 | *she, she really appreciated it, and we really bonded in that phone call, and at the end of it, you know, she said 'oh thank you so much, I really appreciate that'* |
| 38. | Mutual benefits | 295 | *but it was above and beyond the role in a way, but I didn't have a problem doing it and felt, felt a sense of, um, satisfaction at the end of it, that I'd helped somebody…* |
| 39. | Appreciation | 292 | *she said 'oh thank you so much, I really appreciate that'* |
| 40. | New territory | 296 | *but it was above and beyond the role in a way, but I didn't have a problem doing it* |
| 41. | Job satisfaction | 297 | *and felt, felt a sense of, um, satisfaction at the end of it, that I'd helped somebody…* |
| 42. | Different version of role | 306 | *Yeh, so some different, from that normal ELSA role within the school [yes, yes] which it would be wouldn't it due to the really different circumstances that we were under.* |
| 43. | Role 'beyond' school? | 306 | *Yeh, so some different, from that normal ELSA role within the school* |
| 44. | Opportunities to grow | 316 | *It felt really good actually, because I felt like, um, I was really using my skills* |
| 45. | Real connection | 320 | *through talking on a daily basis to families and parents, and really connecting with them… gave me a lot of confidence* |
| 46. | Close contact with families | 320 | *and through talking on a daily basis to families and parents* |
| 47. | Appreciation of role | 323 | *They all really appreciated the contact that was being made and the support that was being given* |
| 48. | Increased confidence | 324 | *and so I have so much more confidence now actually talking… to parents, and obviously around sensitive issues, because what we've all been through has been a very, um, difficult and sensitive time, um… so I feel, yeh I feel much more confident with that now,* |
| 49. | Increased value of role | 330 | *I felt like the profile of ELSA was, was raised, um… I feel like the headteacher acknowledges the value of it so much more now* |
| 50. | Increased responsibility | 336 | *There was an issue with a particular family that was raised, so the headteacher asked me, um, to deal with it… um, which I felt… really pleased about it, that he had the trust in me to be able to pick, pick that up and to run with it* |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 51. | Close working | 338 | *he had the trust in me to be able to pick, pick that up and to run with it and then I just fed back into him, so…* |
| 52. | Stepping up to help | 340 | *yeh I felt like, um, it was a time for ELSAs to come alive, almost (laughs) [wow] and go 'yey, I can help!' (laughs)* |
| 53. | Freedom | 340 | *it was a time for ELSAs to come alive, almost (laughs) [wow] and go 'yey, I can help!' (laughs) [yes] in a way that perhaps you, you can't always because you're constrained within the normal working week, does that make sense?* |
| 54. | Close working | 361 | *we were then able to invite them in along with the keyworker children* |
| 55. | Traditional role within school | 363 | *Um, so then, ELSA – so when the keyworker children were in school, ELSA picked - ELSA in school picked back up again (laughs) [yes, yeh] so then I was able to take on some new children… so was still, um, in that lockdown time, if you like…* |
| 56. | Valued role | 375 | *but from a headteacher point of view, I do feel like his, his acknowledgement of what we were going through and… um, the effect it had on everybody's wellbeing really, really hit him actually, um… to the point where yeh, he now values ELSA so much more, I, I believe – than before* |
| 57. | Active helping | 388 | *I asked for an ELSA website page, so I set up a whole web page on the school website….* |
| 58. | Serving the community | 390 | *I didn't call it ELSA – I didn't want… it sounds a bit silly but I didn't offend anybody within the school as in going 'this is mine, this is only ELSA, hands off!' [ok, ok] it wasn't meant to be that. I called it emotional wellbeing [great] um, and it was meant to be, um… not about me - I didn't want it to be about me, I wanted it to be about everybody, I wanted it to be all encompassing, um… for adults and children,* |
| 59. | Inclusion | 390 | *I didn't call it ELSA – I didn't want… it sounds a bit silly but I didn't offend anybody within the school as in going 'this is mine, this is only ELSA, hands off!' [ok, ok] it wasn't meant to be that. I called it emotional wellbeing* |
| 60. | Expanded role | 404 | *so I put links to those sort of things on there, and then links to websites such as ChildLine, um, Young Minds, um, and then more fun things like yoga and mindfulness and things like that on there* |
| 61. | Valued | 407 | *so he – the headteacher did personally thank me for that and said 'I've always wanted something like that' he said, 'and I've just never known how to go about it! (laughs) and then I just came along and just sort of said 'can I do this please?' (laughs) so he was really pleased about that* |
| 62. | Wholehearted support | 429 | *lots of teachers do really appreciate the role… the feeling I get is that, um, we've got some new younger teachers in and maybe it's, um, teacher training now, um, there's more – there's better acknowledgement I feel within the younger teachers of the, um, importance of emotional wellbeing… and, um, they embrace what I do, and they appreciate what I do* |
| 63. | Opposition | 441 | *I sense that it's not fully embraced by everybody unfortunately, and some people see it as a detraction from what we're trying to achieve* |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 64. | Empathy for teachers | 447 | *you know, I really appreciate that it's a really, really difficult job to be a teacher and they must feel under immense pressure… to not only, um, do everything that they need to do, but in, in doing that, to get children to, um… get good grades, because they feel that it's a, a reflection on them,* |
| 65. | Opposing views | 459 | *So, I do, I do understand, I do understand and I do appreciate that it's maybe not on everybody's agenda, and they feel that it's potentially a detraction from what they're trying to achieve and therefore, um, perhaps sometimes put hurdles in the way to it unfortunately* |
| 66. | Questioning effectiveness | 468 | *questioning whether it's valid for a particular child… if it's not, if it doesn't appear to be working straight away.* |
| 67. | The ELSA process | 485 | *Maybe that child could take a couple of years to make progress, and the process, we can't expect things to happen overnight, and, and, it's about building rapport with the child and that element of trust, so, so it's very difficult if a teacher doesn't see immediate results to question it sometimes (pause)* |
| 68. | Defending the role | 496 | *so if a teacher challenges… challenges it, I'll try and be really tactful in the way that I answer, um… but, but I find, I mean I am getting better at that actually, sticking up, sticking up for myself and sticking up for what I believe in* |
| 69. | Overpowered | 501 | *but if that person is quite a bit more senior than me, then I feel like 'oh, I'm just a TA, I'm just an ELSA', it sort of, it can be difficult for me to challenge their thoughts* |
| 70. | Defending the ELSA process | 513 | *So actually sort of saying 'well I believe that this is the right thing for this child, and although they haven't been fixed immediately, and you maybe don't see any results just yet, this, you know, this is still important for this particular child* |
| 71. | Defending the ELSA programme | 520 | *the support I've been trained to understand, um, through educational psychologists, um, the role, so it's backed up isn't it, it's backed up by educational psychologists, backed up by evidence, it's backed up by science, if you like* |
| 72. | Continued opposition | 534 | *Um (pause) interestingly, I don't think so unfortunately, and I would, I had really hoped… that that would change (pause) but I don't… I don't believe it has… which is a real shame [mm, yes] (pause) and I'm talking about one or two people here* |
| 73. | Receiving praise | 541 | *um, you know I had a teacher the other day say 'you should really be a full time ELSA really, shouldn't you?' (laughs) and I'd be 'yeh, I'd love that!' (laughs)* |
| 74. | Barrier to the role | 550 | *there's still a bit of a wall there unfortunately that I do come up against.* |
| 75. | Benefits of support | 572 | *when you feel supportive, supported, um… and people appreciate and understand what you are doing, it's easier, it is easier to communicate with them, they welcome you approaching them to talk about the children,* |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 76. | Support promotes communication | 585 | *so say for example there's something that I might want to suggest within the classroom that could be implemented that may help, um, I might just be told 'no, that's not possible, no that won't work'… so, so yes, it is, it does make, it can make that communi- communication is different, yes* |
| 77. | Personal fit for the role | 598 | *I take that as a real compliment, um, because that's acknowledging that what I do is worthwhile, that it's that it's needed, and actually, um, they haven't said so-and-so over there would be really good - they should be a full time ELSA, they said I (laughs) should be a full time ELSA and so I take that as a compliment (laughs* |
| 78. | Connection | 614 | *I feel like everybody… um, every communication was very welcome. Um, everybody was very friendly, and they would all ask how I was as well, which was very nice* |
| 79. | Appreciation | 618 | *and quite often at the end of the phone call they would, they would say 'oh thank you, really appreciate you taking the time to call, you know, it's lovely to have that connection'* |
| 80. | Increased understanding and empathy | 622 | *um, at a time when everybody acknowledged that that was a difficult time and it affected people… differently in different ways.* |
| 81. | New learning | 652 | *I wasn't, um, working on a rota in school for my, all of my working days, I had more time to research and, um… I did, I did, um, some research and a little bit of an online training course on bereavement…* |
| 82. | Space to reflect | 658 | *um, but I was able to reflect really* |
| 83. | Freedom | 664 | *I don't want to say it was lovely because that sounds a bit inappropriate in a way under the circumstances, but in some ways it was… because, because, there were no pressures to achieve a curriculum and actually, as long as – we were told as long as they did a Maths and an English lesson every day, the rest of the day were free for us to do with them whatever we wanted* |
| 84. | Increased focus on wellbeing | 671 | *and a lot of people focused on, um, mental wellbeing, mindfulness, you know, exercise, yoga, obviously we had the Joe Wickes workout in the morning [of course] and actually it was a lot of, a lot of the activities focused around wellbeing* |
| 85. | Expanded role | 676 | *so I printed off a lot of resources as well and I left them in the staff room and I sort of put them out really obviously on the table like 'look at me!' (laughs) 'look at all this stuff we could use!' And then the room that I was in, I printed off lots of things and put them around the side of the room as well, so the children had finished a particular task they could just help themselves to something.* |
| 86. | Positivity | 688 | *sort of, then for the older children, journals where you think about something positive that's happened that day, and, so I'm trying to keep it all really, really positive under the circumstances* |
| 87. | Sharing resources | 691 | *But yeh, I was a bit, I was a bit resource-happy at that time! (laughs) I think it worked.* |
| 88. | Playing a part | 693 | *It just gave me that opportunity to chip in a little bit* |

| | | | |
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| 89. | Satisfaction | 695 | *I saw some teachers in the staff room going through and then photocopying bits, and I thought 'oh look! They're, they're actually using what I've put there, so* |
| 90. | Opportunity | 699 | *yeh, it was, it was a time when things were turned on their head but actually you could approach things a bit differently and, and it enabled me to help with that* |
| 91. | Equipped to help | 706 | *Yeh, really, really good because I felt like I was in a position to be able to help and as s- at a time when teachers… and, and a lot of people were really busy, to be able to go 'why don't do use this? You could do this?* |
| 92. | Supporting teachers | 706 | *Yeh, really, really good because I felt like I was in a position to be able to help and as s- at a time when teachers… and, and a lot of people were really busy, to be able to go 'why don't do use this? You could do this?* |
| 93. | Opportunity for a different way | 715 | *um, and er, people did really appreciate the, um, flexibility of time that we had and how we could approach things differently.* |
| 94. | Expanded role | 723 | *Um, well what I did was I tried to, um, organise ELSA into different sections like calming, mindfulness activities, um, self-esteem boosters that kind of thing so I set up folders, um, and then labelled them* |
| 95. | Sharing resources | 732 | *so there were some things that I couldn't upload that I printed off that staff could then go in and photocopy and share, share, um, so, but yeh, I tried to make it as easy as possible for them!* |
| 96. | Supporting staff | 734 | *so, but yeh, I tried to make it as easy as possible for them! [yes, yeh] to engage them in it, and I think it worked, and now they - they're aware that that's all there as well and that, um, that information is on the system if ever anybody, say for example in a PHSE lesson perhaps needed a bit of inspiration or an idea* |
| 97. | Understanding others' experiences | 754 | *teachers are very open to the fact that things are different and we need to be tuned into pupil wellbeing and some people – some people have found it difficult in lockdown and some people have thrived… and actually if they thrived they have maybe found it difficult to come back… if they struggled in lockdown, they're actually a lot happier now because they really appreciate that routine and that structure that they need, so it's affected people in lots of different ways and probably thinking about it now, the staff as well, um… in lots of different ways.* |
| 98. | Barrier to communication | 764 | *And unfortunately we're very… segregated and isolated because we can't mix… um… which - which makes it difficult in that sense that you're not having that kind of interaction – that communication with lots of people that you would normally have, so I think communication is a little bit harder at the moment* |
| 99. | Limitations of time and resources | 774 | *I do have a waiting list so I, um, I can only achieve so much in an hour a week, so I have raised this with the people that I talk to about ELSA and… um, that concern has been acknowledged,* |
| 100. | Expanded role | 778 | *So another lady is going to come on board with it and she's going to get her training in February, um, so what I'm doing in the meantime is guiding her through – so she's going to take on a few children and I'm guiding her through her first few sessions with those children* |

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| 101. | The opportunity of more time | 794 | *he's said that I can have more ELSA time for that term to try and support some of these pupils that really need support that unfortunately aren't really getting it at the moment… um, so that will be great, so I'll be able to do that next term as well. And I'm hoping, um, he – he has hinted at the fact that beyond that I may get more time,* |
| 102. | Being heard | 800 | *so I'm hoping that – I think this message is getting through, um, and - and the acknowledgement that I – you know, this needs more, more time* |
| 103. | Limitations of context | 805 | *And I understand that in schools it's really difficult, you know, they're on a budget, and taking me away means that a teacher isn't going to have a TA then, that they need for those lessons. I do understand that* |
| 104. | Hopes for support | 821 | *Initially I thought, 'oh, do I want someone else to do an ELSA role within the school?' and then I thought, 'yes I do actually, because I can – we can become a team, and that person may be… um, want to do Key Stage 1 or maybe Key Stage 2 and it may work in that way, but that doesn't mean that we can't get together and, um, and brainstorm, and bounce ideas off each other… um, or problem solve which - I'm really looking forward to that actually* |
| 105. | Proactive | 826 | *but that doesn't mean that we can't get together and, um, and brainstorm, and bounce ideas off each other… um, or problem solve* |
| 106. | Accessing resources | 828 | *I'm really looking forward to that actually because something that has been difficult is the element of supervision that I get within school and I have to really fight to get it, um, and I have to seek it out rather than it being there for me* |
| 107. | Shared practice | 832 | *so, by having somebody else within the ELSA role, we can – we can support each other and, um, and, and… yes, share I guess, share ideas, share resources so I'm really looking forward to that side of it, yeh* |
| 108. | Limitations | 843 | *so many children need it and my feeling is that a lot of children aren't getting what they need, actually… um. It is really difficult isn't it because what if you're that quiet child who always does the right thing, but they're not being noticed, possibly… um, would they be the sort of child that would be flagged for ELSA? Maybe not, but that doesn't mean that they're not struggling, that they're not trying to manage big emotions* |
| 109. | Demand | 843 | *so many children need it and my feeling is that a lot of children aren't getting what they need, actually* |
| 110. | Seeking invisible needs | 845 | *if you're that quiet child who always does the right thing, but they're not being noticed, possibly… um, would they be the sort of child that would be flagged for ELSA? Maybe not, but that doesn't mean that they're not struggling, that they're not trying to manage big emotions* |
| 111. | Expansive dreams | 851 | *I feel like the role, role is - could be endless. You know in some ways it would be nice to be… more involved in things like Circle Time within the school and PSHE within the school as well, um, so that the role isn't just about 1:1s but about groups* |

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|---|---|---|---|
| 112. | Wider work | 857 | *so that the role isn't just about 1:1s but about groups um, I have done some work, um, with the Year 6 class in previous years, through supporting them with the transition from Year 6 to secondary school, and I just love, I love doing the whole class things as well, and, um* |
| 113. | Dreams of a wider scope | 867 | *so… it wouldn't just be 1:1, I think that role, the role can be, could be wider than that actually and yeh, I could see myself doing that (laughs)* |
| 114. | Equity and inclusion | 884 | *it's that challenge isn't it of reaching out to those children that actually may need it but are not shouting out for it? Um… you can do things in, in groups and with whole classes, you will be able to reach – potentially reach those children and even through – if it's just through them listening and observing, they may learn, um, and it may help them in some way.* |
| 115. | Emphasis on all children | 886 | *Um… you can do things in, in groups and with whole classes, you will be able to reach – potentially reach those children and even through – if it's just through them listening and observing, they may learn, um, and it may help them in some way.* |
| 116. | Benefits of whole-class approaches | 894 | *once one person has actually admitted that they're a bit worried about going to secondary school, you find that the whole class then will go 'and me!' 'and me!' 'and me!' and they feel that it's ok then actually, and then they have that sense of reassurance that actually 'this is a really, really normal, natural feeling and I'm not the only one that feels like this and we've all – admitted now that we feel that way so we all feel so much better [yes] and we can help each other with it'. So, there's real value to be had isn't there, from sharing widely* |
| 117. | Managing risk | 917 | *Um, well one challenge has been, um, obviously mixing between bubbles. Um… so… that's difficult from a keeping everybody safe point of view, that… officially, I shouldn't really be mixing with other bubbles, um, but due to, um… weighing up the risk versus, versus, well you know risk and wellbeing, um, I'm lucky, I guess… I'm able to continue with my role* |
| 118. | New ways of working | 927 | *if possible, I do try and do my sessions outside – that's not always possible. It's nice actually to get outside with them and perhaps have a little chat while we have a little walk or something like that… um… so it's managing that from a safety point of view, um…* |
| 119. | Managing risk | 933 | *I guess it's that thing again of like wandering round the school talking to different teachers - that should be limited, and we do – we have to wear masks if we go into different areas [yes] um, so I am able to do that, but it's managing it in a safe way* |
| 120. | Building a bond | 951 | *one of the things I do is that I get them to blow bubbles outside, so… especially in the early days when I'm trying to bond with them, and then they're like… 'are we going to play with bubbles today, Ms X?' (laughs) so they really look forward to doing that* |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 121. | Benefits to new ways of working | 957 | *but then you have all the benefits, um, to your wellbeing of being outside as well, like when you were saying earlier about the sunshine, if the sun is shining, and we're out, how lovely – they've come out of the classroom for a bit, we maybe go for a little, go for a little walk, we might hear the birds, you know, we're amongst trees… if it's nice we can sit on the grass, which isn't always possible unfortunately, but – but, you know it is – it's nice.* |
| 122. | Challenges to new ways of working | 966 | *Yeh I would probably do that, um… if the… the constraint of that I would say is if I have a very specific plan, like there's a child at the moment that I'm working on anger and zones of regulation with, and there was something that I wanted to go through with him on the computer, um, about anger – a lovely presentation that somebody had put together about the different stages of anger then obviously, I can't go outside to do that, we need to be in the room and it feels a little bit more formal,* |
| 123. | Bespoke support | 976 | *so but yes, working out what works best for that child at that time, I guess* |
| 124. | Making a difference | 984 | *I love being an ELSA! It's - I love making a difference, um… I love the fact that I feel like I have the right skills to bring to the role, um… I love… the fact that it's about promoting mental health and wel- wellbeing, which I do feel strongly about [yes] um… making a difference, um, at the end of the day I can feel yes, I made a difference there whereas in other ways… in other ways in other capacities of being a TA sometimes, that you can left feeling a bit frustrated, um…* |
| 125. | Ownership of role | 994 | *with my ELSA, because it's… mine, it kind of, it feels a bit different, so I do feel – I feel a real sense of achievement about it, um… it's kind of like my baby, and I do – you know I do my sessions… I'm planning the sessions myself and I'm working out what I'm going to do with them, I'm finding the relevant resources* |
| 126. | Job satisfaction | 999 | *And then when I do see results, there's nothing better than that, um… get a child through a difficult time, or… say for example, recently there's been a child with friendship problems, get him to the point where he's just feeling so much more positive and confident about everything,* |
| 127. | Job satisfaction | 1008 | *and she thanked me for what I'd done with him, and, said you know 'he's so different and he approaches things so – he is so much more confident now' and everything and… who doesn't want that in their job? You know, at the end of the day, I can sit there and think – I did good today! (laughs) so it's important to me to have a job, um, that does add value* |
| 128. | Qualities of role | 1025 | *Um (laughs) I'm quite a sensitive person, I've always been a sensitive person [yes] um, I think, I'm quite good at empathising with people, so if I child says they're sad, it's like I really feel it – do you know what I mean?* |
| 129. | Connection | 1029 | *… so… I think, I think I'm just able to connect [yes] and kind of like, I sit there and think 'I get it, I get it… I understand' and, and it's that not being judgemental – I think that can be difficult for some people* |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 130. | View of the child | 1035 | *some people find it really difficult to like that child because of the behaviours that they're displaying, and obviously you need to look beyond that… it's like the iceberg isn't it – that's the tip of the iceberg, well what's going on under the, under the ocean, so I want to get to that bit, and see them – real them, underneath, um* |
| 131. | Confidence | 1060 | *Probably just, just in general – growing in confidence myself* |
| 132. | Mental health and society | 1061 | *that sense of feeling that this is important, and it's not just within school, it's within society, it's, it's a message that is being put out now, which is really, really good - that emotional wellbeing, mental health – it is important. So, I think it's something we've probably all gained from it, but in particular with my role, how poignant that is, that yes – yeh, that's something [yeh, yeh] something… that's er, that I've gained…* |

Appendix L: Example of clustered themes for individual participant (Louisa)

1. **<u>Knowing worth</u>**
- Positively received 226
- Appreciation of the role 232
- Mutual benefits 295
- Appreciation 292
- Appreciation of role 323
- Increased confidence 324
- Increased value of role 330
- Valued role 375
- Valued 407
- Wholehearted support 429
- Receiving praise 541
- Benefits of support 572
- Appreciation 618
- Satisfaction 695
- Being heard 800
- Job satisfaction 999
- Job satisfaction 1008
- Confidence 1060

2. **<u>Affinity with the role</u>**
- Identity as an ELSA 6
- Instinctive practice 7
- Passion and desire to help 19
- Privilege of role 24
- Shared qualities of the role 65
- Well suited to the role 199
- Affirmation 201
- Opposing views 459
- Defending the role 496
- Defending the ELSA process 513
- Defending the ELSA programme 520
- Personal fit for the role 598
- Making a difference 984
- Ownership of role 994
- Qualities of role 1025

3. **<u>The time is now</u>**
- Mental health in society 52
- Time to establish a new way 215
- Task set 236
- Opportunities to grow 316

- Stepping up to help 340
- Freedom 340
- Active helping 388
- Freedom 664
- Increased focus on wellbeing 671
- Playing a part 693
- Equipped to help 706
- Sharing resources 732
- Mental health and society 1061

**4. <u>Into new territory</u>**

- Role set by school 218
- TA or ELSA? 240
- Extended ELSA role or TA role? 247
- Expanded role 257
- Deploying skills with parents 279
- New territory 296
- Different version of role 306
- Role 'beyond' school? 306
- Increased responsibility 336
- Expanded role 404
- New learning 652
- Expanded role 676
- Opportunity 699
- Opportunity for a different way 715
- Expanded role 723
- Expanded role 778
- The opportunity of more time 794
- Expansive dreams 851
- Wider work 857
- Dreams of a wider scope 867
- New ways of working 927
- Benefits to new ways of working 957

**5. <u>Connections</u>**

- Contact with families 221
- Enjoying connecting 243
- Connection 290
- Real connection 320
- Close contact with families 320
- Close working 338
- Close working 361
- Serving the community 390
- Inclusion 390
- Connection 614

- Building a bond 951
- Connection 1029

**6. <u>Acknowledging challengeA</u>**

- Opposition 441
- Overpowered 501
- Continued opposition 534
- Barrier to the role 550
- Barrier to communication 764
- Limitations of time and resources 774
- Limitations of context 805
- Limitations 843
- Demand 843
- Managing risk 917
- Managing risk 933
- Challenges to new ways of working 966

## Appendix M: Emergence of shared superordinate themes

Forming part of the combined analysis of participants' accounts, this table shows clusters of individual participant themes leading to the emergence of shared superordinate themes.

| **Stepping up, stepping out** | **Having time and space** | **Living through challenge** | **Knowing worth** |
|---|---|---|---|
| - Stepping up<br>- Building connection<br>(Louisa) | - The pressure is off<br>- Time to talk<br>(Carolyn) | - Not being able to see<br>- Knowing loss<br>(Rachel) | - Feeling valued by others<br>- Boosted confidence<br>(Louisa) |
| - Stepping up<br>- Reaching out<br>(Rachel) | - New opportunities<br>(Louisa) | - Carrying worry for self<br>- Carrying worry for children<br>(Karen) | - An established part of the school<br>- Closely supported<br>(Carolyn) |
| - Above and beyond<br>(Carolyn) | - Responding to the child's leading<br>(Karen) | - Experiencing opposition<br>- Working within constraints<br>(Louisa) | - The reward of the role<br>- Coming back to positive outcomes<br>(Karen) |

## Appendix N: Lists of quotations for shared superordinate themes

### 4.4.1. Responding to need

Louisa:

- '*yeh, I felt like, um, it was a time for ELSAs to come alive, almost (laughs) and go 'yay, I can help!' (laughs) (340).*
- *'There was an issue with a particular family that was raised, so the headteacher asked me, um, to deal with it… um, which I felt… really pleased about it, that he had the trust in me to be able to pick, pick that up and to run with it and then I just fed back into him, so…' (335-340)*
- *'there was, there was um, er, a parental separation with one particular child, so she was able to come in and then I was able to have chats with her about what had happened' (369-372)*
- *'I felt like I was in a position to be able to help and as s- at a time when teachers… and, and a lot of people were really busy, to be able to go 'why don't do use this? You could do this?'*
- *'Mum might say 'oh, this – you know, my son's been worried about this particular piece of English work, you know, that's been put on the website and he doesn't really understand it…are you ok to have a little chat with him?' and then I could walk through the work with him and then leave him in that sense of, um, yes, he feels much better about that now, so I feel happy sort of leaving him with that then… so it was sort of… dealing with, still playing the ELSA role in a way but dealing with different things and actually to the point where there were a couple of phone calls with parents who actually got upset on the phone, um, because they were feeling overwhelmed and pressure supporting them as well at a time when they were finding it difficult' (250-264)*
- *'she was a little bit tearful on the phone, and I said 'do you want to talk about it? It's fine, you know, I, you know, we all feel like this at times, it's a really difficult time, so I was just trying to empathise with her, um, and relate to what she was going through' (278-283)*
- *'one of the things I did in lockdown for example, was that I asked for an ELSA website page, so I set up a whole web page on the school website…' (387-390)*
- *'he – the headteacher did personally thank me for that [the website] and said 'I've always wanted something like that' he said, 'and I've just never known how to go about it! (laughs) and then I just came along and just sort of said 'can I do this please?' (laughs) so he was really pleased about that' (407-412)*
- *'there was unfortunately a bereavement in one of the families which was completely unrelated to coronavirus and lockdown - that could have happened at any time but, as it happened in lockdown, those children were invited in – well, I encouraged this, because I was talking to families, so I encouraged the children to come in, um, and then I was able to go in and, um do ELSA with them to support them with the bereavement… um, and, um, another child there was a parental separation – again, I was able to work with her' (639-648)*

Rachel*:*

- '*My other days at home, I just spent the whole time on the phone - so what we did was set up a system where we did welfare calls all the time between myself, XX, and the SENCo. So, we did, erm… we set - you know, we would touch base, we would see how they were coping with - seeing if they could access the work, so it was a lot of - at first there was a lot of running around, you know, do they need a work pack? Do they need this? So it was all about communication and touching in - touching base with children that were struggling at home'* (286-299)
- '*so it was very much just non-stop phone calling really for us, erm… I felt busier than ever quite honestly because you're naturally worried about some of these children… that are in that home environment, are they gonna be ok?'* (312-318)

- *'any ELSA child or SEND child, if they were vulnerable at home, then we tried to meet their needs and let them come into school, even if it was only a couple of days a week just to try and get that erm, familiarity for them in school… so that's what we did.'* (345-350)
- *'Erm, one of the main things I did as well was erm… we… at that time when we went into lockdown, we didn't actually have an ELSA website, so… I… that was one of the first activities that … felt that… so we had a school website, but we didn't have an ELSA page, so we've got like an ELSA page within our school website now'* (351-358)
- *'you very much, you wanted to make sure that everything was available for everybody to access, and that's where you were keen to make sure that, you know, on the website they could access everything and it was the same form of teachers, you know they were making sure there was plenty of work, and you know, we were all working blind the first bit'* (442-450)
- *'I mean I'm going through the file now and thinking like all that stuff that we did and we found and we sent out, looking at it all I'm thinking goodness me, erm… (laughs) it's quite - I mean I'm looking at it and I'm thinking I can't believe we did all that erm…'* (522-528)
- *'you know we're sending some notes out to children we've been working with, we found these - it was a great big smile for you or something, and we decided we'd post a little letter out to all the children we were currently working with and you know, just to remind them that we were still there, and they could still contact us, we encouraged them if they wanted to, they could send us work that they'd done or…'* (528-538)
- *'I find the job very, very rewarding because you feel that the skills that you've got and the experience that you've gained definitely helps you get by because you - you know when I look, when we look at all the resources we've got, what we've tapped into, what we've used and what we've found - it, it's really rewarding, because you, you do make a difference as an ELSA, there's no two ways about it, having an ELSA in school makes a massive difference'* (1176-1187)

Karen:

- *'I suppose about a month, maybe not even as long as that, he [ELSA child] started - he came into school, so then I spoke to my Head and asked if I could carry on during the sessions with him… in a room and she said, you know, she said, 'yes, that will be fine' (398-403)*
- *'Um… we did approach, we did ask the Head, because the Head is very, very supportive of our role.' (477-479)*

*Carolyn:*

- *'he was really struggling with transition. Um, because transition was so restricted, he wasn't in school, um, and to start with when I wasn't in school, I was doing, um, zoom meetings with him from my home, and then I did some from in school [yes] and it was all about transition for him. I've got, like - I played transition games with him, sent transition games to his house… um, and… chatted to him about all his questions. And I encouraged him to have a book and write questions down for me, and if I couldn't answer them, I spoke to the SENCo at the secondary school, emailed her and got responses for him. I gave - I managed to get to map and email that across so his mum could print it out for him.' (181-194)*

### 4.4.2. Reaching out

Rachel:

- *'My other days at home, I just spent the whole time on the phone' (287)*
- *'phone call after phone call'* (427)

- *'yeh, it's a weird thing because you're like, you're removed from them aren't you, you're relying on them being in their home environment, you don't know what they're actually really doing, do you?'* (432-437)
- *'a lot of it ended up talking to parents of how they could cope with it really [yeh] you know a lot of stuff we would send out would be almost like saying… to the parents that you're doing a great job, don't try and do too much, just try and do this much work a day [yes] so a lot of it was like meeting parents' needs dealing with lockdown as well so you found yourself wearing a number of hats really'* (484-493)
- *'a lot of it was like it's teaching, telling parents as well not to be too hard on themselves if the kids doing two or three hours a day, that was enough type of thing'* (538-542)

Karen:

- *'the other child, the one I was talking about, he wasn't in, so I rang him every week, and had a conversation… with, with him, asking him how he was, what you've been doing, whether he'd done any more to his book, just, just really, just general talking. Um… and I think because I did that, the rel- the relationship kept, it kept it together, if that makes sense' (262-242)*
- *'but myself and the Head… and XX, we wait for the children to come in every single day, rain or shine, cold, hot…' (laughter) (667-669)*
- *'Yeah, I think meeting them out the front, I think has helped the children, you know, to see staff members outside' (701-703)*
- *'You know, it was quite worrying… um, and when we were having the zoom calls with the - the er supervision, other schools seem to be having a lot more at first than other schools, the other schools, the other ELSAs in the other schools were having a lot more contact, than what myself and XX were having… um, you know, they seem to be doing it on zoom calls or ringing… but at that point, when we had the first supervision after lockdown, I don't think we were having - I don't think we were having any phone calls at that time… [yes] so that didn't,- that wasn't easy either, you know, other schools were managing to keep in touch. And we weren't [yes] you know, not with the ones - not with the children that weren't in school, anyway [yes, yeah] you know, I found that quite tricky - I found it quite difficult.' (507-521)*

*Carolyn:*

- *'so I spent a lot of time through the lockdown talking to him and his mum and… you know, in the transition programme, which was a new thing for me to do.' (208-211)*
- *'parents are telling us, just little things when they drop them off, that perhaps are not important enough to have come in and told us, but because we're chatting with them as they hand the children over, especially the younger ones, you're finding out little things that you can then talk to the child about in the day [yes] you know, [yes] makes you just aware that' (809-816)*
- *'that's really good about seeing parents at the gate, whereas - if - I don't think she'd have come in to school to say 'oh, I need to speak to XX to tell her this' but she's seeing me on the gate [yes], she's saying 'oh, by the way, such and such' you know' (852-857)*

*Louisa:*

- *'every communication [phone call] was very welcome. Um, everybody was very friendly, and they would all ask how I was as well, which was very nice, and, and quite often at the end of the phone call they would, they would say 'oh thank you, really appreciate you taking the time to call, you know, it's lovely to have that connection'. People really did appreciate having that connection with the school and that we were making the effort to do that… um, at a time when everybody acknowledged that that was a difficult time and it affected people… differently in different ways.' (614-625)*

## 4.5. Superordinate theme 2: *Having time and space*

Carolyn:

- *'quite relaxed in the fact that the children that were in school - children that I'd ever seen in the two years of being an ELSA… I picked them up if they were in school, and we had some lovely, relaxed chats about all sorts of things! So it was quite nice… in that aspect' (290-294)*
- *'I just sort of checked in on him, it - we, I just did check ins and [yeah] they were really good [yeah, yeah] we just took that, anything and everything, you know!' (312-315)*
- *'it was just nice that they were happy, and we could catch up [yes] because there wasn't the opportunity to catch up with him because we've got a list of people waiting for ELSA sessions [right] and it just - you don't have the time to say hello to them randomly if you see them round school but you don't have time to say 'how's things?' And you know, give them the opportunity to talk if they want to [absolutely] and it was just nice to be able to do that.' (341-350)*
- *'It felt as if the pace of life was slower, because there were less children in the school. And so you weren't under the pressure' (356-358)*
- *there were less children in school so I had more time to spend with children that needed me… (424-426)*
- *'And then we had two days that the Head… has said you could use as much of those two days for ELSA as needed. So I had lots of time, and that was really good, because… you know, children that might have been worried about something, just a small thing, you were able to spend time with them and somebody who wanted to talk a lot, either were thinking 'oh it's nearly home time, or something' because you could start it in the morning, and give as long as they wanted [yes] so the relaxed side of the ELSA then was really good' (435-445)*
- *'I feel since the pandemic in school, the children are calmer, and… we - XX and I - the two ELSAs and the Head go out every morning to meet the children coming in, so they come in calmly and they're all coming in in small bub- well, each class individually [yes] so and it's nice to talk to them as they come in, have a chat with them, and just smooth the way in, and make sure they… that side of it, because it's nice just to bring them in calm, and if they have got anything, they can tell us - any child can tell us on the way in, and - you can pick up from their body language as well, that they look a bit miserable, so you can say to the teacher 'oh, you know, XX didn't look very happy this morning' or something like that, can't you?' (790-803)*

### 4.5.1. Being led by the child

Karen:

- *'when he came back in… September, I carried on seeing him… um, sort of previous to lockdown I'd sort of suggested maybe seeing him for every other week? and he wasn't, he wasn't really very keen. He said, 'oh, I'd rather carry out carry on seeing you once a week'. So I didn't push it, I left it…and just carried on seeing him.'* (242-248)
- *'you know, XX and I don't rush [no] you know, we just let the child talk. I mean, most of the time, we don't, I mean, I don't - we just listen, I just listen, we don't do a lot of work with them.*' (305-308)

### 4.5.2. Expanding the role

Carolyn:

- *'during lockdown, we did some things with - oh, I've forgotten who it was called - um… not… Open… Le - oh, what was it called? Um… some online [yes] like it linked to university, but we did quite a few wellbeing type things on there as well, both of us [oh, brilliant] and we could*

*compare notes, so on the day we were working from home, we'd dip into something like that and did different things' (754-761) Future Learn*

*Louisa:*

- *'another positive… about that time was that I actually had a bit more time, um, because we weren't on - I wasn't, um, working on a rota in school for my, all of my working days, I had more time to research and, um… I did, I did, um, some research and a little bit of an online training course on bereavement… um, and, you know, bought - got some resources as well so did a bit of research, we bought the invisible string book and then a workbook to go with it… um, but I was able to reflect really and a lot of the resources that I have I uploaded on to… um, school Teams system where we can share files.' (649-660)*
- *'I don't want to say it was lovely because that sounds a bit inappropriate in a way under the circumstances, but in some ways it was… because, because, there were no pressures to achieve a curriculum and actually, as long as – we were told as long as they did a Maths and an English lesson every day, the rest of the day were free for us to do with them whatever we wanted, and a lot of people focused on, um, mental wellbeing, mindfulness, you know, exercise, yoga, obviously we had the Joe Wickes workout in the morning [of course] and actually it was a lot of, a lot of the activities focused around wellbeing [yes] um, so I printed off a lot of resources as well and I left them in the staff room and I sort of put them out really obviously on the table like 'look at me!' (laughs) 'look at all this stuff we could use!' And then the room that I was in, I printed off lots of things and put them around the side of the room as well, so the children had finished a particular task they could just help themselves to something. It may be something like, um, trying to, trying to keep it positive, um, so it was things to boost self-esteem, like there was a sheet, like, um, 'things that make me special' which they can then fill in and colour in, um, so, or like, you know, things like gratitude… sort of, then for the older children, journals where you think about something positive that's happened that day, and, so I'm trying to keep it all really, really positive under the circumstances. But yeh, I was a bit, I was a bit resource-happy at that time! (laughs) I think it worked. It just gave me that opportunity to chip in a little bit and, um, you know, I did have some teachers thank me and I saw some teachers in the staff room going through and then photocopying bits, and I thought 'oh look! They're, they're actually using what I've put there, so [yes] so yeh, it was, it was a time when things were turned on their head but actually you could approach things a bit differently and, and it enabled me to help with that.' (664-701)*
- *'I felt like I was in a position to be able to help and as s- at a time when teachers… and, and a lot of people were really busy, to be able to go 'why don't do use this? You could do this? How about you, you know, you could do a bit of mindfulness?' and 'oh, I've got just the thing for you' and they were like 'oh, thank you!' and they were really welcome, welcome to that [yes]' (706-713)*
- *'I printed off that staff could then go in and photocopy and share, share, um, so, but yeh, I tried to make it as easy as possible for them! [yes, yeh] to engage them in it, and I think it worked, and now they - they're aware that that's all there as well and that, um, that information is on the system if ever anybody, say for example in a PHSE lesson perhaps needed a bit of inspiration or an idea, um, they could pop in and think 'oh yes, that information is there isn't it - maybe I could use something from there' (733-742)*

## 4.6. Superordinate theme 3: *Living through challenge*

### 4.6.1. Holding fears

Karen:

- *'And we were, we were quite worried when we went into lockdown, because where we see the children each week… you know, we didn't know how that would affect the children… so we spoke to the head' (224-228)*
- *'You know, it was quite worrying… um, and when we were having the zoom calls with the - the er supervision, other schools seem to be having a lot more at first than other schools, the other schools, the other ELSAs in the other schools were having a lot more contact, than what myself and XX were having… um, you know, they seem to be doing it on zoom calls or ringing… but at that point, when we had the first supervision after lockdown, I don't think we were having - I don't think we were having any phone calls at that time… [yes] so that didn't,- that wasn't easy either, you know, other schools were managing to keep in touch. And we weren't [yes] you know, not with the ones - not with the children that weren't in school, anyway [yes, yeah] you know, I found that quite tricky - I found it quite difficult.' (507-521)*
- *'I don't think we really knew… which way to turn, how to help the children we - we just didn't really know what to do' (586-588)*
- *'I, I do think the lockdown was quite tricky in our role as an ELSA when it first happened, because we didn't know how we were going to talk to the children, whether they would be alright, you know [yep] how, whether stopping… seeing us all that time… you know, would have any effect on them, I don't know, it was quite worrying [yes] it was quite worrying, but then, I suppose once we got back, you know, the children came back into school…and our role started up again, then, I suppose looking back, yeah, it was it was very worrying. It was very worrying. Yeah, it was very worrying. I have to say, I think.' (592-603)*
- *'He just, I think I got to a point where he was beginning to open up [yes] you know, he - it had taken a while. I was worried that if I didn't carry on he'd, you know, maybe regress back to how he was before.' (375-379)*
- *'he was probably my main… concern… about whether, you know, it was just really the contact between him and me? [yes, yes] you know, and I was worried what would happen because… we weren't coming back into school until the September, and from March to September is a long time' (392-397)*
- *'in the back of my mind, I was thinking, you know, what is going to happen to those children? [yes, yes] without the continued support that… I give them? [yes, absolutely, yeah] I mean, it is, COVID is very, you know, it's a tricky situation, isn't it? [yeah, it really is] you know, it's… I often wonder where it's going to end or when it's going to end or stop? I don't know. Yeah. I don't know. It is so hard.' (830-837)*

Rachel:

- *'Well, the first two or three weeks when I came into school, I was absolutely petrified of being in school, and near the children (laughs) because you were just - there was nothing about wearing masks, there was nothing about, you know, we were just told to keep our distance, try not to touch things, you could wear gloves and things'* (389-396)
- *'I tell you what I struggled with a lot was that I knew that I was you know - we'd made a list of people we thought the vulnerable children were, so we'd took all the children that were on our ELSA books at that time, we took all the children from the SEND register, and we made the initial calls and we touched base and we saw who needed help and who didn't, but I suppose it was like well that's just a list of… who we know are vulnerable. I felt very much like what about all these kids that we have no idea if they're being looked after properly, we don't know if they're ok, we don't know if they've had any education, and how do we know that?'* (577-592)
- *'so I sort of worried about people that might have been having a rough time and we didn't know… whereas in school we tend - you know, don't you, because they're being seen every day, so I felt for me well it's ok, I've got the list of that I was working on but what about all the kids that I was ready to start working with that in the summer term'* (613-621)

- *'it's all very well on the phone isn't it, if you're not got eyes on them, you don't know exactly what's happening do you [no] you don't know how they are, what their welfare is'* (659-663)
- *'I did expect there to be much more of an issue with children coming back to school and I was surprised in September how many were willingly back in school'* (664-667)
- *'I thought that I was going to have to clear the decks because I would literally be dealing with children who didn't want to come back to school because of coronavirus, and it turned out like that, so maybe that's implying that an adult's fears onto what a child might feel'* (677-683)

*Carolyn:*

- *'I know our Head was concerned of the effect it would have on our children, and I think, well, everybody was weren't they [yes] but it's not had the impact on the children that - the negative impact that I thought it would'* (154-158)

### 4.6.2. Working within constraints

Rachel:

- *'adapting is very strange - I mean in a lot of ways I really enjoyed all the contact with the children - it was very different… because obviously I'm sort of used to seeing several children a day and doing interventions with them [yes, yes] and whereas this was like have a phone call or speak to a parent, right, what can I put together for them that they might be able to do at home? Or what can I put on the website that might help them with their anxieties, I mean we sent stuff out individually to children if we thought it would help, but then you're reliant on the parent… a lot of it ended up talking to parents of how they could cope with it really [yeh] you know a lot of stuff we would send out would be almost like saying… to the parents that you're doing a great job, don't try and do too much, just try and do this much work a day [yes] so a lot of it was like meeting parents' needs dealing with lockdown as well so you found yourself wearing a number of hats really [yes]' (470-493)*
- *'I think the difference has been how we're operating in school, because we're operating in bubbles, we haven't got assemblies… er… we can't use the dining hall apart from in groups, PE - they just put their trainers on, so everyone's still working in bubbles, so, and that's very difficult for the kids, and it's very difficult for the staff, because you haven't got that - you feel like you haven't got your support…' (733-742)*
- *'so it's this ever-changing scenario isn't it that the whole world - the whole country is having to deal with, you know like, every time the news comes on it's a different thing of what you can do, you know.' (801-806)*
- *'So, um… yeh, it's a real challenge working as you are, but again it's like anything, the minute you start doing it, it just becomes the norm doesn't it [so interesting] before you know it, it's the norm again [yeh] and that's it, can't really mix with other people, so there is a feeling of - you do feel more isolated, but I think that's how people are feeling in general' (811-820)*
- *'you just adapt, don't you, it's like you have - you have no choice [yeh] other than to adapt really…' (842-844)*
- *'I mean there's a few things that is - that I can't do, so, um… and I'm sure the other TAs will say things like this, I mean I've always run um, a book club - a tradition I've done for years, and I choose children to be my librarians, just for a bit of welfare, and then they're librarians and they do the books and everyone comes and just shows you their books… can't do any of that' (849-857)*
- *'I used to do a siblings club where siblings of children with ASC could come and talk about their experiences but I can't do that because that's mixing' (865-868)*
- *'there's a whole social and emotional thing missing there as well isn't there - you know, they can't, you know the before and after school clubs, they could do sort of parts of it, so nothing*

*- and we're doing no clubs after school, so we would have had clubs - we had two sports teachers who would have had clubs virtually every night of the week after school, so they're all missing out on all the team sports' (897-906)*

- *'so there's still loads of stuff missing isn't there, for all these children - nothing is normal for them, at all.' (909-912)*
- *for me so I think you're very much - you've got the basis of what you're doing, but you have to adapt to - you know there's no point me saying oh you can go and do this this and this because they can't so I've got to come up with other ways for having to deal with situations I think… (943-950)*

Carolyn:

- *'R: Because… in person, you get a feeling, you can see the body language more… says me talking with my hands… um, you can see their body language more. Um, in Zoom calls, sometimes the screen freezes, you can't read the facial expressions and things like that. Um, and… you know, because we have a room that we do the ELSA in and we've got a cupboard with all our things in and … if somebody says something, you can just open the cupboard door and get it out, get something out, you think, 'Oh, yes' [yes] whereas if you're on a Zoom from home or whatever, you can't produce things like that. And… I quite like big pieces of paper when I'm working with the children… and I like talking about pens, and you can't do anything like that over Zoom. You know, sometimes it just helps them just to see something on a piece of paper, and if you're on a Zoom, you can't do that… I did at one stage try and draw something, and I was.. but it's not the same, like that delay isn't there, and… easier to see face to face.' (244-263)*
- *'So you forget, you do forget about it [visor/PPE], but then when you sat there close, you know, it just feels a bit… clinical [ok, yes, sure, yes] and I feel that - and this is perhaps just my personal feelings - I wonder if they see us as open with it on as, you know, they did beforehand? (402-407)*

*Louisa:*

- *'some people [teachers] see it as a detraction from what we're trying to achieve, and the pressure of assessment and SATs…' (443-445)*
- *'They [some teachers] feel that it's potentially a detraction from what they're trying to achieve and therefore, um, perhaps sometimes put hurdles in the way to it unfortunately.' (461-464)*
- *so it's very difficult if a teacher doesn't see immediate results to question it sometimes (pause) (488-490)*
- *'And unfortunately we're very… segregated and isolated because we can't mix… um… which - which makes it difficult in that sense that you're not having that kind of interaction – that communication with lots of people that you would normally have, so I think communication is a little bit harder at the moment, um... so it does – school feels different, so if it feels different for us it must feel different to the children, and I think most people do get that, um, there is a higher demand for ELSA, um, we do, I do have a waiting list so I, um, I can only achieve so much in an hour a week' (764-775)*
- *'one challenge has been, um, obviously mixing between bubbles. Um… so… that's difficult from a keeping everybody safe point of view, that… officially, I shouldn't really be mixing with other bubbles, um, but due to, um… weighing up the risk versus, versus, well you know risk and wellbeing, um, I'm lucky, I guess… I'm able to continue with my role because I do believe that some ELSAs at the moment aren't able to do that because of safety reasons, so it's, so it's managing that, in a sense of we're in a safe place… it can be ventilated, um, that we're far enough apart, if possible, I do try and do my sessions outside – that's not always possible.' (917-929)*

- *'so many children need it and my feeling is that a lot of children aren't getting what they need, actually… um. It is really difficult isn't it because what if you're that quiet child who always does the right thing, but they're not being noticed, possibly… um, would they be the sort of child that would be flagged for ELSA? Maybe not, but that doesn't mean that they're not struggling, that they're not trying to manage big emotions, um… so and it's, obviously really difficult to try and identify those children [yes]. I feel like the role, role is - could be endless' (843-853)*

## 4.7. Superordinate theme 4: *Knowing worth*

### 4.7.1. Feeling closely supported

Karen:

- *'because XX and I, we do a lot of supporting of each other [yes, yeh] um, because, you know, it's quite an emotional role, and if there's anything that maybe we're a bit unsure of tackling, you know, we always talk about the children, and, you know, it's just between ourselves, you know, never in front of anybody else.' (219-224)*
- *'she's [the Head] really supportive of our ELSA role, ELSA role, like I've said [yes] Um… any, any courses that come up she's, you know, she, she's quite happy for us to - you know, she wants us to to to enhance that' (709-712)*
- *'I think it's nice that we've got a sounding board for each other as well? Does that make sense? [yes, it does] because you are listening to children with quite emotional issues. And some, you know, I'm… I don't believe anybody could sit there and listen, and not feel anything at all of what these children are telling you, without having to have a sounding board, and go and speak to somebody about what you've heard. Does that make sense? [it does, yes, yes] it's just having, it's just knowing that XX is there, you know, supporting me and she's - I'm the same for her, we support each other in that in that role.' (765-776)*
- *'I think, being a TA as long as I have, you… it's always every day is different, isn't it? You know… you have just got to transition between things. And you just take it in your stride. Well, I just take it in stride, I don't know if you've got to, but I do! [wow, I can tell, yes] and I sort of make the most of every opportunity that I can!' (482-488)*

Carolyn:

- *obviously there's two ELSAs in this school… XX. And we… any challenges I face, we talk to each other and bounce ideas off each other. I think it's, I would recommend to anybody, any Headteacher to have two ELSAs so that they can bounce ideas. I mean, XX is a really good friend anyway. And we've… always had each other to bounce ideas off - to support each other, and… because sometimes you just need that offload, don't you? (563-571)*
- *'Um, we're very similar people - the way we work [right, yes] and, and… I think a lot of time, we know what the other one's thinking… [wow] Staff in this school often say about how they think that we're one person, really [wow] we're both - very similar in the way we work and the things we say or… the way we think.' (576-582)*
- *'She's [the Head]- she is so supportive. Our wellbeing is really important to her. Um, not only for the children, but for the staff as well [yes] um… she really cares about everybody's wellbeing. And she - she uses the ELSAs for the wellbeing of the children. But she's got lots of things in place for our wellbeing as well.' (516-521)*
- *'She's so supportive of what we do. And you need the Head to be supportive [yeah] and she, she blocks every Friday afternoon, she's - the calendar's blocked out, we use a - I use a room and XX does hers on a Tuesday in the same room, so all our resources are in a locked cupboard in there. And Tuesday afternoon, Friday afternoon, they are blocked out on the*

*calendar. That room is for the ELSAs only, and nobody else can use that room… um, which everybody knows, you know, it's for ELSA… and in school generally, the staff are really supportive of ELSA work and they want to know how their children are doing [yes] and it helps when you know, the child comes in, and they say 'oh, such as such wasn't great this morning. Do you think you can have a chat with her?' Or um…' (636-650)*

- *'I'm pleased that XX - that the Head - sorry, I've said the name again! That the Head… has got the trust in me to do the role and… and… [yes, yes] it makes me feel valued. And I'm pleased that I'm making a difference to people' (669-673)*

*Louisa:*

- *'most teachers, and the headteacher are very, very supportive and embracing of it, um, you know I had a teacher the other day say 'you should really be a full time ELSA really, shouldn't you?' (laughs) and I'd be 'yeh, I'd love that!' (540-544)*
- *'it feels to me that the headteacher is going to do what he can… under the circumstances to give me more time.' (809-811)*

### 4.7.2. Feeling validated

Rachel:

- *'when they were contacting the class, they would just you know email myself and XX and just sort of say 'oh, I've just spoke to so and so and they're really struggling with…' you know if it was something emotional-related, they would sort of us hand it to us, the same as they would if we were in school'* (1147-1154)

Karen:

- *'you wouldn't think it was the same child, honestly, you would not - if you saw him from the first - from the time when I first had him to now… he's just - well he's my actual success story, actually, if that makes sense' (109-113)*
- *'You know, he's, he's more confident in himself, he's confident in the classroom… he's answering questions, he's putting his hand up, whereas when I first had him, when I first had him, you know, in my role, he, he was in, I was in year 5, so he was a year 5 boy. And he was just quiet, never, never used to put his hand up very much. I think he was always worried maybe about getting the answer wrong' (384-391)*
- *'So all through lockdown, I had him out once a week… um, and we carried on talking. And I think that's maybe that's what's helped [yes, yeh] you know, um… mum, mum's - can't believe the change in him…'(403-406)*
- *'you know, he's just in a totally different place. Honestly, Kate, you wouldn't believe it was the same child.' (430-431)*
- *I can't tell you how… over the moon, I am with him [yes] you know, for him really, not, you know, I'm glad I was able to help him [yes]… that (pause) I don't know, if you saw… I can't really explain how I even feel, I'm - it's very emotional, to be honest, to see him like that. You know, moving from such a low ebb that he had [yes]… to how he should be as a year - as a child, you know, as a year 6 child' (447-453)*

Carolyn:

- *'quite a few teachers ask us… if - well both XX and I, they ask if we are, if - what do we think? What can we suggest? You know, do you think this person needs to go on the ELSA waiting list? Or 'I'm thinking of putting somebody on the waiting list - what do you think?' (598-603)*
- *'if there's a falling out at playtime, sooner than the teacher's doing it, they pass it to us and we deal with those sorts of things - friendship issues, um… whereas a teacher was doing that before, because they've seen the work we've done with ELSA, they just pass it straight to us*

*[ah, I see] because we're more experienced (laughs) in that sort of thing apparently!' (721-728)*

*Louisa:*

- *'I did sense that the-… and the parents as well actually really appreciated the phone calls, so… yeh, I felt like the work that I was doing was appreciated' (231-234)*
- *'she, she really appreciated it, and we really bonded in that phone call, and at the end of it, you know, she said 'oh thank you so much, I really appreciate that' and, um, I felt like I'd done so much more than just ringing up to check up on the kids, you know, and actually really helped her as well [yes].. but it was above and beyond the role in a way, but I didn't have a problem doing it and felt, felt a sense of, um, satisfaction at the end of it, that I'd helped somebody…' (290-299)*
- *'It felt really good actually, because I felt like, um, I was really using my skills… um, I really gained a lot of confidence, because prior to that, I hadn't really had a lot of, um, contact with parents actually, and it was very much about the children, um… and through talking on a daily basis to families and parents, and really connecting with them… gave me a lot of confidence. They all really appreciated the contact that was being made and the support that was being given [yes] and so I have so much more confidence now actually talking… to parents, and obviously around sensitive issues, because what we've all been through has been a very, um, difficult and sensitive time, um… so I feel, yeh I feel much more confident with that now, I felt like the profile of ELSA was, was raised, um… I feel like the headteacher acknowledges the value of it so much more now' (316-332)*
- *'I do feel like his, his [the Head] acknowledgement of what we were going through and… um, the effect it had on everybody's wellbeing really, really hit him actually, um… to the point where yeh, he now values ELSA so much more, I, I believe – than before.' (375-380)*
- *'he recognises and acknowledges what I've done and, and does thank me for it actually' (414-416)*
- *'I take that as a real compliment, um, because that's acknowledging that what I do is worthwhile, that it's that it's needed, and actually, um, they [the teacher] haven't said so-and-so over there would be really good - they should be a full time ELSA, they said I (laughs) should be a full time ELSA and so I take that as a compliment (laughs)' (598-603)*
- *'I love being an ELSA! It's - I love making a difference, um… I love the fact that I feel like I have the right skills to bring to the role, um… I love… the fact that it's about promoting mental health and wel- wellbeing, which I do feel strongly about [yes] um… making a difference, um, at the end of the day I can feel yes, I made a difference there whereas in other ways… in other ways in other capacities of being a TA sometimes, that you can left feeling a bit frustrated, um… with my ELSA, because it's… mine, it kind of, it feels a bit different, so I do feel – I feel a real sense of achievement about it, um… it's kind of like my baby, and I do – you know I do my sessions… I'm planning the sessions myself and I'm working out what I'm going to do with them, I'm finding the relevant resources. And then when I do see results, there's nothing better than that, um… get a child through a difficult time, or… say for example, recently there's been a child with friendship problems, get him to the point where he's just feeling so much more positive and confident about everything, um, I spoke to Mum a couple of days ago, um, just to agree with her that it was ok to end ELSA with the child, and she completely agreed and she thanked me for what I'd done with him, and, said you know 'he's so different and he approaches things so – he is so much more confident now' and everything and… who doesn't want that in their job? You know, at the end of the day, I can sit there and think – I did good today! (laughs) so it's important to me to have a job, um, that does add value' (985-1014)*