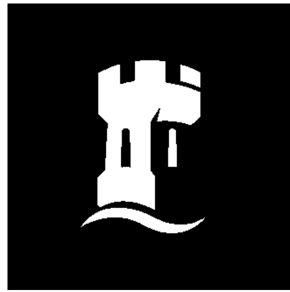

What can we learn about ELSA project implementation from the experiences of ELSAs and EPs?

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Abstract

Over the past two decades, the Emotional Literacy Support Assistant (ELSA) project has been delivered by educational psychologists (EPs) across the UK. Existing literature focuses on the efficacy of the ELSA project; however, less is understood about the factors that help the ELSA project to run. This study, therefore, sought to explore key stakeholders' experiences of implementing the ELSA project.

Semi-structured interviews were held with four ELSAs and seven EPs. Reflexive thematic analysis generated five main themes which indicated that training, supervision, and peer connections support ELSA project implementation. However, systemic factors such as workload and capacity, managerial support, and budget constraints were identified as challenges. These themes were explored in relation to implementation science literature, which suggested that adaptable training, ongoing coaching, communities of practice, and shared leadership contribute to implementing and sustaining the ELSA project, whilst considerations around 'outer context' influences (e.g., sociopolitical climate) may help to mitigate some of the identified challenges.

Despite limitations in recruitment, this study contributes to both implementation and ELSA project research and may help to guide schools and EP services in implementing the ELSA project and other interventions effectively and sustainably. Implications of these findings are discussed, including the potential for a wider understanding of implementation science in educational psychology.

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List of abbreviations

AIF	Active implementation frameworks
CASEL	Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional learning
CYP	Children and young people
EI	Emotional intelligence
EL	Emotional literacy
ELSA	Emotional Literacy Support Assistant
EP	Educational psychologist
IS	Implementation science
LA	Local authority
MAT	Multi-academy trust
MHST	Mental health support team
NICE	National Institute for Clinical Excellence
PSHE	Personal, social, health, and economic [education]
RTA	Reflexive thematic analysis
SE	Social-emotional
SEL	Social-emotional learning
SEAL	Social and emotional aspects of learning
SLT	Senior leadership team
TA	Teaching assistant
TMF	Theories, models, and frameworks

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In memory of Katrina Dalby (1948–2015), and Janet Zoller (1948–2020).

Glossary of terms

For clarity, the following terms and definitions are used in this study:

Term	Definition
ELSA intervention	Also referred to as *ELSA work*, *ELSA programme*, and *ELSA*. In this study, *ELSA intervention* refers to the work ELSAs plan and carry out within their ELSA sessions.
ELSA project	The concept of teaching assistants trained by EPs to work in schools as ELSAs has a range of descriptions, including *ELSA project*, *ELSA programme*, *ELSA intervention,* and *ELSA*. I use *ELSA project* in this study to distinguish between the project, ELSAs as people, and the work that ELSAs do.
Implementation	Sometimes referred to as *diffusion*, in this study, *implementation* refers to the process of establishing and sustaining an intervention, curriculum, or initiative, particularly within educational settings.
Intervention	Also referred to as *innovation* or *programme*. I use *intervention* to refer to specific programmes, steps, or guidelines which are intended to support an area of need (e.g., social-emotional development).
Mental health problem	Language relating to mental health can be an emotive subject (Foulkes, 2022). In this study, *Mental health problem* is used as a general term to refer to feelings such as low mood, anxiety, and depression, as well as mental health conditions that may be clinically diagnosed. This terminology is consistent with that used by the mental health charity Mind (2024).
Senior leadership team	Also referred to as *administration* within US-based literature. For consistency, *senior leadership team* (SLT) in the present research refers to staff within schools who hold a position of responsibility, including principal, headteacher, deputy headteacher, SENDCo, business manager, and school governors.
Social-emotional development	*Social-emotional development* refers to the developmental domain that encompasses skills including developing relationships; managing emotions, making responsible decisions; and understanding others' feelings.

Chapter 1 – Introduction

In this chapter, I introduce the topic of this thesis and outline the rationale and aims for the present research, including its theoretical position, the approach to analysis, and my personal and professional interests. I conclude this chapter with an overview of the thesis structure.

1.1. Context, rationale, and aims of the study

This research is positioned in the context of a reported rise in mental health problems amongst children and young people (CYP; Newlove-Delgado et al., 2023). Early intervention to support social-emotional (SE) development is recognised as helping to prevent mental health problems (National Institute for Health and Care Excellence [NICE], 2022), and SE development has been a key focus in education for over two decades (Winship, 2021). As part of this, a range of whole-school programmes and curricula have been developed to promote mental health awareness and support SE development in schools.

Within a similar timeframe, the Emotional Literacy Support Assistant (ELSA) project has been widely delivered by educational psychologists (EPs) across the UK. Existing literature indicates that the ELSA project helps to support CYPs' SE development, however, less is understood about what helps or hinders the ELSA project to run. Further, although implementation science is a rapidly growing field of research, its application in relation to targeted interventions is limited (Bond et al., 2024), despite targeted support forming part of the NICE graduated response (2022). The present research, therefore, seeks to address the following research question: *What can we learn about ELSA project implementation from the experiences of ELSAs and EPs?*

1.2. Approach to research

1.2.1. Theoretical position

This research sits within an experiential-qualitative paradigm and holds an ontological position of critical realism, and an epistemological position of subjectivism. This means that, although the study seeks to explore ELSA project implementation, it recognises that this can only be understood partially, and that it may be experienced differently by different people in different contexts. The dataset for this study, therefore, was generated through semi-structured interviews held with four ELSAs and seven EPs. Reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) using an inductive approach to coding was used to prioritise participants' experiences and stories, and to develop and interpret patterns of meaning across the dataset.

1.2.2. Reflexive reporting

Within RTA, researcher subjectivity is valued as a resource for analysis, and researchers' reflexivity is considered key in understanding and reflecting upon how their values and experiences shape the research process and the knowledge produced (Braun & Clarke, 2019). In keeping with this, and the theoretical positioning of this study, I have chosen to write in the first person. I consider this to contribute to situating myself as the researcher within this research, and to support with owning and articulating my perspective (Braun & Clarke, 2022a, 2023, 2024a). The language I have used, therefore, is reflective of that outlined in the Reflexive Thematic Analysis Reporting Guidelines (RTARG; Braun & Clarke, 2024b). However, as this study is part of a doctoral thesis, chapter headings largely follow more traditional academic conventions, to aid the reader's navigation of this document.

1.2.3. Research question development

This study initially sought to address the research question: *What helps and hinders the implementation of ELSA*? However, throughout the research process, and particularly during data analysis and interpretation, my research question evolved to be more reflective of the dataset generated (Braun & Clarke, 2022b, p. 27). The present research question—*What can we learn about ELSA project implementation from the experiences of ELSAs and EPs?*—is, therefore, the basis for this study; however, the original research question features in appendices relating to ethical approval, research recruitment, and analysis.

1.3. Personal and professional interest

This study stems from my interests in supporting the SE development of CYP, and in helping schools to support themselves, which in turn supports CYP, and the wider school community. These interests developed from my previous career as a teaching assistant in mainstream schools and specialist social, emotional, and mental health (SEMH) provisions, and, more recently, my experiences of delivering training to schools as a trainee EP. A particular reflection of this work came after noticing that the training I delivered was not always put in place, or seemed to fizzle out after an initial period of interest. Following a curiosity around the factors that help an intervention to run effectively and sustainably, I discovered the field of implementation science. My developing interest in this topic, combined with supporting SE development, then became the focus of my thesis.

1.4. Thesis overview

This thesis is comprised of six chapters. The chapters following this introductory chapter are outlined below:

- **Chapter 2: Literature review** – The context for the study is presented in the form of a narrative literature review which explores the literature and theory relating to

supporting CYPs’ SE development in schools; the ELSA project; and implementation science. This chapter concludes with the rationale and research question for this study.

- **Chapter 3: Methodology** – The theoretical ideas and values that underpin this research are discussed, along with the rationale for adopting RTA. Considerations around research design, ethical thinking, quality, and data analysis are outlined.
- **Chapter 4: Findings** – An illustrative account of the findings is presented, consisting of the five themes and four subthemes generated during analysis, along with relevant extracts from the dataset.
- **Chapter 5: Discussion** – The findings are analysed in relation to relevant implementation science theory and literature to consider the factors that help and hinder implementation of the ELSA project. This chapter ends with a methodological review of the study, and implications for practice and future research.
- **Chapter 6: Conclusion** – The key points of this thesis are drawn together to address the research question and to provide a concluding summary.

Chapter 2 – Literature review

2.1. Chapter overview

In this chapter, I discuss my chosen approach to the review. Following this, I explore the current context and support available for supporting CYPs' SE development within education. As part of this, I explore emotional literacy and its role in SE development, and the ELSA project. I then focus on implementation of the ELSA project, and literature relating to implementation science, to consider how this area of research can further support the implementation of the ELSA project. I end this chapter with the research rationale and aim for this study.

Although a standalone version of this literature review was written to fulfil earlier doctoral requirements, this final version has been developed and refined throughout the research and analysis process. This is to ensure that it provides a contextual understanding of what is currently understood in relation to implementation of the ELSA project, and 'sets the scene' (Braun & Clarke, 2022b, p. 121) for the research it precedes.

2.2. Approach

Literature reviews provide in-depth and critical evaluations of prior research and support our understanding of existing knowledge and theory by bringing together the range of literature relating to a topic (Baumeister & Leary, 1997; Braun & Clarke, 2022b; Paré et al., 2015). Literature reviews also support the development of a rationale, research question, or hypothesis for a proposed study (Baumeister & Leary, 1997; Bourhis, 2017; Braun & Clarke, 2022b).

2.2.1. Systemic literature reviews

Literature reviews may be broadly categorised as *systematic* or *narrative*, based on the methods used for searches, appraisal, synthesis, and analysis (J. Byrne, 2016; Greenhalgh et al., 2018). Systematic reviews are commonly regarded as the 'gold standard' (J. Byrne, 2016, p. 1) approach to literature reviews, owing to the strong emphasis placed on methodological reproducibility, involving pre-determined review approaches, specific search criteria, quality checklists, synthesis tools, and guidelines to support methodological rigour (J. Byrne, 2016; Cochrane, 2023; Greenhalgh et al., 2018; Mulrow et al., 1988; Page et al., 2021). However, systematic reviews have also been criticised for their possibly narrow review questions (Petticrew, 2015), and an assumed superiority over narrative reviews which sees 'systematic' conflated with 'superior quality' (Greenhalgh et al., 2018). Further, a lack of reflection on their epistemology has been highlighted as potentially conflicting with the philosophical position of the research they may inform, suggesting that their use requires careful consideration (Braun & Clarke, 2022b; Greenhalgh et al., 2018; Sukhera, 2022).

2.2.2. Narrative literature reviews

Narrative reviews are typically situated within the social sciences and, in contrast to systematic reviews, usually take a subjectivist or interpretivist perspective (Greenhalgh et al., 2018; Sukhera, 2022). Narrative reviews explore and synthesise multiple points of view across a wide range of literature or topics (Baumeister & Leary, 1997; Bourhis, 2017; Greenhalgh et al., 2018). They can, therefore, help researchers to develop their conceptual framework or approach to research (Maxwell, 2012); extend understanding within a given field; and explore under-researched topics (J. Byrne, 2016; Greenhalgh et al., 2004, 2018).

Narrative reviews are sometimes criticised for their lack of systematicity, and their potential for bias owing to their possibly selective choices of literature (Greenhalgh et al.,

2018; Henry et al., 2018; Paré et al., 2015). However, advice around ensuring quality in narrative reviews encourages transparency in terms of how the review was conducted, including clearly defined aims, purpose, and literature search criteria (J. Byrne, 2016; B. N. Green et al., 2006; Greenhalgh et al., 2018; Popay et al., 2006). Further, Greenhalgh et al., (2018, p. 4) suggest that, as opposed to being inferior to systematic reviews, narrative reviews should be viewed as 'different and potentially complementary', in that they 'raise areas to consider' (Greenhalgh et al., 2004, p. 613) rather than provide definitive answers to a question.

Given the exploratory nature of this study, and the relatively small base of literature relating to ELSA (Pickering et al., 2019), I considered a narrative literature review to be an appropriate approach. To support the integrity of this literature review, I used the narrative literature review recommendations outlined by J. Byrne (2016) for guidance:

- Clearly define the review's scope and what it intends to achieve
- Clearly define and outline literature search choices
- Cite a comprehensive range of literature
- Summarise information correctly
- Cite original references
- Include appraisal of studies' methodology
- Aim to derive and present new ideas and/or research directions

2.3. Aim & purpose

The purpose of this literature review is to understand the social and theoretical context of supporting CYPs' SE development in education, including through universal or curriculum-based approaches, and targeted interventions including the ELSA project. This literature review also seeks to understand how implementation science literature is applied in educational contexts, particularly in relation to delivering SE teaching and interventions.

2.4. Search strategy

A scoping literature search was conducted in February 2023 with the purpose of providing an initial overview of the existing literature, and to determine appropriate search terms. Full literature searches were conducted between March 2023 and April 2024, using the following databases: American Psychological Association (APA) PsychINFO, British Education Index, Education Resource Information Centre (ERIC), ScienceDirect, and Scopus. Search terms were kept broad and Boolean operators were used (see Table 2.1), to accommodate differences in spelling and terminology, (e.g., programme vs program).

Table 2.1
A table of literature search terms and Boolean operators

Subject	wellbeing OR emotional literacy OR emotional intelligence OR mental health OR social emotional AND program* OR lesson OR teach* OR intervention AND implement* OR barrier* OR facilitator*
Population	AND Child* OR young person OR adolescen* student* OR pupil* OR class*
Setting	AND education OR school OR teach*

As there is limited published literature relating to the ELSA project (Pickering et al., 2019), the search was expanded to include 'grey' literature (Adams et al., 2017), including doctoral theses, using the COnnecting REpositories (CORE), and E-Theses Online Service (EThOS) databases. EThOS was searched between March 2023 and September 2023, until it became inaccessible (British Library, 2024). Further grey literature, including commissioned reports, research projects, and unpublished local authority (LA) evaluation reports were acquired via the ELSA Network website, Google Scholar, and reference harvesting. Although grey literature is not considered an academic form of literature, it can provide

valuable insight into data which may not be otherwise publicly disseminated (Adams et al., 2017; Paez, 2017; Pappas & Williams, 2011), and has, therefore, been included as part of this literature review.

Eligibility criteria (Table 2.2) were also purposefully broad due to variations in terminology. Publication dates were established in line with the introduction of the ELSA project, and the introduction of SE curricula in the UK and US.

Table 2.2

A table of literature search eligibility criteria

	Year	Population	Setting	Subject
Inclusion parameters	1999-present	Children Teenagers Adolescents Young people	Primary school Secondary school Elementary school Middle school High school	Emotional literacy Emotional intelligence Wellbeing Mental health Social-emotional education Emotional development
Exclusion parameters	Pre-1999	Infants Adults	Clinical settings	Clinical diagnoses or disorders

2.5. Literature overview

In Part 1 of this this literature review, I discuss the current context in relation to CYPs' mental health and SE development. I then explore the universal and targeted approaches used in educational settings within to support SE development during the last 20 years. Following this, in Part 2 of the review (section 2.8), I focus on implementation science, associated theories and frameworks, and the application of implementation science in education.

2.6. Part 1 – Children and young people's mental health

The mental health and wellbeing of CYP is recognised as being important because it can impact on all aspects of life, in childhood and adulthood (World Health Organization [WHO], 2022). This includes educational progress, social development including relationships, and physical wellbeing (NSPCC, 2023; WHO, 2022).

Globally, 13% of 10–19-year-olds are reported to experience mental health problems (WHO, 2021), and within the UK, the Mental Health of Children and Young People in England survey (Newlove-Delgado et al., 2023) indicates that 20.1% of CYP between the ages of 8–16 have a 'probable mental disorder' – an increase from 12.1% in 2017. Further, the Good Childhood Report (The Children's Society, 2023) suggests that, in the UK, CYPs' overall happiness is declining. Increases in mental health problems amongst CYP have been attributed to a range of factors, including online bullying, feeling unsafe at school, academic pressures, having fewer social support networks, appearance, and money worries (Newlove-Delgado et al., 2023; The Children's Society, 2023). Further, correlational links have been made between an increase in CYPs' mental health problems and the Coronavirus (Covid-19) global pandemic, particularly the impact of school closures during 2020 and 2021 (Newlove-Delgado et al., 2022; Office for Health Improvement and Disparities, 2022). However, it has also been suggested that increases in mental health problems may be linked to awareness campaigns and teaching, which have potentially resulted in misinterpretation of milder forms of distress as mental health problems (Foulkes & Andrews, 2023), and may have changed perceptions around how we define mental health problems alongside typical human emotions (Speerforck et al., 2024). These examples highlight the importance of taking a balanced and holistic view to both raising awareness of and understanding increases in mental health problems.

Mental health support for CYP has been the focus of successive British governments, who have outlined a range of plans to improve CYPs' mental health over the last twenty years (Winship, 2021). In the context of education, governmental initiatives have included whole-school approaches at primary (Department for Education and Skills [DfES], 2005), secondary (DfES, 2007), and post-16 phases (Department of Education [DfE] & Public Health England [PHE], 2021); a Green Paper consultation (Department of Health [DoH] & DfE, 2017); advice and guidance around understanding and responding to mental health needs (DfE, 2014, 2018, 2023); and targeted mental health support within schools (Department for Children, Schools and Families [DfCSF], 2008; DfE & PHE, 2021; Ellins et al., 2023; National Health Service [NHS] England 2023a; Procter et al., 2021).

Alongside this, there has been a global shift in practice and growth in research around promoting good mental health, preventing mental health problems, and supporting SE learning (Procter et al., 2021; Weare, 2010). The Allen Report (2011, pp. 7–10) highlighted early intervention as being key to supporting SE development, by providing a 'social and emotional bedrock', and the government and NICE issued guidelines for supporting SE wellbeing in early years settings and schools (DoH & DfE, 2017; NICE, 2008, 2009, 2012, 2022). The green paper (DoH & DfE, 2017) identifies the role of schools and colleges as being part of a universal approach to mental health support, which includes promotion of mental health awareness, early identification of mental health problems, and the provision of specialist interventions from trained staff or external practitioners. Similarly, NICE (2022, p. 41) outline a *graduated response*, which moves between *universal* (whole-school approaches) and *targeted support* as necessary. The universal and targeted approaches used in education over the past twenty years are now explored.

2.6.1. Social and emotional learning

SE skills relate to a set of abilities and competencies which include *prosocial behaviours* – helping, sharing, and caring for others; *emotional regulation* – managing our emotions; and *empathetic responses* – conveying our understanding of others' experiences (V. W. Harris et al., 2022). SE abilities are considered 'critical to human happiness' (V. W. Harris et al., 2022, p. 226), 'essential for all students' (Zins & Elias, 2007, p. 234), and are thought to develop throughout the lifespan, providing they are given the appropriate support to do so (Cotruş et al., 2012; Schonert-Reichl, 2023). SE skills influence relationships, social engagement, decision-making, mental health and wellbeing, and life satisfaction (Greenberg et al., 2015; V. W. Harris et al., 2022; Payton et al., 2000; Santos et al., 2023; Weissberg et al., 2015). They are understood to be explicitly teachable (Niemi, 2020; Osher et al., 2016; Payton et al., 2000; Ross & Tolan, 2018; Weare, 2010), and schools are, therefore, regarded as holding a key role in supporting CYPs' SE learning (SEL; Education Endowment Foundation [EEF], 2019a).

Intended as a move towards the promotion of social competence, as opposed to mental health or behavioural difficulty prevention (Elias et al., 2007; Zins & Elias, 2007), in some US states, SEL has become a mandated curriculum requirement (Goleman, 2020; Starr, 2019). Alongside academic teaching, schools are expected to provide explicit SEL opportunities, as well as nurturing, caring, and respectful environments (Darling-Hammond, 2015; Durlak et al., 2011; Goleman, 2020; Sauve & Schonert-Reichl, 2019).

To support SEL opportunities and evaluation of SEL programmes, the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) was established in 1994 (CASEL, 2023a; Niemi, 2020; Payton et al., 2000), with the aim of disseminating SEL research, and supporting training in implementing SEL teaching. As part of this, the CASEL framework (or 'CASEL wheel') was introduced, (CASEL, 2023b; Payton et al., 2000). The CASEL framework

outlines five areas of SEL, which are based on theories relating to SE development, behaviour change, community action-research (Frye et al., 2022) and emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995, 2020). The CASEL competencies include: 1) self-awareness; 2) self-management; 3) social awareness; 4) relationship skills; and 5) responsible decision-making. As well as acting as a definition for SEL (Frye et al., 2022; Osher et al., 2016), the CASEL framework also provides a foundation for applying SEL strategies in schools, families, and communities, by guiding SEL practice amongst educators and practitioners (CASEL, 2023b; Frye et al., 2022; Niemi, 2020). In addition, CASEL has influenced state standards for SEL practice (Frye et al., 2022), and many SEL programmes are underpinned by the CASEL competencies (Gresham et al., 2020; Syeda et al., 2023).

Despite its widespread acceptance (Frye et al., 2022; Schonert-Reichl, 2019), there have been some criticisms around SEL (Shriver & Weissberg, 2022; Starr, 2019); for example, Finn & Hess (2019) highlight concerns around an emphasis on SEL risking diminishing the focus on academic progress. However, there is some evidence from meta-analyses that SEL interventions improve academic outcomes, particularly in relation to literacy (Cipriano et al., 2024; Corcoran et al., 2018; EEF, 2021). Although EEF (2021) report that these findings have 'low security', Corcoran et al. (2018) suggest that weak evidence of effectiveness may also be in part due to small sample sizes, whereas Cipriano et al. (2024) highlight a lack of follow-up studies as affecting whether we can tell if positive outcomes from SEL interventions are sustained.

A further criticism of SEL is the lack of clarity experienced by some in terms of what SEL can be defined as, and how it may be interpreted differently, for example, in relation to

growth mindset[1]; anti-bullying, character development[2]; or classroom management, which may be difficult to distinguish between due to potentially overlapping concepts (Hamilton & Schwartz, 2019; Shriver & Weissberg, 2022). Whilst these interpretations and potential overlaps may occur because of SEL's flexibility (Starr, 2019), it is also suggested that the success of SEL is dependent on how it is implemented—particularly in relation to fidelity within set programmes (EEF, 2019; Kim et al., 2022; Schonert-Reichl, 2017)—and how the efficacy of SEL is measured (Corcoran et al., 2018; Hamilton & Schwartz, 2019; Kim et al., 2022). It may, therefore, be difficult to fully gauge the importance and success of SEL without more clearly defined definitions and parameters.

A further consideration in being able to define or distinguish CASEL from other concepts may lie in fully understanding its theoretical underpinnings (Durlak et al., 2022; Durlak & DuPre, 2008). As mentioned, CASEL draws on theories relating to SE development and behaviour change (Frye et al., 2022), as well as the theory of emotional intelligence (EI; Goleman, 1995, 2020; Salovey & Mayer, 1990). EI will, therefore, be explored in more detail.

2.6.2. Emotional Intelligence

EI relates to a set of skills associated with feelings, including being able to recognise, understand, and regulate the feelings of oneself and others, and using feelings to support motivation, planning, and achievement in life goals and achievements (O'Neil, 1996; Salovey & Mayer, 1990). EI first appeared in scientific literature in the 1990s, when Salovey and Mayer (1990) proposed EI as a framework of intelligence relating to emotions

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[1] A belief and motivation that skills can be developed and worked on (Dweck, 2006).

[2] The development of morality, conscience, personal values, and social attitudes (American Psychological Association, 2018).

and identified its position as a subset of *social intelligence*[3] (Cantor & Kihlstrom, 1985), and *personal intelligence*[4] (Gardner, 1983), rather than the models of intelligence relating to cognitive abilities such as abstract thinking (Salovey & Mayer, 1990).

Salovey and Mayer's framework of EI was followed by Goleman's EI theory (1995). The combination of these works drew interest from both scientific and lay communities (Zeidner et al., 2008) and subsequently, EI has been incorporated into a range of contexts, including education (Humphrey et al., 2007), leadership and management (Goleman, 1999; Kerr et al., 2006; Reshetnikov et al., 2020), medicine (Arora et al., 2010), and social work (Morrison, 2006).

There are a range of definitions and conceptualisations of EI (Dulewicz & Higgs, 2000; Goleman, 2020; Zeidner et al., 2008). Salovey and Mayer (1990, p. 189) define EI 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 Goleman (1995, pp. 62–63) draws on Salovey and Mayer's model to categorise EI into five key domains:

1. *Knowing one's emotions* (self-awareness); being able to recognise feelings as they occur. This is described as the 'keystone of emotional intelligence'.
2. *Managing emotions* – responding to feelings or 'handling' them 'so they are appropriate'. This is considered an ability which 'builds on self-awareness'.
3. *Motivating oneself* – Goleman (2020) explains that 'marshalling emotions in the service of a goal is essential for paying attention; self-motivation and mastery, and creativity'.

[3] Understanding the actions of oneself and others (Cantor & Kihlstrom, 1985).

[4] Thinking logically about personality and personal information to improve one's thoughts, plans, and life experiences (Mayer, 2008).

4. *Recognising emotions in others* – Empathy is described as an ability that 'builds on self-awareness' and as a 'fundamental people skill'.
5. *Handling relationships* – Managing emotions in others; social competence, and the skills required in 'interacting smoothly with others'.

Whilst not explicitly identified as an underpinning theory (CASEL, 2023b; Osher et al., 2016), it is noted that these domains also correspond with the CASEL competencies, and as such, highlight a further overlap of concepts and ideas.

Although EI has been incorporated into a wide range of contexts, Humphrey et al. (2007, p. 237) describe its promotion within educational contexts as 'controversial' on account of the 'oxymoron' that occurs in the concept of rationalising emotions, and the viewpoint that cognition and emotion are 'diametrically opposed entities'. Further, around the time of its introduction to schools, Waterhouse (2006) argued that EI theories should not be taught, due to inconsistencies with cognitive neuroscience literature, and minimal empirical evidence supporting EI as a concept. However, Cherniss et al. (2006) countered that existing research had been overlooked, and that EI was at a stage of development and hypothesis-testing at the time. Since this debate took place, contemporary research has suggested an association between EI abilities and cognitive performance (He et al., 2018; Lim & Lau, 2021). Nevertheless, as with SEL, EI is identified as a broad, potentially overlapping concept, resulting in potential confusion, and risking hindering consistent empirical research owing to difficulties defining it (Mancini et al., 2022). This debate, therefore, highlights a tension between waiting for a body of empirical evidence to support the application of a new theory, versus disseminating and applying new theories so that they can be experienced, reflected upon, and further defined (Muurinen & Kääriäinen, 2022; Wilson & Kislov, 2022).

Another dispute around EI has been the suggestion that EI is more important than IQ (Fernández-Berrocal & Extremera, 2006; Goleman, 2020; Treglown & Furnham, 2023; Zeidner et al., 2008), versus the 'entrenched opposition' from scholars whose focus is on IQ as being a sole measure of aptitude (Goleman, 2020, p. IX). Aside from the underlying debate around whether IQ is regarded as a reliable measure of aptitude (Sternberg et al., 2001), Goleman (2020) argues that, amongst groups of people with similar levels of technical skill, EI-based abilities are the underlying skills required for leadership, and which may distinguish stronger leaders from those without these skills. Further, Goleman (1995, p. 40) explains that IQ and EI are 'not opposing competencies' rather, they are separate competencies which can occur together. Goleman (2020) makes the distinction that:

> *While our emotional intelligence determines our potential for learning the fundamentals of self-mastery…our emotional competence shows how much of that potential we have mastered in ways that translate to on-the-job capabilities. To be adept at an emotional competence like customer service or teamwork requires an underlying ability in EI fundamentals* (Goleman, 2020, p. 13).

This perspective indicates that universal approaches to supporting EI skills may support SE development in childhood, alongside the interpersonal skills required in adulthood, for example, in the context of a job or interactions with other adults. With this in mind, the next part of this literature review will explore how EI skills have been introduced within the UK education system over the past twenty years.

2.6.3. Emotional Literacy

Goleman (2020, p. 7) describes the UK as 'leading the way' in embracing EI, however, within the UK, and particularly in relation to education, the term *emotional literacy* (EL) is more commonly used (Burton, 2008, 2009; Park et al., 2004; Shotton & Burton, 2019; Weare, 2010; Wilding & Claridge, 2016). Shotton & Burton (2019) explain that this is because the term emotional literacy is removed from the idea of an underlying

intelligence that cannot be changed. Although EI and EL have been described as ‘interchangeable’ terms (Burton, 2009, p. 73), it has also been proposed that there is more of a distinction between the two (Steiner, 2003). The term *emotional literacy* appears in a paper by Lotecka (1974), advocating for humanistic education in the context of preventing drug abuse. However, Steiner (2003), describes himself as having coined the term in his work relating to alcohol misuse (Steiner, 1979), which was underpinned by Berne’s Transactional Analysis (Berne, 1961; Steiner, 1984, 1996). Steiner (2003, p. 32), describes EL as ‘emotional intelligence from the heart’, and defines EL training as encompassing five key principles:

1. *Knowing your feelings* – Defining specific feelings and why they may be occurring.
2. *Having a heartfelt sense of empathy* – Recognising others’ feelings; intuitively sensing what others’ feelings are, their strengths, and their cause.
3. *Learning to manage emotions* – Knowing when and how one’s ‘emotional expression’ – or lack thereof – affects other people.
4. *Repairing emotional damage* – Apologising and making amends; taking responsibility for wrongdoings and asking for forgiveness.
5. *Putting it all together* – Developing an ability called ‘emotional interactivity’, involving tuning into others’ feelings, ensuring their emotional state, and interacting effectively with them.

As with EI, these principles reflect the CASEL competencies (CASEL, 2023b). However, whilst very similar to Goleman’s five EI domains, a key difference occurs in the forgiveness aspect of Steiner’s EL principles, which is replaced by motivation in Goleman’s domains. The reason for this is unclear but could be partially explained by the therapeutic context of Steiner’s work (Steiner, 1979, 1996, 2003), as opposed to the organisational origins of Goleman’s work (Goleman, 1995, 2020), and their differing theoretical

underpinnings (Berne, 1961; Cantor & Kihlstrom, 1985; Goleman, 1995; Salovey & Mayer, 1990; Steiner, 1984). Further, Steiner (2003, p. 33) makes the distinction that EI is a concept which is quantifiable, whereas training in EL is intended to support people to 'work with each other, cooperatively, free of manipulation and coercion, using emotions empathetically to bind people together and enhance the collective quality of life'. Although a subtle difference, it may be suggested that Steiner's interpretation of EL relates more to affective qualities—as in Goleman's definition of emotional competence (Goleman, 2020)—rather than the development of specific skills, as outlined in EI. Nevertheless, for the purpose of this research, EL will be used as this relates to the terminology used within the ELSA project (Burton, 2009).

2.6.4. Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning programme

In 2005, as part of the Every Child Matters policy (DfCSF, 2009; DfES, 2003), the Labour Government introduced the Social Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) primary programme, which aimed to develop CYPs' SE and behavioural skills through whole-school approaches (Gillies, 2011); class work, small-group work (Gillies, 2011; Lendrum et al., 2009), and individual sessions (Banerjee et al., 2014; DfES, 2005, 2007; Lendrum et al., 2009; Wood, 2016). Later, the programme was also introduced for secondary schools (DfES, 2007; Lendrum et al., 2013; Snape, 2011; Wigelsworth et al., 2012).

Although CASEL was contemporary to SEAL, the SEAL programme was more explicitly underpinned by the key domains of EI theory (Goleman, 1995) and was the dominant approach to SEL within the UK (Wigelsworth et al., 2022). An estimated 90% of primary schools, and 70% of secondary schools implemented the SEAL programme (Humphrey et al., 2013) until it was discontinued by the Coalition Government in 2011 following national evaluations (BBC, 2011; Humphrey et al., 2013).

Evaluations of SEAL suggest that it encouraged whole-school engagement; promoted dialogue relating to behaviour, actions, and attitudes; increased staff knowledge; and supported staff understanding and confidence in interacting with CYP (Hallam, 2009; Wood & Warin, 2014). Further, some teaching staff attributed the SEAL programme to having calmer classrooms and CYP who were better able to concentrate on their work, and interact with their peers (Hallam, 2009). However, Humphrey at al. (2013, p. 251) describe the benefits of SEAL as being 'greatly overstated', on account of there being little in the way of measurable outcomes. They also highlight the 'lack of methodological rigour', in the evaluations, due to a lack of control or comparison groups and longitudinal studies, and a potential risk of reporting bias (Vaganay, 2016) in that five of the evaluation studies were funded by the DfCSF.

SEAL was intended to be adapted by schools, rather than a set package (Humphrey et al., 2013), however, Gillies (2011, p. 195) describes the views underpinning the programme as 'culturally specific', which assumed a 'white privileged standpoint', and Wood and Warin (2014) and Wood (2018) highlight that teachers' interpretation and use of SEAL had the potential to marginalise the values of minority groups. In addition, SEAL risked 'pathologising' the needs of individual pupils, owing to its 'therapeutic ethos', which was delivered by staff without therapeutic training (Gillies, 2011, p. 195). A further limitation of SEAL's efficacy was found in its implementation, including staff knowledge of and belief in SEAL; and wanting more guidance on implementation in light of its flexibility (Banerjee, 2010; Humphrey et al., 2013; Lendrum et al., 2013). These findings indicate a tension between ensuring interventions are tailored to individual circumstances, whilst also ensuring programme fidelity (Weare, 2010, p. 11). Further, they highlight the importance of supporting staff knowledge to ensure programme fidelity and efficacy (Humphrey et al., 2013).

SEAL was a free programme which was implemented extensively across both primary and secondary schools. However, these findings indicate that, whilst programmes aimed at SE development are widely accessible when implemented at a national level (Banerjee et al., 2014), 'one size fits all' approaches may not be suitable (Humphrey et al., 2013), as these risk overlooking the individual differences within regions, cities, and communities (Gillies, 2011; Weare, 2010; Wood, 2018; Wood & Warin, 2014).

2.6.5. Personal, Social, Health and Economic education

Under the Coalition and then Conservative governments, and in a step away from the SEAL strategy (Winship, 2021), the focus on supporting CYP placed an emphasis on mental health and wellbeing, rather than SEL (Norwich et al., 2022; Winship, 2021). This shift saw the introduction of a range of policies, guidance and strategies relating to CYPs' mental health and SE development (DfE, 2019; DoH, 2014, 2015; NHS England, 2023b).

Between 2010–2015, the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition Government issued the white paper *Healthy Lives, Healthy People* (DoH, 2010), which placed an emphasis on schools undertaking a role in improving health through personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) teaching (DoH, 2010; National Children's Bureau, 2014). In addition, the *No Health without Mental Health* strategy (HM Government & DoH, 2011) was introduced, with the aim of achieving 'parity of esteem between mental and physical health services' (p. 2), across all age groups, including CYP. As part of this, the *Mental Health and Behaviour in Schools* guidance (DfE, 2014b, 2018) was introduced, with the aim of supporting adults in schools to reframe challenging behaviour and understand it as emotional need (Winship, 2021).

Although PSHE education formed a key part of the *Healthy Lives, Healthy People* paper (DoH, 2010), PSHE education did not specify inclusion of mental health or emotional wellbeing topics (National Children's Bureau, 2014). Further, PSHE education did not

become statutory until 2020 (Crow, 2008; DfE, 2021a; Garratt et al., 2022), with the addition of statutory physical and mental health education as part of the relationships and sex education (RSE) regulations introduced in 2019 (DfE, 2021; Long, 2023). Whilst not labelled as such, the PSHE and RSE guidance includes aspects of Goleman's EI domains (Goleman, 1995), including learning about, recognising, and talking about emotions (DfE, 2021b; Garratt et al., 2022). In addition, RSE guidance outlines different types of relationships; how to handle healthy relationships; and how relationships may affect wellbeing (DfE, 2021b; Long, 2023). This links with Goleman's domain of *handling relationships* (Goleman, 1995), and suggests that aspects of EI and SEAL are still considered important areas to teach, albeit with different labels.

Alongside other whole-school strategies (EEF, 2019; Procter et al., 2021), PSHE education and RSE has the potential to provide opportunities for universal access to emotional wellbeing education, and support SE development (Chester et al., 2019; Howard-Merrill, 2024; PSHE Association, 2021). Despite this, and similar to SEAL, PSHE is largely delivered by non-specialist staff, who are not usually provided with appropriate training on SE development during their own training (Procter et al., 2021). In addition, teachers' confidence in delivering the PSHE curriculum has been highlighted as a concern by teachers themselves (E. Davies & Matley, 2020; Howard-Merrill, 2024), which risks impacting on the quality and consistency of information being delivered during PSHE lessons (Procter et al., 2021), and reflects Humphrey et al.'s (2013) suggestion about supporting staff knowledge to promote implementation. The PSHE Association (2021) reports that, when taught effectively, PSHE increases emotional wellbeing and in turn, improves academic outcomes. However, Bragg et al. (2022) suggest that teaching SE and relationship skills through a curriculum alone—rather than as a whole school approach—may limit the social, behavioural, and attitudinal changes and development that can occur. This further

emphasises the importance of a balance between specific teaching in the context of a class, and whole-school approaches to supporting SE development.

Alongside whole-school or universal approaches, the NICE (2022) guidelines also outline targeted approaches as part of their graduated response. This review now focuses on the targeted approaches which have been introduced within education to support SE development.

2.6.6. Mental Health Support Teams

Following the publication of the Conservative Government's green paper for *Transforming Children and Young people's Mental Health* (DoH & DfE, 2017), Mental Health Support Teams (MHSTs) were established to expand mental health care for CYP ages 5–18 with 'mild to moderate mental health issues' such as anxiety, depression and behaviour problems (Department of Health and Social Care [DoHSC], 2022; NHS England, 2023b, 2023c). The first 58 MHSTs were introduced in 2018 as 'Trailblazer' (pilot) teams (Ellins et al., 2023a; NHS England, 2023a), and the intention is for two thirds of schools in England to have an MHST by 2024/25, and for all schools to have MHSTs by 2027/28 (DoHSC, 2022).

MHSTs are nationally directed and jointly delivered by the NHS and the DfE in partnership with other partners or local organisations (Association of Educational Psychologists [AEP], 2021; Barnardo's, 2022). They have three 'core functions': 1) to deliver evidence-based interventions for 'mild to moderate' mental health problems; 2) support senior mental health leads (where they are established in settings) to introduce a 'whole-school approach' and 3) give 'timely advice' to school staff, and liaise with specialist services (NHS England, 2023a). This is achieved by training Educational Mental Health Practitioners (EMHPs; NHS England, 2023c), who are employed by the NHS and work directly in schools or colleges, using techniques such as brief, low-intensity cognitive behavioural therapies (CBT; Barnardo's, 2022; Ellins et al., 2021). MHSTs also consist of

higher-level therapists—who may deliver high intensity CBT sessions (Barnardo's, 2022)—and senior staff, who supervise EMHPs (NHS England, 2023c). Some MHSTs also include EPs who undertake a practitioner psychologist role (AEP, 2021). EMHPs' work typically involves 1:1 support, group interventions, and support for parents using psychoeducation (Barnardo's, 2022)—which involves learning about mental health and wellbeing (Anna Freud, 2023)—and low-intensity CBT (Barnardo's, 2022).

MHSTs have been recognised for the early access they provide for CYP in accessing mental health support (Barnardo's, 2022; British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy, 2023; Ellins et al., 2023a), and schools report their introduction so far to be positive (AEP, 2021; Ellins et al., 2023b). EP involvement in MHSTs has been highlighted as a strength in helping to facilitate relationships between MHSTs and schools, as well as facilitate whole-school mental health support to be implemented (AEP, 2021; Skene, 2023). However, at present, there is limited research relating to the impact, efficacy, or implementation of MHSTs (Spencer et al., 2022), and no research related to longer-term outcomes on account of MHSTs' relatively recent introduction.

Of the literature available, a 'rapid evaluation' of the Trailblazer programme (Ellins et al., 2023b) and a report by the National Children's Bureau (NCB; 2022) indicate that schools with MHSTs feel more confident and have faster and wider access to mental health advice and resources. However, further evaluations have raised concerns about MHSTs' integration with school curriculum and universal mental health support (Procter et al., 2021, p. 19), and suggest 'substantial variations' in the implementation of whole-school approaches. This is echoed by Ellins et al. (2023a, 2023b) who identified that, amongst some Trailblazer teams, EMHPs were spending more time focusing on individual therapeutic interventions than supporting the development of whole-school approaches. As whole-school approaches are considered important in supporting schools' ethos and

culture towards CYPs' overall SE development and mental health (Ellins et al., 2023a; Procter et al., 2021), this focus risks overlooking the development of universal approaches in favour of targeted support (NICE, 2022), as well as potentially conflicting with the teaching that already takes place through the PSHE curriculum. In addition, Ellins et al's (2021) study noted concerns from some participants regarding the training and experience EMHPs have of working with the age groups they are assigned to. This could have implications for MHSTs' integration into schools, especially if practitioners are unfamiliar with individual settings' requirements, ethos, needs, and challenges.

A further consideration from Ellins et al. (2021, 2023a) is around potential limitations in terms of the suitability or effectiveness of MHST interventions (e.g., CBT-based therapies), particularly for younger age groups; cases of self-harming; and CYP with special educational needs, or who are from vulnerable or disadvantaged cohorts. However, specific details surrounding the needs within these groups are not provided, so may not fully reflect the groups for whom MHST CBT provision is or is not suitable for. Ellins et al. (2023b) suggest that it may be easier for inexperienced therapists to deliver structured, manualised interventions with minimal training, however, they recognise that some adaptations to CBT may be required to ensure its suitability and efficacy for some groups, indicating the need for flexibility within the MHST programme to be appropriate to more CYP.

From a broader perspective, NCB (2022) highlights issues with how MHSTs are implemented at a local level, owing to a perceived narrow focus of interventions offered (e.g., just CBT), which are not always regarded as fitting with local need, or complementing provision which is already available from charities or local organisations. In addition, Ellins et al. (2021) suggest that some settings disinvest the support they already provide within school once MHSTs are in place, meaning that MHSTs act as a substitution for this support

rather than an additional provision. Whilst it is anticipated that this relates only to 'a very small number of settings' (p. 8), this could have implications in terms of ending the support that CYP were already receiving from trusted adults within school, as well as further stretching—rather than increasing—capacity for support.

Overall, the MHST programme raises awareness of mental health support needs amongst CYP and aims to provide accessible support within educational settings; however, in contrast to the SEL approaches discussed earlier, MHSTs seem to move the focus from SEL approaches, which may be more preventative (Corcoran et al., 2018; Durlak et al., 2022; Wigelsworth et al., 2022), to reactive approaches involving identification or 'diagnosis' and subsequent 'treatment'. It also suggests a move towards incorporating clinical concepts into educational settings, risking shifting support for CYP towards 'therapeutic education' (Winship, 2021, p. 590), rather than promoting and integrating support, understanding, and SE skill development into schools (CASEL, 2023b; Frye et al., 2022; Winship, 2021). Whilst the longer-term impact of these approaches is not yet understood (Foulkes & Andrews, 2023), this further highlights the importance of considering how CYPs' emotions and experiences are perceived and responded to, and maintaining a balance between CYP receiving adequate support for mental health problems as well as being mindful of avoiding pathologising the range of emotions humans experience (Foulkes & Andrews, 2023; Speerforck et al., 2024).

This section has discussed current approaches to targeted, low-level SE support within schools, but has highlighted some considerations around therapeutic versus educational perspectives, and understanding schools' context and CYPs' specific needs. In contrast to the clinical foundations of MHSTs, the ELSA project, as a targeted approach to SE support within schools, is now explored.

2.6.7. Emotional Literacy Support Assistant project

2.6.7.1. Context

Within a similar timeframe to SEAL, the ELSA project was introduced as a peripatetic service in 2001 by Sheila Burton as part of the Southampton Psychology Service, on the principle that, to benefit from educational opportunities, emotional needs must first be recognised and supported (Burton, 2008, 2021). Following this, the school-based ELSA project was established by Burton in Hampshire in 2003, initially in primary schools, followed by secondary and SEMH special schools, to support CYP with a range of SE needs (Burton, 2008, 2021; ELSA Network, 2017a). Subsequently, the ELSA project has been introduced throughout the UK, and the ELSA Network website (2023) lists approximately 145 LA educational psychology services offering ELSA training and supervision.

In contrast to MHSTs, the ELSA project aims to build capacity within schools using existing resources (ELSA Network, 2017a), by training and supporting school teaching assistants (TAs), so that they can develop and deliver interventions which are individual to the identified needs of pupils (Burton, 2021). Interventions delivered by ELSAs typically take place weekly, over 6–12 weeks, although some last slightly longer depending on CYPs' needs (Burton, 2009). The ELSA project is described as preventative work (Burton, 2019), which is intended to be 'proactive and planned', rather than a reactive response, for example, following an incident (Burton, 2008, p. 44). This further contrasts with MHSTs, who respond to identified mental health problems (NHS England, 2023c). The ELSA project is not considered permanent or open-ended (Burton, 2021), meaning interventions are planned, and time limited, with clearly defined aims and objectives for each session (Burton, 2008, 2021). Pupils may receive further, targeted interventions as required, but the time for new skills to be consolidated and generalised is also considered (Burton, 2009, 2021). However, as ELSAs are a permanent member of school staff, gradual withdrawal of

ELSA involvement can be supported through drop-in sessions or occasional reviews (Burton, 2009).

2.6.7.2. ELSA training

ELSA training consists of a six-day programme, usually delivered as one-day units by one or two EPs, across one or two school terms. This allows for ELSAs to begin to put their training into practice between sessions (Burton, 2021). The training focuses on individual modules relating to:

- Emotional awareness
- Self-esteem
- Understanding and managing anger
- Social and friendship skills
- Loss and bereavement
- Active listening and communication skills.

Since its initial introduction, some of the modules have been developed or expanded. For example, loss and bereavement was added as a core part of the training; anger management now incorporates broader emotional regulation, including coping with anxiety, and self-esteem now includes motivation and resilience (Shotton & Burton, 2019).

Each module is underpinned by psychological theory and draws on Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1943, 1969); EI theory (Goleman, 1995; Salovey & Mayer, 1990), referred to as EL (Shotton & Burton, 2019); Glasser's choice theory (1998); and Dweck's (2006) growth mindset theory (Burton, 2009; Shotton & Burton, 2019). In addition, training incorporates basic counselling skills, including the concepts of empathy, congruence, unconditional positive regard, and active listening (Burton & Okai, 2018; Shotton & Burton,

2019). ELSAs are introduced to a range of resources and tools during the training, to support them in identifying, supporting, and evaluating need and change (McEwen, 2019).

Although ELSA training provides information on the outlined modules, accompanying psychological theory, and suggested resources, ELSAs are expected to use the information from their training to devise interventions which are bespoke to the needs of the CYP they are working with (Burton, 2008, 2021). Interventions are intended to be realistic in terms of their purpose, and have clearly identified aims (Burton & Okai, 2018). This is achieved by gathering background information through a referral form (ELSA Network, 2017b), which then informs interventions (Burton & Okai, 2018). Interventions may focus on topics such as recognising and regulating emotions; resolving conflict; improving or developing peer relationships; or support following a bereavement (Burton, 2009), drawing on techniques or approaches such as social stories (C. Gray & Garand, 1993), the principals of CBT, and The Circle of Friends (Newton et al., 1996) when supporting peer relationships (Burton, 2008; Burton & Okai, 2018).

Research suggests that ELSAs view their training to be valuable, particularly in relation to their personal and professional development and competency, and the support they receive during the training (Leighton, 2015; D. Mann, 2014; Rees, 2016; Robertson, 2021). ELSAs reported that the training supported their confidence, knowledge, and understanding of the CYP they work with, and changed their thinking and practice to working in a more child-centred way (Bland & Macro, 2018; Grahamslaw, 2010; Harris, 2020; Leighton, 2015; Rees, 2016). Further, Rees (2016) suggests that ELSAs' trait EI scores on questionnaires increased following ELSA training, which indicates that the training supports personal development alongside learning the ELSA role.

2.6.7.3. ELSA supervision

Following the initial training, ELSAs receive line management support within their schools (ELSA Network, 2017c), and attend regular group ELSA supervision as part of groups of up to eight ELSAs (Burton, 2008, 2021; Osborne & Burton, 2014). ELSA supervision draws on the professional supervision practitioners within helping professions are expected to receive (ELSA Network, 2017d; Hawkins & Shohet, 2012; Health & Care Professions Council [HCPC], 2024) and aims to provide opportunities for reflective practice, supportive challenge, and personal support (ELSA Network, 2017d), plus opportunities for further training (Burton, 2008). Supervision groups are led by EPs and are expected to meet for two hours per half term. Ongoing supervision is outlined by Burton (2021) as being a unique component of the ELSA project, as it provides ELSAs with guidance and support in relation to their competence, the quality of their work, and emotional support. In addition, supervision appears to support ELSAs' self-efficacy, which in turn supports CYPs' SE development (McEwen, 2019).

Research suggests that ELSA supervision enables ELSAs to share ideas, discuss cases and problem-solve together, as well as receive emotional support from both EPs and other ELSAs, (Atkin, 2019; Bland & Macro, 2018; Eldred, 2021; France & Billington, 2020; Leighton, 2015; Osborne & Burton, 2014; Ridley, 2017; Robertson, 2021), particularly where participants may be the only ELSA in their school (Bravery & Harris, 2009). Despite this, some ELSAs reported wanting more direct involvement from their supervisor, beyond the context of group supervision (Osborne & Burton, 2014), whereas others requested changes to the structure of supervision, such as bigger groups, more time to discuss the topics raised, more experienced ELSAs as part of their group, or separate groups for ELSAs working in different settings (France & Billington, 2020; Osborne & Burton, 2014). However, the context of this is unclear – for example, whether ELSAs making these

requests were working in particularly complex settings or had personal circumstances for which they required more individual support.

A further consideration relates to understanding the importance of supervision. Some ELSAs described supervision as a ‘grey area’ (Atkin, 2019, p. 79), and others appear to perceive supervision as having a negative impact on the CYP they support, owing to the time they are required to be out of school (Osborne & Burton, 2014). Further, Atkin (2019) indicates that ELSAs’ supervision attendance may vary depending on their limited availability, and that some schools with more than one ELSA may release ELSAs to supervision on a rota basis. This suggests that, despite supervision being outlined as a core component of the ELSA project, there may be differences in how supervision is introduced and interpreted by ELSAs, their schools, and supervising EPs.

2.6.7.4. ELSA practice

To support the ELSA role, schools are asked to allocate one day per week for ELSAs, as well as provide a designated space for ELSAs to work in, and a small budget for relevant resources (Burton, 2021); however, some ELSAs report a lack of allocated time in which to undertake their ELSA role, and a lack of allocated space for sessions to take place (King, 2020; D. Mann, 2014; McEwen, 2019; Robertson, 2021), which may be perceived as a barrier to their practice.

ELSAs report that they find their role rewarding (Endersby, 2021), and that it helps them to feel valued within their schools (Bravery & Harris, 2009). The ELSA role also appears to provide ELSAs with new opportunities within school, for example, sharing information around CYPs’ needs with other colleagues (Leighton, 2015). Some of the benefits of the ELSA role have been attributed to ELSAs already being members of staff at school, so they are familiar with the school systems, their colleagues, and the CYP (Burton, 2019; Leighton, 2015), which ELSAs seem to regard as particularly important when

establishing a relationship with CYP (McEwen, 2019). This contrasts with the literature around MHSTs (Ellins et al., 2021, 2023a, 2023b; Procter et al., 2021), where EMHPs work within schools but are not staff members, and suggests that the position of ELSAs may help them to establish a rapport with CYP and understand their context.

Despite these positive findings, ELSAs also appear to experience some challenges in their roles. This includes feeling overwhelmed by their role, particularly in relation to their skills and knowledge around certain topics or approaches, and maintaining boundaries in relation to their workload (Leighton, 2015; D. Mann, 2014; McEwen, 2019). This is also reflected in Rees's (2016) study, where ELSAs reported feeling alone or unsupported in their roles, or lacking in confidence. This was, in part, attributed to lack of autonomy in undertaking the ELSA role (e.g., not choosing to become an ELSA), as well as concerns around the support and time allowance they received from senior management, which indicates that ELSAs may be affected by systemic factors beyond their control.

Alongside potential systemic concerns, some ELSAs reported experiences of challenges with their relationships with CYP when working out of the context of ELSA. Miles (2015) suggests that ELSAs' multiple roles act as a barrier to the development and maintenance of relationships with CYP, owing to ELSAs needing to respond differently to CYP in their capacity as TAs or playground supervisors, versus when they are ELSAs. Burton, p. (2021, p. 545) explains that TAs were selected for the role of ELSA owing to 'sustainability', in that TAs were more likely to be allocated time for regular, individual support sessions. However, it may be suggested that TAs have different demands placed upon them now—for example, teaching phonics groups, or covering for other staff (Hall & Webster, 2023)—than when the project originally started. CYP may, therefore, see ELSAs in different roles more frequently, which could confuse their relationship with them.

2.6.7.5. ELSA project impact

The ELSA project is reported to have been well-received by EPS, schools, and ELSAs (Burton, 2008, 2021; Haigh, 2019; Pickering et al., 2019), however, there is a relatively small body of literature relating to the ELSA project, much of which is unpublished and conducted by LAs or trainee EPs (Pickering et al., 2019). Whilst not mentioned explicitly, Pickering et al. (2019) seem to imply this is a problem, perhaps on account of potential bias or variable quality (De Herde et al., 2021). Although grey literature is increasingly valued for its diversity (Adams et al., 2017; Paez, 2017; Pappas & Williams, 2011), a lack of published or easily accessible literature may make it difficult to draw upon to inform the ELSA project. However, as scientist-practitioners with experience in conducting rigorous research (British Psychological Society [BPS], 2023; Maydew & Atkinson, 2022; Miller & Frederickson, 2006; Sedgwick, 2019), EPs and trainee EPs may be considered well placed to research the ELSA project, which is unique to their practice.

Existing literature identifies limitations around how the impact of ELSA is gauged, owing to the sensitivity of the measures used (McEwen, 2015; Pickering et al., 2019). Further, a lack of definitive method for tracking or establishing measurable outcomes has been highlighted (Pickering et al., 2019; Purcell & Kelly, 2023). Research using pre and post measures relating to CYPs' EL skills following ELSA interventions indicates little change in pupil-reported scores (Bravery & Harris, 2009; Haigh, 2019; D. Mann, 2014; F. Mann & Russell, 2011); however, Hills (2016) indicates that primary-aged CYP recognised a positive change in themselves, e.g., in confidence and friendship skills as measured through an adapted questionnaire.

From the perspective of key adults, positive changes were perceived in relation to behaviour and peer interactions (Butcher et al., 2013), social skills and emotional regulation (Barker, 2017; Burton et al., 2009), and self-efficacy (Grahamslaw, 2010). Single-case

studies by Butcher et al. (2013) and Haigh (2019) corroborate this, although it is noted that these studies did not gauge whether positive changes were sustained over time. Nevertheless, this difference in results suggests CYP may recognise EL skills differently in themselves compared to those which adults identify.

Research involving interviews and focus groups indicates that CYP perceive ELSA interventions to be positive experiences (Balampanidou, 2019). CYP highlighted the positive relationships they develop with their ELSA (Barker, 2017; Haigh, 2019; Hills, 2016; Purcell et al., 2023); opportunities to talk about, and understand their feelings (Balampanidou, 2019; Hills, 2016; Purcell et al., 2023); and a change in their perspective or experiences of particular situations, such as making friends, attending school or participating in lessons (Haigh, 2019; Hills, 2016; Krause et al., 2020; McEwen, 2015; Purcell et al., 2023; Wong et al., 2020).

In considering how the ELSA project is evaluated, and bearing in mind that ELSA interventions are specific to CYP (Burton, 2021), these findings indicate that it may be difficult to accurately gauge impact using broad outcomes as measures, as data may not be representative of the targets identified for individual pupils. Further, it suggests that research designs may need to allow for individual analysis over time, for example, using single-case designs, which may offer more flexibility (Maydew & Atkinson, 2022), as opposed to traditional evaluation methods such as randomised control trials (Humphrey et al., 2013).

2.6.7.6. ELSA project implementation

Although ELSA training is manualised (Burton, 2009), some EP services have made adaptations to the training programme (Burton, 2021), for example, to include an additional day relating to resilience (Bland & Macro, 2018). Further, Fairall (2020) indicates that ELSA implementation between schools may vary. In the context of evaluations, these

differences in training and implementation potentially undermine the quality of evidence regarding ELSA project effectiveness as there may be inconsistencies in the outcomes being measured (Lendrum & Humphrey, 2012). Nevertheless, such differences could be accommodating local context or settings' specific needs (Burton, 2021) and may, therefore, be considered necessary adaptations.

Beyond differences in the initial training and ELSAs' practice (Burton, 2021), further facilitators and barriers to ELSA implementation and fidelity are reflected within the literature. ELSAs' limited availability to plan and deliver interventions is identified across numerous studies (Bravery & Harris, 2009; Fairall, 2020; King, 2020; Leighton, 2015; D. Mann, 2014; Nicholson-Roberts, 2019), which echoes earlier discussions around current demands on TAs (Hall & Webster, 2023). School colleagues' understanding of the ELSA role is also recognised as being helpful (Bravery & Harris, 2009) but variable (Fairall, 2020), as is communication between colleagues (Bravery & Harris, 2009). However, Leighton (2015) and Nicholson-Roberts (2019) note that ELSA communication with colleagues may be limited. This could, in part, relate to ELSAs' overall limited availability, although differences in understanding may also reflect schools' wider understanding of SE development and support (Fairall, 2020; Nicholson-Roberts, 2019; Robertson, 2021).

ELSA—pupil relationships are identified as helpful in terms of implementing ELSA interventions (Nicholson-Roberts, 2019), which also reflects Purcell et al.'s (2023) study relating to CYP experiences. Despite this, the emotional impact of ELSA work on ELSAs, for example, in terms of the negative effects risk of pupils developing a dependency on ELSAs was identified as a barrier (Nicholson-Roberts, 2019), and possibly signifies a lack of available support within school (King, 2020), which also corresponds with the need for ELSA colleagues to understand the ELSA role (Bravery & Harris, 2009; Fairall, 2020). Nevertheless, the ELSA–EP relationship is recognised as being a supportive factor (Eldred,

2021; Fairall, 2020; Leighton, 2015; Nicholson-Roberts, 2019), which could potentially mitigate this issue.

Flexibility in terms of planning individual ELSA interventions was also identified as a facilitating implementation, however, Nicholson-Roberts (2019) notes that some interventions did not have well-defined finish points and lasted longer than the recommended 6–12 weeks. This may link with CYPs' emotional dependency on ELSAs, but also suggests that, whilst the flexibility of ELSA is identified as a facilitator to implementation (Burton, 2021), it may also act as a barrier. This indicates that ELSAs may benefit from guidance regarding planning interventions and adhering to the time-limited component of ELSA work.

In the context of research focusing specifically on ELSA project facilitators and barriers, five prior studies have taken place. Of these, three involved secondary schools (Begley, 2016; King, 2020; Nicholson-Roberts, 2019) , one involved two primary schools (Fairall, 2020), and one involved primary and secondary schools (Robertson, 2021). One study involved primary and secondary ELSAs (Robertson, 2021); three studies involved school staff such as ELSAs, special educational needs and disabilities coordinators (SENDCOs), and senior leadership team (SLT; Begley, 2016; King, 2020; Nicholson-Roberts, 2019) and one involved primary school staff plus EPs (Fairall, 2020). Robertson (2021) indicates that ELSA project implementation helps schools' understanding of EL and identified staff relationships, school readiness, and ELSA communities as supporting this, but it is unclear as to whether these results relate to primary or secondary ELSAs. Amongst studies involving just primary or secondary schools, some differences between implementation were identified, for example, in secondary schools, understanding SE development and behaviour was highlighted as a challenge (King, 2020; Nicholson-Roberts, 2019). In primary schools, this was not identified as an issue but specific understanding

around the ELSA project was (Fairall, 2020). However, as this comparison involves only a small number of studies and settings, it may represent differences between schools more broadly (Fairall, 2020), rather than between primary and secondary settings. This indicates that further research into the factors which help and hinder ELSA project implementation would be beneficial in terms of enabling CYPs' access to SE support through school.

2.6.8. ELSA project summary

Overall, the literature suggests that the ELSA project provides an opportunity for schools to offer their own targeted support through interventions which are tailored to CYPs' needs, and provided by school staff who receive specific training and ongoing support through supervision. However, there is little research relating to what helps the ELSA project to run in schools. Factors relating to implementation are important in terms of intervention evaluation, as effective implementation is associated with stronger outcomes (Durlak & DuPre, 2008; Pickering et al., 2019). Further, understanding the factors which influence intervention implementation can help to inform what needs to be in place, and what may need to change to ensure their sustainability (Wilson & Kislov, 2022).

2.7. Part 1 summary

The first part of this literature review explored the approaches used within education to support CYPs' SE development and mental health, including school-based curricula, and targeted interventions. Throughout the approaches discussed, a theme was identified in terms of who delivers these approaches, e.g., familiar teachers without training, or trained EMHPs who, although working within schools, are external to the school community. Further, limitations were identified in how SE curricula and interventions are implemented and evaluated. Sitting separately from government-led initiatives, the ELSA project was discussed in the context of having a similar theoretical foundation to SEL and SEAL, but utilising school-based staff who receive specific training

and supervision. Research suggests that the ELSA project supports CYPs' SE development. However, despite the ELSA project's longevity and wide uptake, there remains a limited literature base for both its efficacy and implementation. To further understand implementation of the ELSA project, implementation science theory and literature are now explored.

2.8. Part 2 – Implementation science

The field of implementation science (IS) seeks to identify, understand, and address the challenges of applying research evidence and findings to policy and practice (Kelly, 2012), with the aim of helping practitioners to use interventions with fidelity to their original design, and thus support their efficacy (Fixsen et al., 2009; Lendrum & Humphrey, 2012). As such, IS may be considered to have three functions (Wilson & Kislov, 2022):

1. Use theory and empirical research to identify, understand, and explore factors which may influence successful implementation, including systems, behaviours, and practice.
2. Examine implementation evaluation to identify factors which may help or hinder implementation in different contexts.
3. Seek to understand the process of implementation itself, including the specifics of what gets implemented, when, why, and how.

IS covers a broad and multidisciplinary field (Kilbourne et al., 2020; Wilson & Kislov, 2022) and has been incorporated into a range of disciplines and contexts, including: medicine (Greenhalgh et al., 2004), engineering (Borrego et al., 2010), public policy (Crable et al., 2022), social care (Van Houtven et al., 2023), and education (Bond et al., 2024; CASEL, 2021; Kelly, 2014; Lendrum & Humphrey, 2012; Sharples et al., 2024). This indicates that the importance of IS is widely recognised, however, as IS approaches vary in purpose,

complexity, and target audience, it is also important to know how to select an appropriate approach to best support implementation practice (Nilsen, 2015; Wilson & Kislov, 2022).

2.8.1. Theories, models, and frameworks in implementation science

IS is complex and multifaceted, and draws on a range of theories, models, and frameworks (TMF) to understand how or why the implementation of an intervention is successful or not (Durlak, 2016; Lendrum & Humphrey, 2012; Moir, 2018; Nilsen, 2015; Wignall et al., 2023). Further, IS proposes that implementation may be influenced by a range of factors beyond intervention content (Durlak et al., 2011; Procter et al., 2021), including stakeholder behaviours, systemic factors, and context (Durlak & DuPre, 2008; Nilsen, 2015; Nilsen & Bernhardsson, 2019).

Well-founded and developed TMFs have been described as helping to capture, and then advance knowledge about which interventions work best, as well as offer guidance to practitioners on intervention implementation (Damschroder, 2020; Sharples et al., 2024). However, choice of TMF may be more complex (Nilsen, 2020; Y. Wang et al., 2023), with several TMF to choose from, many of which overlap in terms of theoretical foundations (Hanson et al., 2016; Nilsen, 2015; Wilson & Kislov, 2022). Y. Wang et al. (2023, p.2), describe a 'proliferation' of TMF—approximately 143 included in their scoping review—and highlight variations in the quality and usability of some when appraised using a TMF selection tool. Further, Oxman et al. (2005, p. 115) propose that IS TMF introduce unnecessary jargon into a field which requires 'less dogmatism, more common sense'. Nevertheless, Nilsen & Bernhardsson (2019) suggest that the range of TMF available accounts for considerations around context in TMF development. This indicates that there may be more nuanced factors involved in considering TMF quality and usability, e.g., understanding the subtle differences between strategies which *help* people to change, versus those which *influence* people to change (Wilson & Kislov, 2022). It also highlights the

case for more in-depth considerations around understanding and implementing IS itself (Gaias et al., 2023; Wilson & Kislov, 2022) so that researchers and practitioners can fully understand its purpose (Gaias et al., 2023).

An additional factor in TMF selection relates to its philosophical position. Wilson and Kislov (2022) note the dominance of a 'predominantly positivist agenda' (p. 20) within IS, for example, drawing on TMF from medicine, which may not be suitable in fields such as education. Further, Boulton et al. (2020) suggest that TMF risk making over-simplified explanations about events or experiences, rather than considering how they explain and represent reality. For example, in identifying barriers and enablers to implementation but not why they may occur (Collier-Meek et al., 2019). This suggests that, alongside factors such as context, the epistemological and ontological position of TMF must be considered at the point of selection to ensure they cohere with the issue being addressed (Moullin et al., 2020; Nilsen, 2015).

In contrast to considerations around TMF selection, and with the intention of supporting a comprehensive understanding of IS, general theories of implementation have been proposed (May, 2013; Wilson & Kislov, 2022). General theories integrate ideas about social systems, collective action, and individual and shared attention, and aim to be applied across different disciplines (May, 2013). However, Nilsen (2015) suggests that IS is too complex a phenomenon to be explained by general theories and instead proposes a TMF classification system involving three identified aims and five TMF categories. As well as considering context, this system supports the previously outlined considerations around epistemological position by considering the type of question being addressed (Wilson & Kislov, 2022), enabling researchers to select TMF which are most appropriate to their purpose. An outline of the classification system, along with examples of associated TMFs, is represented in Table 2.3.

Table ***2.3***

A table of theories, models, and frameworks, adapted from Nilsen (2015)

Aim	Category	Description	Examples
Describing and/or guiding the process of translating research into practice	Process models	Specify the steps or phases in the process of transferring research into practice. Describe or guide the process; provide practical guidance and strategies for planning and supporting implementation.	Models by Huberman (1987); Quality Implementation Framework (Meyers et al., 2012); Stages of Implementation (Fixsen et al., 2005).
Understanding and/or explaining what influences implementation outcomes	Determinant frameworks	Specify types of determinants which enable, prevent, or influence implementation. Some frameworks specify relationships between determinants. Understand or explain implementation influences to predict or interpret outcomes.	Active Implementation Frameworks (Fixsen & Blase, 2020); Ecological Framework (Durlak & DuPre, 2008); Diffusion of Innovation (Greenhalgh et al., 2004).
	Classic theories	Originate from fields which are external to IS, but which can be applied to understand or explain elements of implementation.	Theory of Diffusion (Rogers, 2003); Communities of Practice (Wenger, 1996).
	Implementation theories	Developed from scratch or adapted from existing theories by IS researchers to understand and/or explain aspects of implementation.	Organisational Readiness (Weiner, 2009); Implementation Climate (Klein & Sorra, 1996).
Evaluating implementation	Evaluation frameworks	Specify aspects of implementation that could be evaluated to determine the success of implementation.	PRECEDE–PROCEED (L. W. Green & Kreuter, 1991); RE-AIM (Glasgow et al., 1999); framework by Proctor et al. (2011).

There is not the scope within this review to explore all the TMFs listed in Table 2.3, however, as this study aims to understand some of the potential factors which influence ELSA project implementation, it may be suggested that implementation theories and determinant frameworks are an appropriate focus (Bond et al., 2024; Nilsen, 2015). An overview of these frameworks and theories is now presented.

2.8.1.1. Implementation theories

Implementation theories are adapted from so-called 'classic theories' (those from fields beyond psychology) to be applicable to IS (Nilsen, 2015, 2020). These adaptations mean that researchers can analyse the aspects considered most pertinent to the 'how and why' of implementation (Nilsen, 2020, p. 20), and ensure their relevance to the contexts they are applied to.

The organisational readiness for change (ORC) theory (Weiner, 2009) is an example of an implementation theory which originates in healthcare, and draws on the three-stage model of change[5] (Lewin, 1947). The ORC is considered a 'critical precursor' to the implementation of changes (Weiner, 2009, p. 2) and broadly refers to organisation members being collectively motivated and 'ready and able' to implement change, prior to the change occurring (Weiner, 2009, p. 2). The ORC posits that when organisational readiness to change is high, stakeholders are more likely to initiate change and persist in the face of obstacles (Howley, 2012; McKnight & Glennie, 2019; T. Wang et al., 2023; Weiner, 2009). Within ORC, three organisational determinants are outlined:

1. *Change valence* – whether stakeholders value the proposed change. The more valued the change is, the more stakeholders will want to implement it.

[5] The concept of 'unfreezing' from one state; making a change; and 'refreezing' at the new state (Burnes, 2020).

2. *Change efficacy* – whether stakeholders believe they can implement the change effectively and have the resources to do so. When stakeholder efficacy beliefs are high, change efficacy is high.
3. *Contextual factors* – the wider context, including organisational policies, good working relationships, and previous positive experiences of change.

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There appears relatively little literature relating to the application of ORC in practice (Weiner, 2009); however, T. Wang et al. (2023) illustrate an account of applying ORC to a government-led programme in Taiwan which aimed to implement wide-scale educational reforms. The programme involved three phases spanning ten years, and utilised school leadership to foster stakeholders' beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours in creating change. Over the course of the programme, participating schools moved from stages of 'dysfunction' or non-readiness to 'actualisation' or sustainability (p. 1055) in terms of programme implementation, but it is noted that this was not a linear process. This highlights the length of time required for full implementation to take place, as well as the tiers of support required to effect change (e.g., from government down to individual staff).

In the context of the interventions discussed in Part 1 of this review (e.g., SEAL), the ORC theory suggests that, separate from evaluation outcomes and intervention fidelity (Humphrey et al., 2013; Lendrum & Humphrey, 2012), the inefficacy of interventions may also be attributed to schools' readiness to implement. This emphasises the potential level of preparation which must take place prior to implementing interventions, to support their efficacy.

2.8.1.2. Determinant frameworks

Determinant frameworks are used to describe and classify general types of determinants which have been identified to influence implementation (Nilsen, 2015, 2020).

Individual determinants usually comprise of individual barriers and/or enablers. These are seen as independent variables that can impact on implementation outcomes (Collier-Meek et al., 2019; Nilsen, 2020). In some frameworks, relationships between determinants are also hypothesised (Collier-Meek et al., 2019; Durlak & DuPre, 2008; Greenhalgh et al., 2004; Nilsen, 2020).

Unlike implementation theories, determinant frameworks do not address causal mechanisms, or how change takes place, and are, therefore, not considered theories (Nilsen, 2020). However, like the ORC, many determinant frameworks identify determinants at multiple levels (e.g., individual, organisation, systemic) and hence recognise the interacting influences which occur within implementation (Collier-Meek et al., 2019; Nilsen, 2020). Some determinant frameworks are developed from syntheses of results from empirical studies (Durlak & DuPre, 2008; Greenhalgh et al., 2004), whereas others are developed from researchers' own experiences of implementation, alongside data from literature, for example, the Active Implementation Frameworks (AIF; Fixsen, Blase, et al., 2005; Fixsen et al., 2009, 2015).

The AIFs (Fixsen & Blase, 2020) consist of five overarching frameworks, including: 1) usable innovations; 2) implementation teams; 3) implementation stages; 4) implementation drivers; and 5) improvement cycles.

Of these frameworks, implementation drivers and their core components feature in the literature in the context of education (Moir, 2018) and EP service development (Chidley & Stringer, 2020) and are, therefore, explored further.

Implementation drivers consist of three key domains, within which *core implementation components* sit. See Table 2.4 for a description of implementation drivers and their corresponding components.

Table 2.4

A table of implementation drivers and components (Fixsen & Blase, 2020)

Implementation drivers		Core implementation components	
Competency drivers	Mechanisms which develop, improve, and sustain individuals' implementation of interventions.	**Staff selection**	Who is qualified to carry out a programme, and considerations around their recruitment.
		Pre-service training	Providing practitioners with knowledge and skills, including background information and underpinning theory; and how interventions may be adapted.
		Ongoing consultation and coaching	Provision of information, advice, and opportunities to practice new skills.
Organisation drivers	Mechanisms which sustain 'hospitable' organisational environments and support effective use of interventions.	**Decision support data system**	Sources of information which help to make planning decisions at intervention and organisational levels.
		Facilitative administration	Providing leadership and using data to inform decision making, provide support, and support staff organisation and focus on interventions and outcomes.
		Systems intervention	Leaders working with external systems to ensure sufficient financial, organisational, and human resources to support practitioners' work.
Leadership drivers	Different people undertaking different kinds of leadership behaviours, which adapt when circumstances change.	**Adaptive**	Champions of change at the start of implementation. Solve difficult problems as they arise.
		Technical	Managing ongoing implementation, to support programmes to run effectively in the longer-term.

Drivers are considered interactive processes, which influence staff behaviour and organisational culture (Blase et al., 2012). The drivers are considered to compensate for one another, so that weaknesses in one driver can be overcome by strengths in another (Fixsen et al., 2009; Moir, 2018). This suggests that where common issues to implementation are identified—e.g., time allocation and whole-school understanding (Fairall, 2020; Nicholson-Roberts, 2019)—the overall success of intervention implementation is being supported by different components (e.g., ELSA training or supervision).

Implementation components are considered to exist separately from the quality of the programme being implemented. This is because, whilst the desired outcome is for effective programmes to be implemented well, ineffective programmes can also be implemented adequately, and effective programmes can be implemented inadequately. In the context of this study, that means that the implementation of the ELSA project exists separately from its efficacy. This highlights the importance of ensuring that the programme being implemented is effective, as well as the implementation itself (Fixsen et al., 2009), and indicates that evaluations of the ELSA project should consider factors relating to implementation, rather than just measured outcomes (Pickering et al., 2019).

Determinant models are described as 'intuitive' in Collier-Meek et al.'s (2019) evaluation; however, from the perspective of application to practice, the literature appears to portray a confused picture of AIF, with some overarching frameworks presented without the context of AIF (Fixsen et al., 2009; Moir, 2018). Whilst this indicates the potential differences in interpretation which occur between researchers from different disciplines during framework research, development, and application (Wilson & Kislov, 2022), it also risks introducing an additional layer of confusion, including adding mixed terminology to an already complex topic (Oxman et al., 2005). However, it also highlights that IS is still a

developing area of research (Fixsen & Blase, 2020), and concepts may be susceptible to change as our understanding grows.

2.8.2. School implementation guidance

Though not explicitly linked to IS, as part of their education evidence work, the EEF outline guidance for schools relating to the implementation of research. This involves three key elements: behaviours; contextual factors; and structured but flexible processes (Sharples et al., 2024), and has been updated from a process model which involved six steps (EEF, 2019b). It is noted that these elements reflect ORC and AIF, however, although Fixsen et al. (2009) are listed in the references, there does not seem to be an explanation as to how or why AIF has been adapted. Whilst not directly impacting schools, this has potential implications in terms of EP practice, as it introduces further terminology differences that could result in confusion for school settings (Oxman et al., 2005).

In the US, CASEL have developed a theory of action *School Guide* (SG) model (Li et al., 2023; Meyers et al., 2015; Oberle et al., 2016; Yoder et al., 2021) to support systemic SEL implementation in schools. The SG outlines six key steps to support schools in implementing SEL, including: 1) shared vision; 2) available resources; 3) ongoing professional development; 4) evidence-based programmes; 5) integrated practice; and 6) continuous monitoring (Oberle et al., 2016), which is also reflective of the ORC and AIF components discussed.

There does not appear to be literature relating to the implementation of EEF's current or previous guidance, however, the SG's efficacy in embedding whole-school SEL practice has been evaluated (Li et al., 2023; Meyers et al., 2019; Oberle et al., 2016). Meyers et al. (2015) suggest that urban schools using the SG model made progress in the six steps of implementing SEL, and that coaching helped to facilitate this. Li et al. (2023) examined the effects of the SG over two years and indicate that whilst progress in SE

development was identified in schools using SG, these gains were also identified in control schools, suggesting that SG could not be specifically associated with SE outcomes. Although specific mechanisms for change could not be clearly identified, it may be suggested that developing implementation guidance alongside specific interventions helps to highlight the importance and expectation around implementation, as well as provide an accessible resource for supporting this in practice.

2.8.3. Implementation science in SEL

Over the past twenty years, meta-analyses relating to intervention implementation have helped to establish key factors in effective implementation and have contributed to the body of implementation theories established by IS researchers (Durlak et al., 2010; Durlak & DuPre, 2008; Fixsen et al., 2013; Weare, 2010). In a meta-analysis of SEL interventions, Durlak et al. (2011) suggest that implementation problems with interventions negatively influenced programme outcomes, although the type of implementation problems and their context was not always reported in the studies used. A recent review of meta-analyses of universal SEL programmes (Durlak et al., 2022) indicated mixed results in terms of the impact implementation fidelity had on programme outcomes. In four studies, implementation significantly predicted outcomes, whereas implementation was not significant in three of the studies. Further, data relating to who delivered the intervention was also mixed, with metanalyses indicating that teachers, researchers, and groups of teachers and researchers, respectively, were effective in terms of implementation. Whilst these findings are somewhat inconclusive, they indicate that, over time, studies are starting to look more specifically at the factors relating to implementation, so that they can be more clearly understood.

2.8.4. Implementing interventions

Within schools, successful implementation of universal SEL interventions is highlighted as requiring *internal capacity* such as leadership, resources, positive attitudes from staff; and *external capacity*, including professional development from specialist trainers (Li et al., 2023; Wandersman et al., 2008). This corresponds with both the ORC and AIF, and is corroborated by research indicating that systematic collaboration and staff qualities support whole-school implementation of SE approaches (Brown et al., 2023; Romney et al., 2022; Ward, 2023; Wignall et al., 2023). For example, Romney et al. (2022) suggest that school ethos, quality training and support, and staff qualities were factors in implementing whole-school Emotion Coaching. Similarly, Wignall et al. (2023) identified types of implementations (tokenistic versus authentic) as affecting the impact of a whole-school mental health intervention, including factors relating to leadership, engagement, support, and attitudes towards the programme. These factors fit into both ORC and AIF and emphasise the role that a range of stakeholders hold in effective implementation.

In the context of targeted interventions, Bond et al. (2024) indicate that, despite a dearth of implementation frameworks for targeted interventions, many implementation components remain similar to universal interventions, including support from colleagues, leadership, and training. However, they highlight a reduced availability of 'infrastructure' in the context of targeted interventions in that responsibility for the intervention may not be shared with many colleagues (e.g., if the trained member of staff is unavailable, the intervention cannot run), risking its sustainability. This raises important considerations around staff selection and training, and indicates the potential benefit of a 'team' rather than sole practitioners.

2.9. Part 2 summary

IS is a developing area of research but one that holds importance in terms of evaluating interventions, and then interpreting and applying this information to practice. Further, IS helps to identify the processes and factors involved in effective implementation. IS is underpinned by a range of theories, models, and frameworks, and the literature suggests that these are beginning to be applied in the context of educational research. However, it may be suggested that, alongside understanding the mechanisms that support implementation, there is also an important role for EPs in understanding how to support settings to apply implementation theory themselves, to further support intervention efficacy and sustainability (Gaias et al., 2023).

2.10. Research rationale

This literature review established that CYPs' mental health and SEL development has remained a key focus over the past two decades (Winship, 2021), and that a global shift in practice has resulted in a two-part approach to supporting mental health, through universal provision, and targeted interventions (Procter et al., 2021; Weare, 2010). As a result, schools and colleges have become an active part of the support available for CYP, through the promotion of mental health awareness and SE teaching which aims to be preventative (DoH & DfE, 2017; 2022a; Winship, 2021).

As part of school-based support, SEL approaches have been implemented to support SE development (Frye et al., 2022; Schonert-Reichl, 2017). In the US, SEL has been widely implemented using the CASEL framework (CASEL, 2023b; Meyers et al., 2015), and has become part of a mandated curriculum (Frye et al., 2022; Starr, 2019); however, there have been some criticisms around SEL, including how it is defined and how it is interpreted (Hamilton & Schwartz, 2019; Shriver & Weissberg, 2022). The success of SEL is recognised as being dependent on how SEL programmes are implemented, and how efficacy is

measured (Corcoran et al., 2018; Hamilton & Schwartz, 2019; Kim et al., 2022); however, this is difficult to gauge without clearly defined parameters and definitions.

Closer examination of the key theories which underpin SEL – EI and EL – established that, although the concept of EI has been widely integrated into schools through SEL programmes, it too lacks clearly defined parameters. In addition, it has been criticised for the espousal of conflicting constructs (Humphrey et al., 2007). Further, within the UK, EI has been conflated with EL, with the terms used interchangeably (Burton, 2009), despite some differences in their theoretical underpinnings and key domains. This highlights the importance of exploring the theoretical underpinnings of concepts and terms that are applied broadly, particularly in education.

Within the UK, a range of SEL initiatives have been implemented nationally, including through the SEAL programme, PSHE curriculum, and MHSTs. Although the sustainability of these approaches has, at times, been susceptible to changes in political leadership, (Norwich et al., 2022; Winship, 2021), these approaches maintain the focus on early intervention; whole school implementation, and an ethos which understands unsettled or challenging behaviour as an emotional need (Allen, 2011; DfE, 2014; DoH & DfE, 2017).

Sitting separately from national governmental initiatives, and instead delivered at a more local level, the ELSA project has been widely adopted by EP services across England and Wales (ELSA Network, 2023). ELSA helps schools to increase their own resources, through the delivery of bespoke interventions devised by ELSAs based within individual schools (Burton, 2008, 2021). Although it has been the focus of a number of doctoral theses and LA evaluations, there are relatively few published papers relating to ELSA (Pickering et al., 2019). Nevertheless, the literature that is available suggests that the ELSA project supports EL development in CYP, and the ELSA–pupil relationship is regarded as a

positive aspect of the project (Krause et al., 2020; McEwen, 2019; Purcell & Kelly, 2023; Wong et al., 2020). Further, ELSAs report the benefits of ELSA training and supervision on their personal and professional development (Leighton, 2015; Osborne & Burton, 2014).

A common theme throughout all the approaches discussed is that of implementation, in terms of programme fidelity and the mechanisms that support the efficacy or outcomes of a programme. Implementation science is a growing area of research, particularly in educational interventions (Bond et al., 2024; Evans & Bond, 2021; Oberle et al., 2016; Romney et al., 2022; Wignall et al., 2023), and one that holds importance in terms of evaluating interventions, as well as helping to identify the processes and factors involved in effective implementation when applying research to practice. Implementation science is underpinned by a range of theories, models, and frameworks, and the literature suggests that these are beginning to be applied in the context of educational research (Bond et al., 2024; Chidley & Stringer, 2020). However, the number and type of frameworks to choose from potentially restricts how easily they may be selected and applied (Collier-Meek et al., 2019; Y. Wang et al., 2023). Further, alongside understanding the mechanisms that support implementation, there may be an important role for understanding how settings can apply implementation theory themselves to further enhance intervention efficacy and sustainability. This highlights a potentially key role for EPs in supporting the transfer of IS theory to practice (Gaias et al., 2023).

In the context of the ELSA project, the literature indicates that the ELSA training programme and supervision support implementation (Leighton, 2015; Rees, 2016), in addition to a systemic understanding of the project within schools (Bravery & Harris, 2009; Fairall, 2020); however, there remains limited research in this area, particularly from the perspective of implementation science. Contributing to the literature in this area, therefore, could further support ELSA project practice, as well as understanding the

mechanisms of its efficacy. In turn, this could enhance the ELSA project's value and sustainability, as well as provide EPs with insight into how to support implementation practice for ELSA, and other school-based interventions.

2.11. Research aim

The present research aims to contribute to the literature relating to ELSA project implementation. Prior research indicates that five studies have taken place, that highlight facilitators and barriers to ELSA practice in schools. Of these, three involved school staff within secondary schools (Begley, 2016; King, 2020; Nicholson-Roberts, 2019), one involved primary and secondary ELSAs (Robertson, 2021), and one involved primary school staff plus EPs across two primary schools (Fairall, 2020). The present research, therefore, aims to gather a wider range of perspectives of ELSA project implementation, by exploring the experiences of participants from different settings. As secondary schools have been the sole focus of three prior studies, the present research focus intends to extend Fairall's (2020) findings by recruiting a participant group of primary school ELSAs, ELSA managers and EP from across England.

2.12. Research question

Following the rationale and research aim established during this literature review, this study seeks to address the following research question: *What can we learn about ELSA project implementation from the experiences of ELSAs and EPs?*

Chapter 3 – Methodology

3.1. Chapter overview

In the previous chapter, I explored the literature which provides the context for this study, and outlined my rationale for the present research. In this chapter, I discuss the theoretical ideas and values that underpin this research, along with considerations around design and quality. I begin with the ontological and epistemological positions of this research, and how they have influenced the decisions I have made around my methodological approach and research design. I follow this with considerations around research quality, and data analysis.

3.2. Philosophical assumptions

Ontology and epistemology are parts of philosophy which underlie all research, and which provide the conceptual foundations for individual studies (Braun & Clarke, 2022a). Ontology refers to the nature of reality, or what we can know (Braun & Clarke, 2022b; Mertens, 2020) and informs assumptions about what exists or is real (Braun & Clarke, 2022b). Epistemology relates to the nature of knowledge, or how we can know something (Braun & Clarke, 2022b; Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017; Mertens, 2020), and underpins how knowledge can be generated meaningfully (Braun & Clarke, 2022b).

Ontology and epistemology are important because they inform what we consider to be meaningful knowledge (Braun & Clarke, 2013, 2022a). This then guides decisions around the methodological approaches used to generate knowledge or research; how we position ourselves as researchers in relation to the research, and how we interpret and make sense of our findings (Braun & Clarke, 2013, 2022a, 2022b; Mertens, 2020).

3.2.1. Ontology and epistemology

Ontology holds two basic positions – *realism* and *relativism* – which sit at opposite ends of a continuum (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Cohen et al., 2018). Realism assumes there is a 'real' world, independent of what we think of it (Braun & Clarke, 2022b; Robson & McCartan, 2016). In contrast, relativism assumes that reality is dependent on human knowledge and interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2013). It takes the view that there is no singular reality and, therefore, no final truth (Braun & Clarke, 2022b).

Epistemology holds the dominant positions of *objectivism* and *subjectivism* (Cohen et al., 2018). Objectivism takes the view that things exist independently of our awareness (Fryer, 2020), which we can come to know through careful research methods, e.g., experimentation and systematic observation (Braun & Clarke, 2022b; Robson & McCartan, 2016). In contrast, subjectivism takes the position that knowledge is imperfect, and that meaning is created from human experience (Braun & Clarke, 2022b; Fryer, 2020). As such, subjectivism values researcher subjectivity, and situates them within the research as 'subjective storytellers' who co-create meaning with research participants (Braun & Clarke, 2022b, p. 6).

Ontological and epistemological positions are considered deeply connected, and together indicate a researcher's philosophical position or *paradigm* (Braun & Clarke, 2022a, 2022b; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). In the context of research, ontological and epistemological positioning determines the types of research questions being asked; how research is approached; and the tools or methodologies used to address research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2013, 2022a). Paradigms also provide a means for reflecting on research goals and understanding one's own assumptions and beliefs (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). I now explore these philosophical paradigms further.

3.2.2. Research paradigms

Just as ontological and epistemological positions sit along a continuum, so too do different philosophical or 'big theory' positions (Braun & Clarke, 2022b, p. 156). Research paradigms are composed of combinations of ontological and epistemological positions, which determine the broad area within which different research paradigms sit. In this section I discuss three broad philosophical positions: positivism, post-positivism, and postmodernism.

3.2.2.1. Positivism

Positivism holds a realist ontological stance, and an objectivist epistemological stance. It takes the view that the world has universal laws, and seeks to find cause and effect relationships to explain events (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). Positivism typically operates by testing hypotheses using quantitative methodologies (Cohen et al., 2018; Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). Positivism claims that we get the clearest idea of knowledge through science, although it may be suggested that our idea of what science is is also informed by positivist perspectives (Wilson & Kislov, 2022). Critics of positivism take the view that universal laws do not exist, particularly in relation to social science and human behaviour, which is considered more complex and intricate (Cohen et al., 2018; Robson & McCartan, 2016).

3.2.2.2. Post-positivism

Post-positivism holds a realist ontological stance, and a subjectivist epistemological position. It accepts that there are objective realities but rejects the positivist view that the world is absolute, instead suggesting that we should be guided by the best evidence available (Robson & McCartan, 2016). Post-positivism considers realities to be multiple and co-existing, rather than singular (Cohen et al., 2018), and holds the assumption that we cannot know things without considering the uncertainties that are raised as a criticism of positivism, e.g., the complexities of human behaviour (Robson & McCartan, 2016).

3.2.2.3. Postmodernism

Postmodernism holds a relativist ontological stance, and a subjectivist epistemological stance. There are varying postmodernist positions, some of which deny the existence of reality, whilst others reject the idea of a universal reality, but all generally emphasise the complexity which occurs in trying to understand reality (Maxwell & Mittapalli, 2010; Robson & McCartan, 2016).

3.2.2.4. Summary

'Big Theory' positions (Braun & Clarke, 2022b, p. 156) relate to how reality and knowledge are understood and are closely aligned with research practice. They help to underpin and inform what is suitable and allowed, and what does not make sense. Philosophical positions should work together within the research concept and design to offer 'methodological integrity' (Braun & Clarke, 2022a, p. 4).

3.3. Positioning this research

In this research, I seek to explore how implementation science unfolds in the context of the ELSA project, through the experiences described by ELSAs and EPs. However, I understand that reality is relative to different people in different contexts (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Pilgrim, 2020). As such, this research extends out from post-positivism to hold an ontological position of critical realism. Critical realism understands that there is a truth to how ELSA is implemented (realism), but that this cannot be fully known (relativism) as it is shaped by human practice and experience (Braun & Clarke, 2022b; Pilgrim, 2020; Wilson & Kislov, 2022). Whilst there is some debate about whether critical realism allows for a distinction between ontology and epistemology (Braun & Clarke, 2022b; Maxwell, 2012; Pilgrim, 2020), it may be suggested that critical realism holds an epistemological position of subjectivism, owing to its conceptualisation of reality as something which cannot be fully known (Pilgrim, 2020). This means that the findings from this study, whilst contributing to

wider knowledge about ELSA project implementation, will be unique to participants' experiences and context.

Though I was not fully conscious of this at the point of research design, as I have progressed through the doctorate and this study, I am also now aware that critical realism encapsulates my personal ontology and epistemology (Tomlinson, 2023; Willig, 2019). I consider this realisation and position to have helped me make sense of my relationship with my own research, and my interpretation of the literature incorporated into this study.

3.4. Methodological approach

Having discussed the philosophical positions that inform and underpin my philosophical research principles, I now discuss the methodological approach of this study.

3.4.1. Quantitative and qualitative paradigms

Within social research, there has traditionally been a choice of two approaches – quantitative research, and qualitative research (Robson & McCartan, 2016). Quantitative methods take an objective approach to research, and generally apply the same principles used in natural science to test pre-existing theories and concepts, with the aim of generalising these findings to the wider population (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Robson & McCartan, 2016). In contrast, qualitative research seeks to focus on meaning and context, and values the involvement, commitment, and *reflexivity* (self-awareness) of the researcher (Mills & Birks, 2014; Robson & McCartan, 2016).

Quantitative and qualitative research have been viewed as opposing research paradigms (Kuhn, 1963; Madill & Gough, 2008), with qualitative research sometimes considered as lacking parity with quantitative research (Jackson, 2015). However, Braun and Clarke (2022b, p. 158) argue that qualitative research is not a paradigm, and is better thought of as an 'umbrella term', which encompasses a range of different research

theories, orientations, and methodologies. Qualitative research may instead be considered as two 'broad orientations' (Braun & Clarke, 2022b, p. 158): *experiential* qualitative approaches – those focused on meaning, experience, and how people make sense of their realities, as described by participants; and *critical* qualitative approaches – those which focus on language itself and understand it as something that creates, rather than reflects meaning.

The aim of this study is to develop an understanding about the implementation of the ELSA project, from individual experiences and perspectives; therefore, I chose an experiential qualitative approach to this research for the emphasis it places on understanding the meaning of participants' experiences and contexts. I also chose this orientation because it values researcher subjectivity and involvement as being situated in the research, and as a resource for analysis, rather than as an impartial observer (Braun & Clarke, 2022b; D. Byrne, 2022; Madill & Gough, 2008). This was important to me because, as a trainee EP exploring a topic closely related to EP practice, and as part of my doctorate, it felt incongruous to attempt to separate myself from the research process.

3.4.2. **Choice of analysis**

Having selected a qualitative methodology with a critical realist position, three main qualitative methodologies and approaches to analysis were considered: grounded theory, interpretative phenomenological analysis, and thematic analysis. I now present an overview of these approaches, before explaining my overall choice of thematic analysis.

3.4.2.1. Grounded theory

Grounded theory (GT) was developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and is a methodology that has evolved to include a range of approaches (Braun & Clarke, 2021a). GT prioritises understanding social processes and aims to build theory from data, with the researcher assuming an objective position (Glaser, 1978). Its analysis is organised around

key categories, which aim to identify patterns in the data and theoretically interpret them (Braun & Clarke, 2013, 2021a). GT methods provide a set of research strategies, however, these processes are numerous and can be complex (Braun & Clarke, 2021a; Mills & Birks, 2014). In addition, whilst RTA is not considered a 'quick' approach to analysis, it may be regarded as a faster process than GT (Braun & Clarke, 2021a). As a result, I considered RTA to be more suited to my relatively tight doctoral deadline.

3.4.2.2. Interpretative phenomenological analysis

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was developed by Smith et al. (2009) and is a methodology which focuses on how people make sense of their lived experiences, through their perceptions and the way they talk about them (Mills & Birks, 2014). IPA has a guiding theoretical framework and uses research questions which are based on personal experience, along with small, homogenous samples. Whilst IPA would have helped to explore my participants' experiences in detail, the purpose of this study is to develop an understanding of implementation by exploring shared patterns of meaning across a wider, heterogenous sample, including participants with different roles (Braun & Clarke, 2021a). IPA, was, therefore, not considered suitable for my research.

3.4.2.3. Thematic analysis.

Thematic analysis is best considered a 'family' or spectrum of approaches to analysis, although it is commonly misunderstood as being a singular approach (Braun & Clarke, 2021a; Clarke & Braun, 2018). Braun and Clarke (2022b) describe thematic analysis as being a *method*, as opposed to a *methodology*, with the former being an approach to analysis, which offers flexibility in philosophical position and type of data. In contrast, methodologies (as with GT and IPA) are considered packages which may pre-determine guiding theory and approaches to language and data type (Braun & Clarke, 2022b; Chamberlain, 2011).

At a basic level, thematic analysis supports the development, analysis, and interpretation of patterns across a qualitative dataset (Boyatzis, 1998). Whilst each thematic analysis approach has elements in common (i.e., using systemic coding to develop, analyse, and interpret patterns across a dataset), they also each have different conceptualisations, philosophical assumptions, and analytical processes (Braun & Clarke, 2021a, 2022a). In an attempt to clarify differences between different thematic analysis approaches, three categories or 'schools' of thematic analysis have been established (Clarke & Braun, 2018): *coding reliability* which is underpinned by a positivist philosophy and uses a structured approach to coding; *reflexive* thematic analysis, which is situated in a qualitative paradigm and encourages an 'organic' approach to coding and themes (Braun & Clarke, 2016); and *codebook* thematic analysis which combines the structured coding of coding reliability and the philosophical position of reflexive TA (Clarke & Braun, 2018).

3.4.2.4. Reflexive thematic analysis

Although not originally defined as a specific approach, in the years following their initial paper (Braun & Clarke, 2006), *reflexive thematic analysis* (RTA) started being used as a means of describing the fundamental character of thematic analysis from Braun and Clarke's perspective, as well as distinguishing it from other types of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2022b). Broadly speaking, RTA consists of an analytic process involving six phases (Braun & Clarke, 2022b). These include: 1) dataset familiarisation; 2) data coding; 3) initial theme generation; 4) theme development and review; 5) theme redefining, defining, and naming; and 6) writing up. The phases offer clear information about each step of the analytic RTA process, however, Braun and Clarke (2019, 2022b) emphasise the need to consider them as guidelines for 'doing' RTA—rather than a recipe or a set of rules—as well as a means of learning how to do thematic analysis reflexively. Further, although phases are organised in a sequential order, they are considered fluid,

with the potential for movement between each phase as the analysis progresses (Braun & Clarke, 2022b; D. Byrne, 2022).

A defining feature of RTA is the role that reflexivity plays, alongside 'theoretical knowingness' (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 592) and transparency, in terms of the philosophical and theoretical assumptions that inform the research, and the decisions made throughout the analysis in line with these. This requires researchers to understand what they are doing and why, and continually question and query the assumptions being made. This level of engagement with the analytic process helps to ensure coherence and quality in the research being produced (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

3.4.2.5. Choice of reflexive thematic analysis

From a conceptual perspective, I chose RTA for this study because it offered flexibility in terms of accommodating my philosophical position, and allowed for identifying patterns of meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2021b, 2022a). This supported my initial aim of exploring the experiences of ELSAs, their managers, and EPs and, following recruitment, and also accommodated a change of plan to interview just the ELSAs and EPs I managed to recruit.

From a pragmatic perspective, and as a novice researcher with a relatively tight deadline alongside other doctoral requirements, Braun and Clarke's (2022b, p. xxix) *practice-first* (or 'learning through doing') approach to learning RTA also contributed to my decision to use it. I consider this approach to have supported me to immerse myself in my dataset, and engage more widely with conceptual thinking, including extending this beyond analysis (e.g., to my literature review). Braun and Clarke's RTA 'adventure' of RTA (2022b, p. 100) has been every bit as challenging, messy, and enlightening as they promised, and has undoubtedly enhanced my thinking as a researcher and psychologist along the way.

3.5. Research quality

Research validity, reliability, and generalisability are central to assessing research quality in quantitative paradigms (Robson & McCartan, 2016), however, these concepts do not easily transfer to qualitative paradigms, on account of the philosophical positions qualitative research holds; differences in methodology; and the subjectivity of qualitative researchers (Braun & Clarke, 2021b; Nowell et al., 2017). Qualitative equivalents to assessing quality are, therefore, required (Braun & Clarke, 2021b). For example, replacing validity with *credibility* – demonstrating the truth in one's findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985); and replacing generalisability with *transferability* – providing rich descriptions of the context and circumstances of the study, so that readers can evaluate the relevance of the findings in the context of other settings (Braun & Clarke, 2022b; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Braun and Clarke (2019, 2022b) highlight reflexivity and thoughtful engagement with the data as being key components of quality assurance; however, Wiltshire and Ronkainen (2021) argue that whilst reflexivity and thoughtfulness are important for establishing trustworthy findings, they do not mitigate the mistakes that could occur within research and are, therefore, no guarantee for quality by themselves. With this in mind, and to support quality within this study, I considered quality criteria by Nowell et al. (2017), along with Braun and Clarke's 15-point checklist (2022b, p. 269); however, I was guided by the quality strategies outlined by Braun and Clarke (2022b, p. 268) as they encompass both the analysis and broader quality considerations across the study and are specific to RTA.

- **Reflexive journalling** – 'A self-critical account of the research process' (Nowell et al., 2017, p. 3). I kept a scrapbook-style reflexive journal on OneNote (see Appendices 7, 12, 13, 15, and 17 for extracts), from the point of research design, throughout recruitment, analysis, and writing up. It initially took time for me to slow down my thought process sufficiently to embed ongoing reflection. However, as my research

progressed, I found my increased engagement with my journal supported my analysis as it developed and evolved, particularly when developing and refining themes, and contributed to the decision-making processes around how I interpreted my dataset.

- **Audit trail** – A demonstration of quality and transparency. Electronic records in the form of screenshots were kept of each stage of the process (e.g., recruitment documents, coding, theme generation, thematic maps, reflexive journal). Records of thematic maps were particularly helpful in tracking my previous steps and planning my next route. I have referred to these records throughout this chapter, and they are included in the Appendices in relation to relevant sections.
- **Time-planning** – Allowing enough time for themes to develop (Braun & Clarke, 2022b). The analysis stage of research, though not as long as intended, allowed for pauses to engage in discussions with others and reflect on the process to date (see below). Whilst I initially paused due to overwhelm or confusion, I began to embrace these breaks—particularly during phase 6—as they resulted in the biggest shifts of my analysis.
- **Drawing inspiration from published examples –** As a researcher new to RTA, I drew on previous RTA studies, particularly D. Byrne (2022) and Trainor and Bundon (2021). For example, D. Byrne's (2022) worked example helped me to learn how to begin coding. Further, Trainor and Bundon's (2021) reflections on theme development—especially the potential overreliance on subthemes as a novice researcher—helped my considerations during theme development and refinement and offered reassurance as I returned to these phases.
- **Gaining insights from others**: I engaged in reflexive discussions with my research supervisor, which helped to continually revisit my philosophical position, and allowed me to 'step back' from my research to reflect on my role within it (Graham & Clarke, 2021). I also participated in peer group discussions, including a cross-university ELSA research group, which helped me to reflect more broadly on my research topic and its

purpose; and a peer data analysis group (Braun & Clarke, 2022b, p. 271), which supported navigating the process of learning and understanding RTA; and allowed for sharing perspectives relating to conceptual thinking; theme generation and refinement; and pragmatic considerations (e.g. paper versus NVivo).

- **Naming themes carefully** – Ensuring themes are themes. This stage required careful consideration in how themes were generated and conceptualised (including considering 'essence' and 'intent' (Braun & Clarke, 2022b, p. 274), and reflection upon whether a theme was a theme. For example, during latter parts of the analysis, some subthemes became themes in their own right, whereas others were changed or set aside. This is particularly reflected in the thematic map records which are included in the Appendices in relation to relevant analysis phases.

3.6. Ethical considerations

This study was informed by the University of Nottingham Code of Research Conduct and Research Ethics (2023); guidance issued by the University of Nottingham for educational psychology students and supervisors; the BPS Code of Human Research Ethics (Oates et al., 2021), and the HCPC guidance on conduct and ethics for students (2016). Ethical approval for this study was received from the University of Nottingham Research Ethics Committee in June 2023 (Appendix 1).

'Ethical thinking' (Braun & Clarke, 2022b, p. 28) is considered an important aspect of research design and should be integral to all aspects of the research, including throughout the process of recruitment, data generation, and analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022b). As such, the ethical considerations underpinning my decision making during the design of this research are incorporated into the research design section, to show their consideration throughout the research process.

3.7. Research Design

This study used semi-structured interviews with four ELSAs who had completed the training and supervision required to have received their ELSA certificates, and seven EPs who were involved in the training and supervision of ELSAs. Reflexive thematic analysis was used to analyse the data gathered. In the following section, I outline the study's research design, including ethical considerations made during this process.

3.7.1. Recruitment

The literature relating to the ELSA project indicated that five prior studies have taken place in relation to ELSA project facilitators and barriers in schools. Of these, three involved school staff within secondary schools (Begley, 2016; King, 2020; Nicholson-Roberts, 2019), one involved primary and secondary ELSAs (Robertson, 2021), and one involved primary school staff plus EPs across two primary schools (Fairall, 2020). The present research aimed to add to Fairall's (2020) study by recruiting a wider participant group of primary school ELSAs, ELSA managers and EPs across England[6], to gather an extended range of perspectives and experiences.

A purposive approach to sampling was used, with the aim of recruiting: 1) primary school ELSAs who had completed the training and supervision required to receive their ELSA certificates; 2) members of staff who line manage or supervise ELSAs in primary schools; 3) EPs involved in the training and supervision of primary school ELSAs. Recruitment posters (Appendix 2) and participant information sheets (Appendix 3) were distributed to all registered ELSA training providers via the ELSA Network, and via EP colleagues. Direct contact was also made with individual LA EP services running the ELSA

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[6] To maintain relative consistency between broader educational contexts (Sibieta & Jerrim, 2021).

project, and with local primary school ELSAs, SENDCos, and head teachers who met the participant criteria. Recruitment took place between September 2023 and January 2024.

At the point of recruitment, participants were provided with consent forms (Appendix 4) and an additional copy of participant information sheets that included details around confidentiality and their right to withdraw. I also provided an overview of the interview questions (Appendix 5) in advance to help support the transparency of the study (Hodgson, 2004), and allow for equitability between participants who may be less familiar with research participation. This also provided opportunities for participants to reflect on their experiences and prepare some of their responses prior to the interviews, should they wish, which I considered to potentially enhance the richness of the data generated.

3.7.2. Dataset size

Agreed approaches to establishing sample sizes have been an area of debate and within qualitative research (Vasileiou et al., 2018), with varied or unclear guidance on how to determine an appropriate sample size (Fugard & Potts, 2015). Some researchers consider *saturation* (the point at which data generation stops generating new perspectives) as being a method for determining when data collection should stop (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Others have devised statistical tools or formulae to support the development and planning of thematic analysis studies (Fugard & Potts, 2015). However, Braun and Clarke (2021b, 2021c) discuss data saturation as being problematic in RTA as new meanings and themes can be developed through ongoing data engagement. In addition, they discuss statistical tools as being 'conceptually incompatible' with RTA (Braun & Clarke, 2022a, p. 16). Instead, *information power* is proposed as a concept by Malterud et al. (2016, p. 1759) which encourages researchers to think about information 'richness' in the context of the aims of the study, participant characteristics, the theoretical underpinnings of the study, and the quality of data generation. In addition, Braun and Clarke (2022a) emphasise the

need to consider pragmatic considerations such as deadlines, manageability, and ensuring there is sufficient time to meaningfully analyse the data.

As a novice researcher aiming to gather a relatively wide range of views, I used Braun & Clarke's (2013) dataset size guidance as a starting point, and determined that a dataset of 9–12 would allow for a minimum of three participants in each group (ELSAs, ELSA managers, and EPs). However, some groups of participants (e.g., ELSA managers) were harder to recruit than others. In the end, the minimum total number of participants was reached (11 in total) and allowed for a range of views in terms of geographical location and experience, but resulted in more EPs than ELSAs being recruited, and no ELSA managers. This risked privileging EP voices over those of ELSAs and ELSA managers but is perhaps also reflective of limited availability amongst school staff making it difficult for them to participate (Hall & Webster, 2023; Schools Week, 2024).

3.7.3. Participants

Participants were seven LA EPs and four primary school ELSAs. EPs were working within four separate local authorities and ELSAs were also working within four different local authorities. Four EPs and one ELSA were working within the same LA.

Participant EPs were asked to self-report the length of time they had been practising for, and the length of experience they had of ELSA training and supervision. ELSAs were asked to self-report the length of time they had worked in schools for, and the length of experience they had of being an ELSA. Participant data is reported in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1

A table showing participant roles and length of experience

Role	ELSA	ELSA	ELSA	ELSA	EP	EP	EP	EP	EP	EP	EP
Experience of role (years)	>10	>10	5–10	5–10	>10	>10	>10	5–10	5–10	< 5	< 5
Experience of ELSA (years)	5–10	< 5	< 5	5–10	5–10	5–10	5–10	5–10	5–10	< 5	< 5

3.7.4. Data generation

Data were collected through individual, semi-structured interviews lasting between 45 minutes and two hours. An interview guide (Appendix 5 – Overview of semi-structured interviews) was developed using the implementation drivers and components (Fixsen & Blase, 2020) as described in Table 2.4. This included open-ended questions relating to the core implementation components: staff selection, pre-service training, consultation and coaching, staff performance evaluation, and external forces (e.g., data systems, administrative support, etc.). However, in keeping with the semi-structured nature of the interviews, more spontaneous or unplanned questions arose throughout the duration of the interviews, in response to—or depending on—the items and topics participants raised themselves. This allowed for discussions to include information which seemed meaningful to participants, alongside information which included the key implementation drivers elements (D. Byrne, 2022), and with the aim of capturing participants' responses in their own words (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

As the data generation process progressed, my approach to the interview questions evolved. For example, the question '*Why* did you want to become an ELSA?' became '*How* did you become an ELSA?' as it emerged that some ELSAs did not necessarily choose to become ELSAs. I considered this slight shift in language to allow me to follow

different lines of inquiry in response to the data being generated, and to ensure that my dataset was reflective of participants' lived experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2013, 2022b).

3.7.4.1. Semi-structured interviews

As participants were distributed throughout England, interviews were conducted online using Microsoft Teams. In-person interviews have previously been considered the 'gold standard' in qualitative research, owing to the rapport that can be built between the interviewer and the participants (Irani, 2019); however, the use of online interviews and focus groups has increased in recent years, particularly following the Coronavirus (Covid-19) global pandemic (Almujlli et al., 2022). Although some limitations of online interviews have been identified, including issues with, or limited access to relevant technology, and reduced visibility of body language and facial expressions (Almujlli et al., 2022; L. Gray et al., 2020; Saarijärvi & Bratt, 2021), they have also been recognised as being convenient and accessible, reducing demands on time, and supporting geographically diverse research (L. Gray et al., 2020). Therefore, I considered online interviews an appropriate option because they allowed for the research to be accessible to a range of participants, despite their location and potentially busy schedules.

Interviews were recorded using the Microsoft Teams recording and transcription function. Recordings and transcripts were downloaded via Microsoft Stream and saved to a personal area of the University of Nottingham's GDPR-compliant storage system (Microsoft OneDrive) before being deleted from Microsoft Teams. Participants were provided with debrief sheets (Appendix 6).

3.7.4.2. Data transcription

Any information relating to participants' identification—including names and places—was immediately anonymised in transcripts and replaced with pseudonyms,

initially by using the Find and Replace function on Microsoft Word, followed by reading through individual transcripts. The process of choosing pseudonyms is increasingly recognised as an act of research which raises potential ethical conflict between the need to maintain anonymity, confidentiality, and data integrity (Saunders et al., 2015) and the need to consider issues such as power, voice, and epistemological position (R. Allen & Wiles, 2016; Saunders et al., 2015), particularly in choosing names which are respectful of culture, ethnicity, context, age, and gender (R. Allen & Wiles, 2016). Participants in this study were, therefore, invited to think of their own pseudonyms, which they shared either at the end of interviews, or emailed separately following the interviews depending on their preference.

An orthographic approach to transcription was used (Braun & Clarke, 2013), which involved transcribing both words and non-semantic utterances (e.g., 'erm'). For the purposes of readability, punctuation was added to data extracts, and repetitions of words or utterances used more than twice were removed. Grammatical differences and vernacular usage were transcribed to maintain participants' individual expression. Where breaks in dialogue occurred to clarify information, an em dash (—) was used. Where breaks in dialogue occurred owing to a sudden turn in thought, a double hyphen was used (--). Pauses in dialogue are represented by ellipses. Data extracts containing irrelevant details were removed and indicated by ellipses enclosed in parentheses (…). Square brackets have been used to indicate where personal or identifying information has been removed (e.g., names and places), or to describe non-verbal responses (e.g., sighing).

3.8. Data analysis

The dataset was analysed according to the six phases of RTA described by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2022b). This approach follows six phases, which are discussed below. RTA is a recursive process, which involves moving back and forth between the phases (Braun &

Clarke, 2022b), therefore, the phases listed below should be considered as a relatively fluid and flexible process.

3.8.1. Phase 1 – Data familiarisation

I recorded interviews using the Microsoft Teams recording and transcription function. Prior to transcription, I watched all interview recordings through once for purposes of familiarisation and immersion in the data (D. Byrne, 2022). In addition, I made notes about initial ideas (Appendix 7). I transcribed all interviews myself alongside the interview recordings (Appendix 8); however, Teams transcriptions were used as an initial guide to support this process.

3.8.2. Phase 2 – Data coding

All transcriptions were read and re-read for further familiarisation (Appendix 9). This naturally led into phase 2, which involved coding the data. I used Lumivero NVivo 14 to support myself in organising and handling the transcripts. Data was coded line by line to identify interesting or potentially meaningful segments, and code labels and meaningful descriptions were applied (see Appendix 10). Coding was repeated across the dataset over multiple rounds and at random, to avoid coding unevenly (Braun & Clarke, 2022b). At points, the coding appeared to be too *fine-grained* resulting in too little repetition or patterning across the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2022b). At these points, codes were broadened slightly, or combined where codes closely resembled similar ideas. Coding largely captured semantic meaning, which is reflective of a critical realist position in wanting to understand participants' unique experiences; however, some latent codes were also generated as required, which went beyond the descriptive level of the data to infer deeper meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2022b). A total of 73 codes were generated (Appendix 11).

3.8.3. Phase 3 – Initial theme generation

The analysis moved into identifying shared pattern and meaning across the dataset by clustering related codes together and considering the core ideas or concepts they may share. This resulted in candidate themes being generated (Appendix 12 & Appendix 13). At this point, the analysis moved between NVivo and thematic maps (Braun & Clarke, 2022b). Seeing the candidate themes sitting beside each other in thematic maps helped to bring them to life and to consider how they captured or represented the data. This then helped to consider which candidate themes fitted together to tell a story and which needed changing. See Appendix 14 for a phase 3 thematic map.

3.8.4. Phase 4 – Theme development and review

I reviewed the candidate themes generated in phase 3 to check they made sense alongside the coded extracts of data and overall dataset (Appendix 15) and ensure that the story they were telling was both coherent and a meaningful representation of patterns across the dataset. This phase of the analysis involved revising some of the data codes (Appendix 16), collapsing others together, and, at times, completely disregarding some themes. Whilst moving between phases 4 and 5, I considered the following questions, the answers to which determined whether to move towards the next phase, or return to the previous phase:

1. What is this theme about?
2. What is the boundary of the theme?
3. What is unique and specific to the theme?
4. What does the theme contribute to the overall analysis? (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 111)

By the final round of this process (having returned to it from both phases 5 and 6), 67 codes were generated, which resulted in five themes and four subthemes.

3.8.5. Phase 5 – Theme redefining, defining, and naming

This phase involves 'fine tuning' the analysis, and refining themes to ensure that they fit with the overall story of the dataset (Appendix 17). During phase 5, I moved back and forth between the phases, particularly at the point of naming the themes, which, at times, highlighted the lack of clarity and cohesion within the theme itself. During one of the latter visits to phase 5, the themes shifted and reduced considerably, with the overall story contracting and expanding (Appendix 18).

3.8.6. Phase 6 – Writing up

Writing is considered integral to the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019). My initial writing was informed by notes from my reflexive journal. During this phase I continued to reflect on my themes, which highlighted where it was necessary to return to earlier phases, as some of the themes seemed not to have clear boundaries once writing them up.

Following the first write-up, it became clear that the themes reflected participants' experiences, rather than definitive information about ELSA project implementation. Therefore, the research question evolved from *What helps and hinders the implementation of ELSA?* to *What can we learn about ELSA project implementation from the experiences of ELSAs and EPs?* This research question feels much more coherent with a critical realist position, as it explicitly acknowledges individual experiences but does not claim an ultimate truth. Further development of the themes occurred following this, as it also became clear that some subthemes were themes in their own right (Appendix 19 & Appendix 20).

Further consideration of writing up came after the first draft, which I had structured around the implementation drivers model (see Table 2.4) to align with the interview questions, as had been my initial plan. Increasingly, though, this felt like it did not fit, which is perhaps an indication of how my perspective of the dataset developed during analysis. I instead took my lead from the findings and used the themes for structure. This

felt much more intuitive, and I think, provided a more cohesive response to the research question.

3.9. Chapter summary

In this chapter, I explored the ontological and epistemological positioning of this research, and how they have informed the decisions made with regards to methodological approach and analysis. I also described considerations around research quality, ethical considerations, and data generation and analysis. The following chapter presents an illustrative account of the research findings.

Chapter 4 – Findings

4.1. Chapter overview

In this chapter I discuss the findings of the research, beginning with an overview of the participants and their contexts, as well as their pseudonyms, followed by a summary of the themes and subthemes that were generated through analysis. I present each of the themes as an illustrative account, accompanied by relevant data extracts. An analysis of the findings in relation to the literature follows in the discussion (Chapter 5 –). I end this chapter with an overall summary of the findings.

4.2. Introduction to the participants

A total of 11 participants took part in the study, comprising of four ELSAs and seven EPs. All participating ELSAs had completed the initial ELSA training and supervision required to gain their ELSA certificates. All ELSAs held ELSA roles within mainstream primary schools throughout England, which were either community schools or part of multi-academy trusts (MATs). EP participants were HCPC registered and had completed the postgraduate training required to use the title of educational psychologist. The EPs held a range of principal, senior, and maingrade EP positions within LA educational psychology services across England, and worked in services which provided ELSA training as part of a traded (paid-for) offer to schools.

To maintain anonymity, specific information around demographic characteristics relating to individual participants has not been included here, as there are a relatively small number of EPs in the UK (Atfield et al., 2023), and as schools usually only have one or two ELSAs working within them. A summary of participants' experiences of ELSA can be found in Chapter 3 (Table 3.1). In addition, participants' roles and pseudonyms are outlined in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1

A table showing participant roles and pseudonyms

Role	ELSA	ELSA	ELSA	ELSA	EP	EP	EP	EP	EP	EP	EP
Pseudonym	J-Bob	Maria	Santi	Sven	Anne	Hannah	Izzy	Jerry	Layla	Ripley	Sam

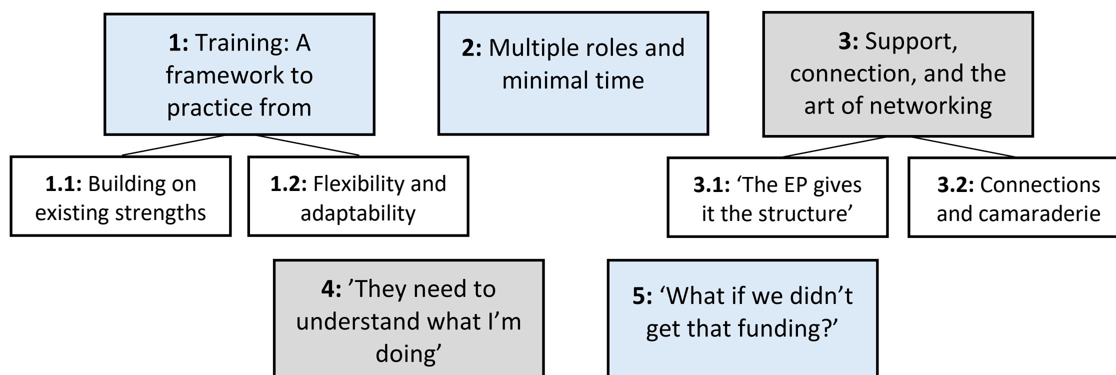
4.3. Introduction to the themes

The purpose of this study is to contribute to the developing body of research relating to the ELSA project and its implementation by exploring the shared experiences of ELSAs and EPs, from a critical realist perspective. This study seeks to address the following research question, as outlined in Chapter 2: *What can we learn about ELSA project implementation from the experiences of ELSAs and EPs?*

Five themes and four subthemes were generated during the analytic process. Generated themes and their associated subthemes are presented in Figure 4.1. The themes shaded in blue represent a unanimous view between ELSAs and EPs, and the themes shaded grey show where the views of EPs were less emphasised. Colour coding has been used to make transparent which perspectives informed these themes; however, it is important to note that a thematic approach to analysis has been used in this study to generate shared meaning across the full dataset, and from all participants. The extent to which individual voices are represented has, therefore, been less of a focus.

Figure 4.1

A thematic map showing generated themes and subthemes



4.4. Theme 1 – Training: A framework to practice from

Theme 1 encompasses two subthemes which together describe the experiences ELSAs and EPs had of the six-day ELSA training programme. Within this theme, participants spoke about the skills, knowledge, and experience that ELSAs had prior to accessing the training, and the role that the training holds in helping to make sense of, and build upon, these skills. Participants also spoke about the structure that ELSA training provides. For ELSAs, this took the form of organising their existing knowledge and learning about 'tools' or techniques involving clear steps and processes. Meanwhile, for EPs, existing training materials appeared to act as a foundation which they could develop or enhance, enabling adaptations or updates to include more contemporary references, and to suit the regions or settings that they work within.

4.4.1. Subtheme 1.1 – Building on existing strengths

Subtheme 1.1 describes the role the training holds in supporting and enhancing the development of ELSAs' existing practice and knowledge. ELSAs identified the understanding and insight that they gained from training, along with the opportunity to make sense of, and put into perspective their prior experiences, knowledge, and skills. This aspect of the training seemed important in supporting ELSAs to transition out of their TA roles and into the ELSA role.

ELSAs appeared enthusiastic about the training, both in terms of the information they received, and the support it offered them in understanding the CYP they were working with. They also drew comparisons between ELSA training and other training they had previously accessed. In doing so, ELSAs seemed to consider their previous training as being basic or brief, in comparison to ELSA training which provided opportunities to explore psychological theories and frameworks in more depth; put them into the context of their

ELSA roles; and give them ideas for how they may apply these theories to their practice. Together, these experiences suggest that ELSA training offers opportunities for both personal and professional growth as ELSAs undertake their new roles.

> *I think for me the training just gave me that knowledge and just gave me that insight. I felt like a sponge. I just wanted to absorb it all. The Ideal Self was like wow, I just love it! I love the fact of that personal construct and such. When I did my early years [training], we had to do, you know, theories of Bandera and all such like that—small scale because it was a Level 3—that was really interesting. I've missed a bit of an opening, I think – I should have gone more into a psychology part. I just love it! So the training just, yeah. When it was general TA [training], you know, you don't do anything do you in that way, the theoretical side. So I loved it, yeah, it was fantastic.* (Santi, ELSA)

> *Understanding, definitely. Understanding the different, the different needs. Umm, like I've done obviously, training, TA training and stuff. You go through Maslow and all that kind of stuff. But this was like breaking it down into different portions. And like, like the Circle of Friends, like the bereavement – bereavement was massive.* (J-Bob, ELSA)

> *I mean, it gives you all the tools you need, doesn't it? It gives you all the information. (…) A lot of the sort of, the basics, you kind of know from being in a school anyway. You know, Maslow and all of that is stuff that's talked about on any sort of TA course or PGCE, or anything you do that's, you know, you kind of know that as a basic. (…) I definitely had a lot of illuminating moments where I just went, 'Ohh! that's why they do that!' Or, 'that's why they've always behaved that way!' And I think it was definitely around the sections of trauma and attachment. (…) Because sometimes you are, you're banging your head going, 'I just don't know, I just don't know'. But then when you hear this information, you go, 'ohh right, that makes complete sense now'.* (Sven, ELSA)

I think a lot of the ELSAs I work with, they have quite a good instinct. It kind of, it is the role for them. But you need the ed psych training to help you deploy that; to help you, you know, to get it in an order. So obviously we were understanding about ohh, OK, we've got—we had a basic framework—identifying emotions, expressing emotions, self-esteem. That's your three. And then you'll go off from there (…) So I suppose it gave us a framework, confidence, and tools, and resources, and experience to, umm yeah, to go forward and to work with the children in schools, and to give it to structure. (Maria, ELSA)

This perspective is also reflected in the experiences of EPs in delivering the ELSA training, who recognised that many of the ELSAs they train have already undertaken an ELSA-like role prior to commencing their training. In addition, EPs suggested that the training supports ELSAs' confidence in their practice and skills, both in their general approaches to supporting CYP, and more specifically within their individual roles as ELSAs:

Erm, I think it's a good insight. I get the feeling a lot of ELSAs come to the training with some prior knowledge and experience already. I think it gives them further insight into, kind of, child development, but the psychological theory behind that. And I think a lot of the time, it's things they're probably using quite a lot, and things that they're doing, but then they understand why they're doing them, and the kind of underpinnings of that as well. And almost linking theory to practice, I guess. (Izzy, EP)

See, it gives them a framework, I think, to practice from; a knowledge base. I hope it gives them a confidence in a way of being; that the way they are with children isn't an accident. It's not just by chance, and it's not just because it's who they are. It's meeting a need, and it's a really important skill and it shouldn't be undermined. (…) I hope it gives them the knowledge to defend that position; that what they're doing has value and it is, it's important, and it's helpful. And it gives them, like, a really broad psychological knowledge base around that; around safety, and attunement, and connection. (Jerry, EP)

Alongside the theoretical knowledge, EPs discussed the practical skills required to establish and run the ELSA project in schools. They described how the ELSA training provides opportunities to shape and contextualise ELSAs' existing skills, and then learn how to apply those skills to the ELSA role, both through EP input and peer discussions:

> *And I think also a lot of that kind of practical considerations as well around: how would you plan sessions? And what would goal setting and targets look like? How might you begin to evaluate sessions or a number of sessions that you've delivered with a child or a group of children? (...) And I think what that really does build is confidence in ELSAs, because although they've got those kind of key qualities maybe, and lots of knowledge and practice, and the experiences they've had in practice are gonna be really valuable. But it's supported then by that theoretical and kind of practical considerations around what ELSA is and what it looks like.*
> (Sam, EP)

> *So I think the…I think like, often with lots of training, especially for these people who already have a real interest in supporting the wellbeing of young people, it's about almost just consolidating that, you know, what they know and also, like six days! Like, the depth of that knowledge and the depth of that, the time that they get to talk about it with other ELSAs as well, and put it into, or talk about how they might put it into practice, I think is something that's really, really valuable.*
> (Layla, EP)

Along with the structure and practical skills, the idea of ELSA training helping to transform or solidify existing skills and knowledge into something that is more formal or recognised was raised. Santi spoke about having not previously undertaken higher education or formal training in psychology, and, therefore, not having 'proof' that her knowledge existed:

And when I have worked with individual children over the years, in whatever role, I've always done that independent research, just to support the children and really just give myself that more knowledge. So I've got loads of knowledge in my head, but I've got no degrees or qualifications to prove it, but it's there. (Santi, ELSA)

Maria and Ripley expanded on this. Maria spoke about the training giving existing skills and experiences ‘credibility’, whereas Ripley described the combination of the ELSA training and the ELSA role as being ‘accredited’, which provides the ELSAs with an element of ‘authority’ within their roles. This suggests that, separate to the pastoral support which may be provided by other support staff within schools, the ELSA training and title elevates the ELSA role into something that is credible, recognisable and distinct, and acknowledges existing skills more formally, through specific certification:

Umm, it will have been, it would have been the—there were lots of people who were already working pastorally or, you know, within schools, and kind of just steering towards ELSA, albeit not ELSAs—and I think it was that coming together, and that sharing of experience. (…) And it was the fact that it was something that we all wanted to do, and something that perhaps a lot of them—not me yet, but certainly them—were doing already, was given some structure, some credibility. (Maria, ELSA)

I think it's all in one place, you know, I think, you know, they access all the different training in one place over, you know, six days. And I think that helps a lot. And I think the title of the ELSA you know, is not just, oh, a ‘wellbeing support person’ or, you know -- it's accredited. And so I think that can be powerful as well. I think that can help. So I think it's just that it's giving a name to what some of them are already doing, but making it, erm, have some authority, maybe within the school as well. And you know the students and the learners could identify people as well. (Ripley, EP)

4.4.2. Subtheme 1.2 - Flexibility and adaptability

The flexible and adaptable nature of the ELSA training was highlighted by EPs, both in the way they deliver the training, and the way the training can be used by ELSAs. Whilst some interventions offer a prescriptive curriculum or programme (Ó. Green & Slack, 2019; Greig & Mackay, 2013; Kuypers, 2011), ELSA training teaches ELSAs how to write bespoke interventions for their pupils. This was identified as being a positive part of the ELSA project, allowing for ELSAs to adapt the information they are taught to be applicable to the ages, needs, and settings they are working with:

> *I think what it doesn't do—and I don't think this is a bad thing, but I think sometimes ELSAs are surprised—is it doesn't give them a prescriptive programme to follow weekly. Like, on week one, we're gonna learn this, and then I'm gonna go do that in school. And I think that's the strength of the ELSA programme, that it doesn't do that; that it's a really flexible set of skills, knowledge, and – I was going to say values, it's not a set of values. I think you come with those values and it aligns with your values. But it's really broad and it's really flexible so that ELSAs then can go on and apply that in a way that meets an individual's needs. It's not prescriptive, they can do what they want with it; it can fit their setting, and it can fit their children, and it fits who they are as an individual. But it does give them lots of practical skills and things to take away.* (Jerry, EP)

> *Erm, and there's, I mean, there's so many topics that they cover, isn't it? It's like you never…that situation. It's so rare to get such a breadth of, erm, knowledge and training in an area. (…) I guess it's making sure that they're all on the same level playing field in terms of their knowledge. They've got the skills already, but then they can think about, you know, how might you put those skills into place and then kind of use the practical element of the training to think, OK, how does this apply to my school?* (Layla, EP)

> *Yeah, it's them, I guess, having permission to adapt it to their setting and what their children need. So like you say, all the training will be the same for every cohort, but every conversation within that training will probably look slightly different, depending on who's in that cohort of trainees on that day.* (Izzy, EP)

Alongside this flexibility, Sven and J-Bob both mentioned referring to the information they received during their training, which suggests that the training continues to act as a foundation which ELSAs can return to as required, beyond the initial six-week training programme. Here, it appears that being trained in theory, techniques and processes, rather than a prescriptive programme enables ELSAs to identify what is required in individual situations, and to select appropriate approaches:

> *Yeah, I think the one thing that remains stable is like, the training, like this [holds up folder]. The, the processes and the way to go about it still work. Like, I still use Circle of Friends now, just as an example – it's amazing. Like, I've done it in front of adults. When I first did it here, we did it for a child a few years back now, and the ed psychs came in, with the heads – and it's like we invented fire (…) They were just like, 'What is this amazing…?' And it was nothing, it was just talking. But it was the process of how you break down the chat, how you go about getting everybody's opinion without everyone just going, 'Blurgh!', you know?* (J-Bob, ELSA)

> *Actually, weirdly, I was looking through my folder the other day from training just because I needed—I was like, oh, I need some information, I'll look through it—and the amount of notes that I was like, you know, when you hear something new? And I was literally writing initials of children here, there, everywhere. I should probably go through with the Tipp-Ex pen.* (Sven, ELSA)

Although the ELSA Network issues the training as a pack, (Burton, 2009), EPs spoke of the updates their services have made over time to the training materials, both in terms of more contemporary references and resources within the materials, and how individual

needs are described, for example, moving away from specific diagnoses to descriptions or approaches which may be suitable to a broader range of needs. EPs spoke of the 'fundamentals' and 'principles' of the ELSA training and gave a sense, much like the ELSAs accessing the training, that the training materials act as a broader framework which can be added to or adapted over time:

> *Erm, I think it, the way the training is set up – and it's really nice actually having seen it develop over time a little bit as well, in terms of some of the topics that used to be covered that are, you know, have developed and grown. But I think it's about helping them just get that overview of, er, some of the areas that they might need to know about when supporting young people, but then underpinning all of it is that kind of, those ELSA principles as well.* (Layla, EP)

> *So we've kind of tweaked Sheila's a bit – and updated it slightly, I think (…) So same things but just with updated resources, updated references, if we can link it in, so. (…) It evolves, doesn't it? I think, so new stuff comes along, and you know, we try and always bring some resources to each training session, to share resources and things like that.* (Hannah, EP)

> *Some of it feels a bit old fashioned at times, in how we describe need. Or whether we should be describing need with ELSA, or just kind of describing responses and things that you might see in school. (…) I don't know as well, I delivered a different day last time and it just felt a bit old. It was day one, talking about, like the content around emotional literacy. That shouldn't feel old fashioned, should it? It's literally the basis of the whole thing. But just some of the research was quite old. And not that the concepts were inappropriate or have changed significantly, but I think there's more relevant stuff (…) I mean, we're not changing the fundamentals of what is being delivered. I'd hope that was OK. But yeah, day one just felt a bit, I don't know, old.* (Jerry, EP)

I think, like now we seem to focus less on, you know, there's like a whole section on autism in the training? Whereas I think we now kind of… we do talk about it, but it comes under some other areas because it's about looking at what that need is, not what that label is, if that makes any sense? So I think that's how we've slightly developed it (…) Erm, we've got like, something on social stories which obviously is applicable. We've got something on interpersonal skills, which is obviously applicable. (…) You know, so you can see how it probably underpins, but again, because we have a lot of focus on actually what that individual's needs are, rather than putting that label on, erm, I wonder whether that's where it's kind of developed from. (Layla, EP)

4.5. Theme 1 summary

Theme 1 describes the knowledge, skills and experiences ELSAs bring to the ELSA role when they begin training, and the role that training takes in underpinning and enhancing these skills through the provision of frameworks, techniques and tools, which in turn adds a sense of credibility to the ELSA role. This theme also highlights that the training materials themselves act as a framework for EPs, which they can then adapt and update to reflect the contexts they and the ELSAs they are training work within, and to represent contemporary research, references, and ideas around how differences and needs are described and responded to.

4.6. Theme 2 – Multiple roles and minimal time

Theme 2 describes the competing demands EPs and ELSAs experience within their roles. All participants discussed the number of other roles ELSAs may hold alongside their ELSA positions, which require ELSAs to attend multi-agency meetings; work with CYP individually, or undertake teaching responsibilities. Whilst these additional roles appear to situate ELSAs as being trusted and well-known members of their school communities,

holding multiple roles seems to result in reduced time for ELSA work, and impacts on how consistently the ELSA project runs:

> *The vast majority of us are doing, will be deputy safeguards, a lot of us will run the Teams Around the Family, and also ELSA itself. So ELSA itself—the strict intervention—is meant to be six weeks, potentially rolling on to another. The reality is, that doesn't happen.* (Maria, ELSA)

> *Well, obviously it's the safeguarding role, and it's behaviour, but more importantly it's behaviour. Behaviour is…it so, so much takes over my role, that I can't do my targeted ELSA. So, I will limit myself to around 10 children a term, erm, because I just can't – I just get dragged all over.* (Santi, ELSA)

> *So, well, I'm officially, I'm an HLTA now, so they upgraded me once I did my training. So I do cover, so I'm in class in the mornings and then afternoons I go out to do my ELSA work.* (Sven, ELSA)

Some of the additional responsibilities placed on ELSAs included spontaneous or unplanned roles, such as providing sickness cover or in-class support, resulting in ELSAs' usual timetables and sessions with CYP changing or being cancelled at short notice. The need to prioritise different roles was also highlighted, along with the potential conflict this can cause. For example, other roles being a higher priority or requiring more of ELSAs' time to be able to run smoothly, or additional roles which require ELSAs to change the way they respond to CYP, depending on which role they are fulfilling. In discussing these additional demands, there was a sense of ELSAs being torn between their loyalty to the CYP they work with, and wanting or needing to be a helpful colleague:

Like, for the next two weeks, every morning, for example, I need to be supporting a new teacher and support the children in there that struggle with change. So it's being in there every morning, which is throwing everything else out, do you know what I mean? (J-Bob, ELSA)

When we get to a point where there's a lot of sickness, or stuff going on, unfortunately I just get -- it's like, you know, I'm the only HLTA in key stage two, so I get pulled. It's like, 'We're really sorry, but you've gotta go and teach class, there's no teacher'. It's like, OK. So it is just, it's the day-to-day school life that gets in the way. (Sven, ELSA)

Yeah, ELSAs in [this area], they haven't been able to do their job. They're pulled. You know, there's a school trip and they've got to go on it, you know, they've got to do playground duty because someone's off. But their timetable can go to pot really without any -- and they can't influence that. And that must be really frustrating for them, and it's frustrating for me. (Ripley, EP)

I mean, I am really involved in all the school productions so—I know, don't even ask—so I now wrap up all ELSA by that May half term of SATS (…) And I've tried to carry on doing ELSA through that time as well, and it was just awful because I was letting children down, and I hated myself for it, and I was like, no. (Sven, ELSA)

I do behaviour as well, which I always say doesn't marry up, but I do do it. So I go from Miss Trunchbull to Miss Honey, in whichever part of the corridor I'm around! (Santi, ELSA)

These extracts highlight the demands ELSAs juggle on a day-to-day basis to be able to fulfil their roles around school, whilst also finding the time to plan, deliver, and record ELSA sessions, alongside attending supervision. They also highlight the emotional demands additional roles may have, for example, safeguarding or supporting behaviour, and the impact that unplanned cover or cancelled sessions may have on both themselves and the

CYP ELSAs work with. The ELSA project was originally intended to enhance capacity within schools by training support staff to fulfil the ELSA role. However, in this context, that premise also relies on ELSAs having availability to begin with.

Like the ELSAs, EPs also described their time as limited. However, instead of being split between different roles, this was due to pressures of an increased workload, including increases in statutory work, which in turn risked limiting capacity within services to deliver the ELSA project. Alongside this, changes to how EPS are run were discussed (e.g., moving to traded models), resulting in reduced flexibility to plan and deliver preventative or early intervention work. As with ELSAs, there was a sense that EPs were torn between needing to fulfil the statutory aspects of their roles, and wanting to be able to engage in early intervention work, which could potentially reduce statutory demands (Division of Educational and Child Psychology, 2024):

> *What else impacts us? Lots of things, I guess. Statutory work. The usual, our capacity versus the pressures on our service for the statutory work, erm, and still carving out that time.* (Izzy, EP)

> *I suppose, you know, you need an EP service, don't you? To deliver it. And if one didn't exist, what would -- I mean it is statutory, it's legislation, it is government. You know, it sometimes, it feels really difficult to deliver it because of the pressures on the workforce to do other work that's statutory, and that's just getting worse.* (Ripley, EP)

> *Time is massive, and because we're fully traded, we haven't got that wiggle room for, do you know what I mean? When we were, when we were—you know, before we were fully traded, when we just like, we would just kind of share it out with schools and stuff—there was much more space for doing preventative stuff.* (Hannah, EP)

> *Time. Statutory work. But it's broader than that – it's capacity, isn't it? Time and capacity, and the ever-increasing statutory demand on EP services means that any of that—I guess ELSAs are arguably preventive work—any early intervention, preventative stuff gets pushed smaller, and smaller, and smaller.* (Jerry, EP)

4.7. Theme 2 summary

Theme 2 describes a picture of ELSAs and EPs taking on increased workloads or handling increased demands owing to systemic pressures both within schools and on LA services more broadly. This has an impact both on the ELSA support which can be offered within schools, and, in turn, results in limited availability for EPs to be able to run and sustain the ELSA project within their services.

4.8. Theme 3 – Support, connection, and the art of networking

Theme 3 incorporates two subthemes which together describe the practical and emotional support ELSAs access from EPs through ELSA supervision, and which they establish between themselves as peer support. ELSAs and EPs alike described supervision as something which is facilitated and structured by EPs, and from which a range of peer supervision develops and evolves by the ELSAs themselves.

4.8.1. Subtheme 3.1 – 'The EP gives it the structure'

This subtheme highlights the role that EPs play in ELSA supervision, and how ELSAs experience EPs within their supervision groups. One aspect of this subtheme was around the organisational aspects of supervision, both in terms of content and how groups are formed. Although supervision groupings might usually be according to ELSAs' settings, Sven and Hannah both spoke of their experiences of changes to ELSA groupings. Sven spoke of requesting the same supervision group for the following year, and the disappointment of being in a different group. In contrast, Hannah described adapting her service's approach

to groupings based on the requests of ELSAs. Whilst all participants spoke of the supportive nature of supervision, there is the potential for ELSAs to feel vulnerable in supervision due to the potentially sensitive topics being discussed. This highlights the balance required between practical considerations in terms of groupings from EPs' perspectives, and considerations around ELSAs preferences and peer relationships:

> *It was quite sad because last year's supervision, it was all a bit higgledy-piggledy. And actually, by the end—it took that group a while to sort of settle into things—and by the by the time we got to our last session, everyone was really starting to open up and had got into it, and we specifically said to the EP, 'Would you be able to keep this group the same people for next year?' And she was like, 'Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah'. And then mine's come through for this year and I am -- it's a completely different group of people I've never met before. So that was a bit disappointing, I must say (…) And I think a couple of the others were a bit disappointed by that as well because they've sort of emailed and said, 'Oh, what a shame, none of us are together this year either'.* (Sven, ELSA)

> *So we did offer to put all the secondary ones together, and they refused. They were like, 'No, we started together, we want to stay together'. Erm, so we just let them carry on and it's, do you know what? It's fine*. (Hannah, EP)

In terms of EPs' approaches to facilitating supervision, a range of experiences were discussed. These included sessions which do not follow an agenda, contrasted with those which use specific frameworks, or EPs who take a flexible approach to supervision by combining ELSAs' requests or needs within a structure. An entirely flexible approach to supervision, which does not have a pre-determined agenda, was recognised as providing the opportunity for ELSAs to have time to share their concerns with other ELSAs. However, whilst this is acknowledged by the participant as not being the 'function' of supervision, it may be suggested that this approach to supervision is cathartic, particularly for ELSAs who

may be working by themselves in schools and undertaking an increased workload (as discussed in Theme 2):

> *I don't have a particular way or an agenda. And I know some EPs do, they like to put a bit of training in there or ask about what would you like to be trained on. But I tend to, whenever I've gone up and rocked up, as it were, I'm not very, I'm not prepared and they don't seem to mind because they use that space a lot of the time to complain, which—and moan—which I know, because then you think, how productive is that? But when we try to steer it away from that (…) they don't like it. The ones I've experienced really want to have that space to tell everyone how bad it is. I'm thinking, well, that's not the function of it, it really isn't, but I have struggled to, you know, shut down those conversations and move on. And I don't know if other people have been more successful.* (Ripley, EP)

In contrast, a heavily structured approach to supervision was described, using the example of Solution Circles. Whilst this approach may steer more towards problem-solving conversations and away from the complaining identified by Ripley, a restrictive element to this approach was also highlighted. This resulted in a lack of 'freedom' for ELSAs to talk about their work or concerns, owing to the 'strict' structure of Solution Circles. Here, it may be suggested that although the EP has a clear process for running the supervision, ELSAs' needs and preferences may change over time and between sessions, resulting in a potential mismatch between how the session is structured, and ELSAs' requirements:

> *Erm, sometimes we -- I think a lot of the other ELSAs do feel that it would just be sometimes just nice to just have the freedom to just chat through cases. Because obviously, the Solution Circle is so strict in how it works that it doesn't ever really work, I'll be honest, because we end up just all asking questions. (…) I get it. I get why they do it, and it does work, but equally, sometimes there's a frustration with how rigid it can be.* (Sven, ELSA)

Some EPs spoke about the flexible approaches they use towards supervision, based on the requests or needs of their supervision groups, which indicates a balance between being responsive to ELSAs' requests and needs, but maintaining a loose structure. This was echoed by ELSAs, who described their experiences of EPs providing some structure to supervision, which also seemed to provide a sense of containment. These experiences portray a picture of supervision as a two-way or collaborative experience, which can be shaped by both EPs and ELSAs to accommodate individual views, needs and experiences, and which allows ELSAs some autonomy over the structure of their supervision:

> *I think the way our supervision has developed over time, and I guess what I've got more emphasis on now, just in response to what they were, what they wanted from the supervision, was the kind of the CPD element of it, like the actual training was ages ago now. So what we've started doing and putting more emphasis on is kind of having a bit of a CPD element into the supervision.* (Layla, EP)

> *It might look different based on obviously the needs of the group, and that might look different in each session, but often includes things, as I say, like maybe a group problem solving model, like a structured model for problem solving. It might be sharing resources with one another, and materials.* (Sam, EP)

> *You gotta have some sort of rudder to the ship, I think if you -- Just like I said, if you all just turn up and had a big old moan, it would just be like, 'What?' You know, 'Why am I here?' And it's never ever been like that. (…) And the EPs have always steered it.* (J-Bob, ELSA)

> *Obviously the ed psych gives it the uh, again, gives it the credibility, gives it the structure, and they will always come with a few resources in mind.* (Maria, ELSA)

Overall, these experiences indicate that there are differences in how ELSA supervision is facilitated, and how ELSAs experience supervision. This variability is to be

expected across a range of services, supervisors, and supervision groups, however, it also suggests that there is a fine balance in ELSA supervision between structure and focus, and the opportunity to contain and meet ELSAs' needs 'in the moment', requiring EPs to both lead and follow in their roles as supervisors.

4.8.2. Subtheme 3.2 - Connections and camaraderie

This subtheme continues from subtheme 3.1 and starts with participants' experiences of the clinical supervision ELSAs receive from EPs, which allows a safe space to receive both the practical and emotional support required to do their ELSA jobs. A key aspect of this theme relates to the opportunity to offload or relax, and the sense of camaraderie which occurs when supervision groups meet. This links with the reluctance or concern ELSAs may have at the prospect of changing supervision groups, as discussed in subtheme 3.1, suggesting that familiarity and attending supervision with people they know helps to maintain the rapport ELSAs establish in supervision, and contributes to the supportiveness identified by participants:

> *It's a wonderful, wonderful job, but when it's quite stressful, it can be quite isolating and you can have lots of children through. And you, umm, you are—ultimately, you're empathising with them as well – and so you can just feel like…[exhales]—and when you get with all the other ELSAs, it's just this opportunity to go 'ohhhhhh, okay!' and have a chat and it's, yeah, you're in it together, and I enjoy that.* (Maria, ELSA)

> *But they also, like, when we come together for the supervision sessions, they're so supportive of each other. There's absolutely no judgment whatsoever.* (Layla, EP)

> *You see in the groups they quite often gel quite quickly, in their little tables or the groups, or... It's quite nice. Depending on the time dynamics of each group, I guess.* (Izzy, EP)

Because, you know, you'll have six people in the same room, and you think, I'm kind of swimming on my own on this, and they're like, 'No, you know, time's a problem for us' or 'This is a factor' or, 'I am seeing a lot more of this type of behaviour', and you kind of think, oh, it's not just me then, brilliant. So yeah. (J-Bob, ELSA)

A further aspect identified was the practical support supervision can provide in terms of individual ELSAs' practice. In contrast to the rigidity of the group problem-solving model described in subtheme 3.1, the reassurance provided by group problem-solving was highlighted. The support offered and received by other ELSAs in the form of resources, knowledge, and advice to take away was also discussed. Together, these elements of supervision suggest that reciprocity in supervision provides opportunities for support, guidance, and learning, through interactions with an EP and other ELSAs.

It can be confidence building as well with the other ELSAs, because when we do brainstorm, you think, ohh yes, I did that, or ohh yeah that's a good idea. So yeah, it's, supervision for me is super important. (Maria, ELSA)

Umm, working alongside, like, having our ELSA meetings that we have. Like, I can't tell you how important they are. Umm, so everyone can share. And sometimes you haven't got anything to share, really, you know, you bring something to the group, sometimes you don't because you're coping with it. Um, but every time you leave, you end up with loads more knowledge, and loads more things that you've shared. (J-Bob, ELSA)

Thinking past, I suppose, like the training itself, but then on to the supervision sessions, I think that's helpful for kind of being able to seek further advice and support once you've had the training and you're implementing ELSA within school, it's having that ongoing support and conversation. Not only with an EP facilitating that, but also with fellow ELSAs who you've trained with. (Sam, EP)

However, there was variability in these experiences which appeared to depend on the support ELSAs could access either within their own schools (e.g., from SLT), or regionally. As a result, Sven described a sense of 'holding back' during supervision to allow others to be able to share their concerns, whereas Santi described the emotional and physical impact that not being able to access ELSA supervision can have. This demonstrates the understanding ELSAs have of why supervision is important, both for themselves and for other ELSAs, and recognises the social and emotional support it can provide:

> *At supervision, everyone is always a bit like -- I always just sit quietly, because everyone -- nobody else has a room, or they're just struggling to find a space, or get anybody to take them seriously. And I'm like, Ohh yeah, we have this whole system that we have in place and it's like Super ELSA.* (Sven, ELSA)

> *I don't have any access at all. (…) I think it's really important and I spoke to other people in varying roles, and as far as I've heard, it's not safe practice to not have supervision. And I do know some points, about taking that cup home and not emptying it, but sometimes you can't help it, can you? I've had situations where I've just gone home, I've just [exhales] like that, and I'm feeling it in my neck. I'll always know when I'll know, as such, but my body feels it.* (Santi, ELSA)

Following on from their experiences of and access to supervision, another aspect of support identified was that which ELSAs provide to each other beyond clinical supervision. Whilst this support begins with the rapport developed within clinical supervision, it then appears to organically grow and develop, through a range of channels, including email groups, social media, and in-person connections at meetings or conferences. Participants spoke of the role EPs hold in initially facilitating these connections, e.g. by setting up email threads or groups, which ELSAs then engage in:

And then we get an email follow-up afterwards, which always helps because, you know, when you get back to the world, you're thrown straight back into the mix, aren't you? And it's all a bit crazy. So to get that email follow-up saying, 'Oh, this is what we talked about, this is the resources that we discussed'. And then we ping little emails to each other, it's lovely talk. It's like a little family, it's great.
(J-Bob, ELSA)

And I know they've been trying to set up some sort of networking of all the ELSAs across the area, or whatever, but that hasn't happened as yet and actually, I think that would probably be more helpful as well as just supervision. (Sven, ELSA)

I think in the past we probably just did the training and the supervision and that would -- that was it. Now, we are trying to develop that community, so ELSAs can support each other. I don't think we're there yet, but that was, that was the vision, was to try and get a community so they could use each other and help each other as a resource. (Ripley, EP)

However, from EPs' initial facilitation, a sense of momentum develops, and peer support between ELSAs continues to widen and sustain itself. Theme 2 and subtheme 3.1 identified the ELSA role as potentially stressful and isolating, and it seems that ELSAs ultimately find and establish support amongst themselves to mitigate these issues, through emotional containment and connection, as well as the sharing of information, advice and tools or resources:

Yeah, you just flit around [at the conference] – social ELSA butterfly. Just going, 'Ooh, what school are you at? What school are you at?', you know. (…) The thing with these kind of things, the more you do it, the more you recognise people and you build that more of a rapport, and you can go and have a chat with whoever. And yeah, it's nice. (J-Bob, ELSA)

And the other thing -- so we've got a couple of other things as well. So we've all, so each supervision group has got their own, erm, WhatsApp group, and they will message each other—any time of the day or night—to ask a question. We set it up. Yeah, but it's basically self-sustaining now because they don't wait for us, they just answer themselves. I mean, I've still got them on my phone—and because my work one wasn't working—it's all on my personal phone. I just mute it, so they just keep going. And the other thing we've got is – have you heard of Padlet? So we've got a [local] Padlet, and we encourage them to upload things onto there. And to be fair, there's loads on it, there's absolutely loads on it. (Hannah, EP)

And it's not unusual for the ELSAs to set up their own networks. (…) I know of previous cohorts that I've been involved with, they have set up WhatsApp, Facebook, and there are national Facebooks groups out there as well. So it's like it's got its own energy. You know, there's another world out there – the ELSA world! (Anne, EP)

Following the connections which are established and maintained between ELSAs, EPs' roles seem to evolve from one of facilitator, as discussed in subtheme 3.1, to one of stepping back or loosening their grip to enable ELSAs to develop and strengthen the connections and peer support they provide to each other, so that it becomes self-sustaining. In doing so, ELSAs develop an independence and autonomy in the support they offer to one another, but also provide themselves with the opportunity of peer supervision between designated clinical supervision sessions. It could, therefore, be suggested that these regular and spontaneous opportunities to connect with other ELSAs further mitigate the stressors and challenges ELSAs may experience in their everyday roles.

4.9. Theme 3 summary

Overall, theme 3 emphasises the importance of ELSA supervision, both clinical supervision, which is facilitated by EPs, and peer supervision, which ELSAs go on to

establish and maintain between themselves. As well as providing opportunities to offer and receive support, share resources, and learn from each other, supervision also appears to act as a mechanism to mitigate the challenges ELSAs may face within their roles. Moreover, peer supervision between clinical supervision seems to act as an easily accessible and readily available lifeline which helps to sustain ELSAs between more formal supervision opportunities.

4.10. Theme 4 – 'They need to understand what I'm doing'

Theme 4 explores ELSAs' and EPs' experiences of the understanding SLT have of the ELSA project in terms of how it is positioned more widely within school, and describes the variance between the approaches to ELSA management used within schools, including the different experiences ELSAs have of management. One focus of this theme was the role that ELSA managers have for overseeing the general wellbeing of ELSAs in their everyday practice, by providing 'day-to-day' supervision, alongside the supervision which is facilitated by EPs:

> *I think the supervision from schools is really important. So we keep saying, 'You've got, you've got a line manager, that's your sort of day-to-day supervision. We are the clinical supervision', so we try and do that. But the ones that have got a supportive head, who understands it, I think they have a much more positive experience of doing ELSA.* (Hannah, EP)

However, ELSA management within schools seemed to vary. For some ELSAs regular, planned involvement from their named managers appeared minimal. This seemed to limit the opportunity for managers to check ELSAs' overall wellbeing, or for ELSAs to share their work. It may also be suggested that these missed or reduced opportunities for managerial involvement link with ELSAs' workload (discussed in Theme 2), resulting in

ELSAs holding additional roles because their managers do not have a full picture of the amount of work they are doing:

> *Well, it's interesting really because no one ever really asks me what I'm doing, I'm pretty much my own boss. I'm obviously trusted and I've got a good paperwork system set in place, you know, the folders, the everything (…) but no one checks, no one knows. I just, I've got them!* (Santi, ELSA)

> *A scheduled, sit-down chat/case review would be good. And I don't mean to the extent where they're nitpicking, I don't mean to the extent where they're saying, 'Well, prove what you've done'. I mean just, 'So how's it going? Who have you got? Roughly what're you doing with that?' Just so you feel that, you know, that you're having that check-in.* (Maria, ELSA)

Whilst some ELSAs described having regular meetings with SLT, it seemed these arrangements were initiated by ELSAs themselves, having recognised a need for them to take place to allow for the needs of the CYP to be discussed, and information to be shared between relevant stakeholders:

> *So I set up an SEMH team within school. So that's the designated mental health lead, our deputy head, both our safeguarding officers and our SENDCos. So once a term, we meet, and we discuss the children.* (Sven, ELSA)

> *That's why I suggested being on the behaviour meeting, the behaviour team. Because I was like, it doesn't make any sense that you're having meetings about the behaviour of the children in the school, and the one person that gets called upon to help with the behaviour of the children in the school is not actually in the meeting. So it's been a bit -- It just made sense to tie up the dots that way, and it gives me more information.* (J-Bob, ELSA)

The knowledge and understanding managers have of ELSA was also highlighted as contributing to how the ELSA project is understood and situated within the school. Here,

open communication and reciprocity in relationships between ELSAs and SLT seemed to help ELSA work to fit in with the school's requirements. Further, a whole-school understanding described as beginning 'at the top'—from SLT—which then filters down through the school to other colleagues, was identified as supporting the understanding and integration of ELSAs within their ELSA roles, and ELSA within the school:

> *They need to understand what I'm doing, and I need to understand what they need. Like -- and having that conversation is, you know, even in passing (…) erm, but yeah, it is massively important. I think we lean on each other quite nicely in that way. Again because it's a trust thing, you know? You gotta trust each other, really.* (J-Bob, ELSA)

> *The key, key thing is we've, we have that buy in from our SLT, from our senior leadership. And that's the bottom line of it. Without that, you can't do anything, I don't think. I think you are just in isolation, trundling along, doing your own thing. But because I've got really good buy in: they believe in it, they fully understand it, and they see the value in it. (…) So I think that is the key, it's that mutual buy-in from everybody, and that comes from the top.* (Sven, ELSA)

> *They can't be seen as alone – they have to be in a network, don't they? They have to be a network to other people in the school that is formal and isn't just an ad hoc arrangement. And they need to know their place in the school, and be clearly identified in their role, in that network or system, whatever you want to call it. And, you know, they have to have communication between the layers, and I don't think any of that happens. They live on their own, they're in isolation, and that just isn't good enough.* (Ripley, EP)

Alongside an understanding of the ELSA project, SLTs' knowledge and prioritisation of ELSA alongside other perceived needs within the school was identified as helping to ensure that ELSA work is valued, integrated, and runs smoothly, both in terms of

administrative processes, including referral systems, and practical resources, such as spaces to work in:

> *Shared values across the SLT, that means taking time—whoever it is, if it's the SENDCo or whoever—taking time to provide adequate line management to the ELSAs isn't seen as a waste of time, or a kind of frivolous add-on to their role. It's integral to the smooth running of the whole school; that ELSA is an embedded part of what the school do.* (Jerry, EP)

> *Yeah, that previous knowledge and experience of an ELSA, they see the value of it, and they're very keen to do it and support it. I think, like I was saying before—I know it was quite flippant, but—the new heads who are not really aware of it, don't really understand. So it's like, they'll take a room away when they don't really realise that that's the ELSA room, do you know what I mean? It's like, 'Ohh we need that for, you know, isolation', whatever it's called now, whatever fancy word they use.* (Hannah, EP)

4.11. Theme 4 summary

This theme highlights that ELSAs may have a range of managerial experiences within their schools, but that a focus on regular communication and understanding of the ELSA project helps to ensure that ELSAs' work can be fully understood, and that the ELSA project can be effectively integrated within schools.

4.12. Theme 5 – 'What if we didn't get that funding?'

Theme 5 centres on the financial aspects of support, both in terms of the money schools must spend on the ELSA project, and the financial implications for EP services in running the ELSA project. Current funding concerns for schools were discussed, which suggested schools need to balance being able to spend money on ELSAs, their training, and supervision, alongside the educational needs of the CYP. Compared to supporting individual

CYP with identified SEND, it was suggested that ELSAs may be perceived a 'luxury'. Further, an example was highlighted of schools wanting to be able to employ ELSAs, but being restricted by other stakeholders who may be responsible for the school budget:

> *Yeah, there's lots going on in schools at the moment, and they -- also funding cuts so schools have got to make sure that they cover the basics. If they've got a child with an education and health care plan, having an ELSA then becomes a bit of a luxury.* (Anne, EP)

> *Erm, financially. I think schools are struggling a little bit, shall we say, so I think there is -- I know I've got one of my schools who would really, really value from an ELSA, and bless, the head teacher is really trying hard to kind of make a case for it with the kind of school external powers that be.* (Layla, EP)

Funding was also highlighted in terms of maintaining current staffing and being able to recruit more staff. Topical situations were described, including ongoing cost increases to household essentials resulting in support staff leaving schools to work elsewhere, and ELSAs needing to cover for other losses to support staff. This was further explained by ELSAs themselves, who, whilst wanting to remain working in schools, highlighted the direct conversations they had had in relation to how their roles would continue to be funded. These experiences present a vicious cycle, both of school budgets becoming extremely limited, of a potential loss in staff either due to personal circumstances requiring alternative employment, or school budgets resulting in cuts to support staff. These situations then risk feeding into the increased demands on ELSAs to be covering other roles; thus reducing their available time for ELSA work.

> *I think it's the 'cost of living crisis'. I think schools are losing support staff because of finances, so they can't do that role, they might be doing, you know, filling in for something else. And then if schools want to recruit, they can't always find the staff*

that they want, and I think some schools are just—for want of a better word—firefighting. (Ripley, EP)

I guess the only other major one would be the funding. I always bring it up every year – what if we didn't get that funding? What would you do? Would you -- Would I still carry on with my role, because I'm qualified? Or would it all come to a grinding halt? (Sven, ELSA)

I think it's funding. So I've felt very insecure in my role. Not because the staff aren't lovely, but for example, when there were the strikes, and there was talk about how there was gonna be more money for support staff, and more money for teachers. And basically they're saying, 'Well, where is that gonna come from?' And they were quite openly saying, 'Well, the teaching assistants, and they'll cut roles like yours'. So there's that feeling you're gonna be kicked out. Not because school don't value you, but because there simply isn't the budgets. (Maria, ELSA)

Money and finances were also discussed in the context of EP services. This included the requirement – particularly on traded services – for the ELSA project to be able to sustain itself financially. For example, ensuring that ELSA training and supervision do not run at a loss. This required EP services to make decisions about how they price the ELSA project so that it pays for itself, but remains financially accessible for schools to buy into. EPs described the difficulties they have experienced in adapting the programme into a traded service model, whilst the ethics of making a profit from the ELSA project were also discussed:

Most [EP services] actually charge because it's the time that takes, you know, that's what the charge is for. But some people are using it to make money, you know. I could say for my local authority, we don't make any kind of profit out of it.
(Anne, EP)

> *I know just talking to other EPs in the region, that services are not running ELSA anymore. It's not cost effective, or it's really hard to do in a traded model to get full cost recovery from an ELSA programme, because it's a lot of EP time. And I don't think we, I don't think we've run full cost recovery on ELSA. If we really broke it down, I don't think it would be.* (Jerry, EP)

> *So there's the money, isn't there? So that's definitely a big thing. We've tried, we've -- so because we, because we're traded, we charge for it. But I've checked within the region and we're not out there.* (Hannah, EP)

A further aspect of EP service funding was discussed in the context of funding which EP services may receive from beyond their service, e.g., from the wider LA. Izzy and Sam acknowledge the financial support that may be accessed by services, and how this may help facilitate the EP service to run the ELSA project, for example, by employing an assistant EP to provide support. However, the influence that external funding may have on running the ELSA project was also highlighted, for example, whether the ELSA project is valued sufficiently within the LA for it to be eligible for funding:

> *And things like funding, I guess. Erm, I know we get, we've had some funding from the LA. So that's influenced how ELSA looks and, how much training we're doing, and what resources we've got, I guess.* (Izzy, EP)

> *I suppose in terms of funding, perhaps, because funding can obviously help with recruitment in terms of recruiting assistant EPs to support with ELSA. So that would be an external factor that would affect whether we continue to deliver ELSA, perhaps. So if there's that external funding, and that would be linked to, how key stakeholders value ELSA. So if it's seen as being really important that we can still continue to train ELSAs, then obviously that will probably, hopefully, be linked with funding to enable, or to support us to deliver that.* (Sam, EP)

4.13. Theme 5 summary

This theme has centred on the role that funding and finances have in relation to the ELSA project, both in terms of how schools can participate in the project and find funding for ELSAs, as well as whether EP services can also manage or access the funding required to be able to facilitate running the ELSA project.

4.14. Findings summary

I have presented five themes and four subthemes in this chapter, which highlight some of the helpful experiences that ELSAs and EPs have of implementing the ELSA project, alongside those which act as a hindrance.

Knowledge and understanding of the ELSA project by key stakeholders such as school SLT was identified as potentially having a positive impact on the integration of ELSA within the school. However, where SLT were less knowledgeable about the ELSA project, the ability to run ELSA effectively was limited; for example, by viewing it as a lower priority than the other work support staff may do.

Workloads in the context of both ELSAs and EPs were identified as a barrier to them being able to fully engage in the ELSA project. For ELSAs, this meant needing to fit their ELSA work in alongside other roles and responsibilities they may hold within school. For EPs, limited availability was associated with wider demands on EP services in relation to statutory work. Funding was also highlighted as impacting on schools' ability to finance training new ELSAs, retaining sufficient staff to enable ELSA work to take place, or retaining ELSAs themselves in the wake of funding cuts. The impact of this was also heard from ELSAs, who recognised their ELSA roles as being vulnerable to wider issues such as school staffing and budgets.

Despite the above difficulties and limitations to ELSA implementation, some facilitating factors were identified. The role of ELSA training was identified as something which builds on the existing knowledge and skills of ELSAs by using a psychological lens to provide frameworks, resources, and tools to enhance ELSAs' work. In addition, the flexibility of the training, both in terms of how ELSAs can put it into practice, and how EPs deliver the training was also highlighted as being helpful. This was particularly the case for ELSAs being able to refer back to the training, as well as EPs ensuring the training is contemporary and reflective of the contexts they work within.

Supervision was also recognised as being helpful, in terms of providing practical support regarding resources and problem-solving, and emotional support from others who have had similar experiences. Similarly, the role of EPs within supervision was identified as supporting ELSAs in understanding some of the needs of the CYP they work with, along with helping them to recognise and work within their level of competency, and the boundaries of their ELSA role. An additional aspect to supervision was that of connecting with other ELSAs, which was identified by ELSAs and EPs as holding the role of peer supervision, and maintaining a line of communication for ELSAs between different schools and, potentially, across different LAs.

Whilst the pressures and limits of time, workloads, and funding cannot be easily reduced owing to wider, systemic factors impacting ELSAs and EPs, such as funding and increased workloads, it may be suggested that the factors which have been identified as helpful support the implementation of ELSA by mitigating some of these issues. In the following chapter, I analyse these aspects of the findings in relation to the literature.

Chapter 5 – Discussion

5.1. Chapter overview

In the previous chapter I presented an illustration of the themes and subthemes generated during analysis. In this chapter, I analyse the themes highlighted in the findings in relation to relevant literature and theory to address the research question. Following this, a methodological review of this study is discussed, before considering the implications of this research for EP practice and future research.

5.2. Research overview

The aim of this study is to contribute to existing literature about the ELSA project, in particular the research relating to its implementation. This research seeks to explore implementation of the ELSA project from the experiences described by ELSAs and EPs. However, it recognises that different people in different contexts will experience the ELSA project differently. As such, this research takes the position of a critical realist ontology, and a subjective epistemology to address the following research question:

What can we learn about ELSA project implementation from the experiences of ELSAs and EPs?

To address the research question, semi-structured interviews were held with four ELSAs and seven EPs from across England. Reflexive thematic analysis generated five main themes and four subthemes, and an illustrative account of the findings (Chapter 4 –) highlighted the following points:

- The knowledge and understanding schools' SLT have of the ELSA project was identified as supporting the integration of the ELSA project within schools. However, where SLT

were less knowledgeable, running the ELSA project effectively appeared more challenging, particularly in terms of available SLT support.

- The workloads of ELSAs and EPs were highlighted as impacting on their availability to fully engage with the ELSA project. For example, ELSAs described having limited time to run ELSA sessions on account of the other roles they undertook within school. Similarly, EPs' availability for the ELSA project appeared to be restricted by wider demands within EP services, such as increased statutory work. These issues seemed to be linked to wider, systemic issues such as funding cuts within education.

- Participants identified ELSA training as being helpful in developing and adding 'credibility' to their prior knowledge and skills, and learning new techniques for supporting CYP. Meanwhile, the flexibility of the ELSA training programme was also highlighted as being beneficial – EPs described the adjustments they had been able to make to the training to ensure the resources are contemporary and reflective of their local context.

- ELSA supervision was described as providing practical support in terms of the resources shared and opportunities for problem solving. The role of EPs was highlighted, including support to develop the skills and knowledge acquired during training. Further, ELSAs spoke of the emotional support and reassurance they receive from other ELSAs, alongside the peer support networks they go on to establish, which appear to act as a vital form of support between formal supervision sessions.

I now analyse the generated themes in turn using relevant psychological theory and literature.

5.2.1. Theme 1 – Training as a framework to practice from

Training as a framework to practice from focuses on ELSA and EP experiences of ELSA training. In this theme, ELSAs described the opportunities training provided to expand and develop their existing skills, whilst EPs highlighted the structure of the training as allowing them to make adaptations to incorporate more contemporary research. This theme incorporates two subthemes—*Building on existing strengths,* and *Flexibility and adaptability*—which I now explore in further detail.

In *Building on existing skills,* participants described ELSA training as helping ELSAs to develop the practical skills required for their ELSA roles, including 'tools' and 'information' for working with CYP, as well as structures and frameworks for supporting CYPs' needs. This is consistent with previous ELSA research highlighting the personal development ELSAs experience through training, including an increased understanding of the CYP they work with, and how to respond to their needs (Bland & Macro, 2018; Grahamslaw, 2010; P. Harris, 2020; Leighton, 2015; Rees, 2016). These findings are also consistent with the IS literature which indicates that training—whilst not considered an effective implementation strategy on its own (Fixsen et al., 2009)—provides practitioners with a range of knowledge and skills, such as background information and underpinning theory; an introduction to the rationale of their practice; and information on how interventions may be successfully adapted (Bond et al., 2024; Fixsen et al., 2009; Humphrey et al., 2009).

In addition to the practical skills the training provides, ELSAs' descriptions of the training seemed to indicate that their experiences extended more deeply. ELSAs drew comparisons between ELSA training and their previous experiences of training and portrayed a sense of ELSA training being more advanced than anything they have

previously accessed. ELSAs spoke of the training as helping to expand their psychological knowledge; helping to make sense of their experiences of working with CYP; providing insight into less familiar topics; and giving their existing knowledge 'credibility'. This suggests that, alongside practical skills, ELSA training acts as formal recognition of ELSAs' prior experience and skills.

Whilst the characteristics of practitioners are mentioned widely in relation to implementation—including those of self-efficacy, openness, resiliency, and commitment (Durlak & DuPre, 2008; Fixsen et al., 2009; Weiner, 2009)—the impact training has on practitioners does not seem to be discussed beyond supporting their skills in implementation fidelity (Fixsen et al., 2009; Fixsen & Blase, 2020; Greenhalgh et al., 2004). Despite this, in the field of medicine, the Promoting Action on Research Implementation in Health Services (PARIHS) framework (Harvey & Kitson, 2015, p. 7) identifies 'a structured approach' to training as supporting implementation by enabling practitioners to move from the role of *novice* – learning what the intervention is and how evidence informs it; to *expert* – having in-depth understanding and knowledge. These findings, therefore, suggest that ELSA training supports implementation in two ways: by helping to develop the practical skills ELSAs require to undertake their ELSA roles, and by recognising and advancing ELSAs' prior knowledge. In turn, this seems to support their transition into the ELSA role, as someone with expertise in supporting SE development.

The subtheme *Flexibility and adaptability,* highlighted ELSA and EPs' shared experiences of the adaptable nature of ELSA training. EPs spoke about having 'tweaked' and 'developed' the training programmes they deliver, e.g., the language used, or to add more contemporary references. EPs also discussed the flexibility of the training, in terms of how ELSAs may interpret and apply resources to their individual settings. However, ELSAs

also spoke of training information as being something ‘stable’, which they to refer back to, indicating a slight contrast in perspectives.

IS considers training to support with intervention fidelity—the extent to which an intervention is delivered ‘as intended’ by those who developed it—and in turn support intervention efficacy (Carroll et al., 2007; Fixsen et al., 2009). However, unlike manualised interventions (Bond et al., 2024; Evans & Bond, 2021), the ELSA project teaches ELSAs skills with which to devise interventions themselves (Burton, 2008, 2021). Greenhalgh et al. (2004, p. 597) refer to the ‘fuzzy boundaries’ of interventions and describe the *hard core/soft periphery* (HC/SP) concept. HC refers to the basic elements of interventions which are ‘well defined and fixed’ (Lennox et al., 2022 p. 32), whilst SP relates to the ‘less clear and more flexible’ elements which offer adaptability. Lennox et al. (2022) suggest that, in contrast to using manuals or instructions, intervention fidelity can be maintained by adhering to HC, whilst SP supports intervention implementation to different contexts. This concept is echoed by Durlak and DuPre (2008), who identify two intervention characteristics: *adaptability* – how programmes can be modified to fit settings and communities, and *compatibility* – contextual appropriateness, or how interventions fit with settings’ priorities and values.

Taking these concepts together, it may be suggested that training in the theories and frameworks underpinning the ELSA project—as described earlier—is the HC and provides ELSAs with the information required to understand and undertake their ELSA roles. Alongside this, the adaptability and SP of the training helps to ensure the ELSA project’s compatibility both in terms of EPs delivering the training, and implementation of the project within different settings.

5.2.2. *Theme 2 – Multiple roles and minimal time*

Multiple roles and minimal time describes the competing demands ELSAs and EPs experience in implementing the ELSA project. Within this theme, EPs explained the impact that increased statutory demands and changes to traded models of delivery have on their capacity to deliver the ELSA project. Meanwhile, ELSAs highlighted their limited availability owing to the additional responsibilities they take on or are given, such as safeguarding roles, or covering teaching in classrooms. These findings reflect existing literature where ELSAs reported challenges with managing their workload (Leighton, 2015; D. Mann, 2014; McEwen, 2015), a lack of allocated ELSA time (Rees, 2016), and concerns around the impact that their different roles within school have on CYP (Miles, 2015). In terms of EPs, these findings are also reflective of literature relating to increased statutory workloads, changes to service delivery, and capacity (Atfield et al., 2023).

Whilst much is discussed in the literature relating to individuals' skills and motivation to implement an intervention (Durlak & DuPre, 2008; Fixsen et al., 2009, 2015; Greenhalgh et al., 2004; Weiner, 2009), less is mentioned about their availability of time. May et al. (2009) refer to *division of labour*—who does what and how this is incorporated into the intervention—as being important in implementation, but this appears to be in the context of organisation–wide interventions rather than individuals' workload. Bond et al. (2024, p. 3) highlight differences in implementing targeted versus whole–school interventions, including targeted interventions involving fewer staff and having less 'infrastructure'—such as whole-staff training—to support them. This suggestion could be applied to ELSAs, as primary schools typically have one or two ELSAs, meaning that ELSAs' roles and requirements may be less understood by other colleagues. However, it is noted that ELSA participants in the present study describe being given extra roles after becoming ELSAs. This links with the implementation drivers (Fixsen & Blase, 2020) discussed in

Table 2.4, and suggests that schools' *organisation drivers*—factors which maintain a 'hospitable' (p. 72) environment for implementation, such as leadership and staff organisation—require ELSAs to undertake additional responsibilities as a compensatory function for other needs (e.g., staffing) within their school. This raises key considerations for schools training ELSAs, in terms of whether they have the capacity to accommodate staff undertaking ELSA roles, and whether, longer term, they can accommodate ELSA requirements such as time for planning and interventions.

In terms of EP capacity, participants shared the current context of their work, including statutory demands on EP services; the impact of traded models of delivery; and service capacity resulting in reduced time for preventative work. These experiences correspond with literature relating to the present circumstances in EP services (AEP, 2024; Atfield et al., 2023) and indicate that wider, systemic issues potentially impact on ELSA project implementation. Greenhalgh et al. (2004) describe the *outer context* of implementation, which includes sociopolitical climate, interorganisational networks, and 'external push' (p. 620) including incentives, policies, and mandates. Further, they describe context as being central to implementation – 'The multiple (and often unpredictable) interactions that arise in particular contexts and settings are precisely what determine the success or failure of a dissemination initiative' (p. 615). Relating this to the present findings, it appears that outer context factors correspond with both EP and ELSA descriptions of capacity. Whilst it is difficult to consider how factors such as sociopolitical climate could be easily mitigated, it may be suggested that highlighting the potential interactions between different implementation factors at least raises an awareness of what might be happening, so that attempts to navigate them may be considered at the point of intervention planning.

5.2.3. Theme 3 – Support, connection, and the art of networking

Support, connection, and the art of networking focuses on ELSA supervision and incorporates the subthemes *'The EP gives it the structure'* and *Connections and camaraderie*. Within this theme, ELSAs and EPs described supervision as providing practical and emotional support, but also the opportunity for ELSAs to draw support from their ELSA peers by establishing their own networks.

In *'The EP gives it the structure'* participants described their supervision sessions, and the roles of EPs within supervision. The structure of ELSA supervision groups included considerations around how groups are organised (e.g., staying with the same group; primary ELSAs mixed or separate from secondary ELSA), and EPs' approaches to supervision. For example, a balance of 'leading' in terms of problem-solving models and elements of training, and of 'following' by responding to ELSAs' requests and interests. ELSAs' responses reflected this, as they described EPs as the 'rudder to the ship' and giving supervision 'the credibility'; however, some different experiences were also described. For example, heavily structured problem-solving conversations (e.g., regular use of Solution Circles) were identified as being 'restrictive'. This range of perspectives corroborates previous ELSA supervision research, where sharing resources, receiving reassurance, sharing concerns, and supporting confidence were identified as perceived benefits (France & Billington, 2020; Osborne & Burton, 2014), but experiences of Solution Circles were highlighted as potentially being 'too organised' (France & Billington, p. 407).

Fixsen et al. (2004, p. 533) identify 'ongoing coaching and consultation' as a core component within AFT (see Table 2.4). Coaches are described as providing information on the 'craft' of the role, together with advice, encouragement, opportunities to practise skills, and help to expand on the skills learned in training (Fixsen et al., 2009). Gunderson et al.

(2018) outline two broad categories of coaches: ‘good’ coaches who are identified as problem-solvers, mentors, and helpers, and ‘bad’ coaches as being overly directive or authoritative. Although the term ‘bad’ coach is blunt and likely not reflective of supervisors’ intentions, this categorisation potentially reflects ELSAs’ experiences of rigid versus more adaptable supervision approaches.

In the context of the present study, it may be suggested that EPs undertake the role of ‘coach’ through ongoing and regular ELSA supervision sessions. Whilst the EPs in this study generally described their approach to supervision as being structured but flexible, consideration of ELSAs’ experiences and perspectives (e.g., helpful versus overly-directive) could help to gauge whether the approaches used in supervision are perceived as beneficial.

Connections and camaraderie builds on *‘The EP gives it the structure’* and relates to the emotional and practical support ELSAs receive from EPs, as well as their ELSA peers during supervision. This includes opportunities to offload, relax, and share ideas and/or concerns. However, it is noted that these experiences varied, for example, one ELSA reported that ongoing supervision is not provided by their EP service, meaning they do not have access to the support described by other ELSAs, or required as part of the ELSA project (ELSA Network, 2017c). Whilst the reasons for this are not identified in the findings, it may be considered that EPs’ provision of ongoing supervision is possibly vulnerable to the outer context factors highlighted in *Multiple roles and minimal time,* and, therefore, indicates the potential effect that systemic factors may have on determining implementation success or failure (Greenhalgh et al., 2004).

Many of the ‘coaching’ supports outlined in *‘The EP gives it the structure’* may be applicable to *Connections and camaraderie*, however, participants’ experiences in this

subtheme also seem to reflect the relational aspects of supervision. Trusting relationships are described in the literature as being important amongst stakeholders involved in implementation on account of the need to work as a team (Durlak & DuPre, 2008; Fixsen & Blase, 2020; Greenhalgh et al., 2004; Metz et al., 2022; Weiner, 2009). Further, high-quality relationships have been identified as a critical factor in achieving successful implementation outcomes, owing to the trust, honesty, mutuality, etc. required within organisational teams (Metz et al., 2022; Weiner, 2009). Whilst ELSAs attend supervision from a range of settings, it may be suggested that supervision brings them together as a 'temporary team'. The relationships formed within supervision, therefore, could be described as helping the implementation of supervision itself, and in turn, positive outcomes in terms of the support ELSAs may draw from it.

A further aspect of relationships relates to participants' descriptions of ELSA peer connections and networks. These relationships saw ELSAs' interactions facilitated initially by EPs during supervision groups, then evolving organically through email chains, social media, and in-person connections (e.g., conferences). As EPs reduced their involvement (e.g., after initiating WhatsApp groups), there was a sense that these networks developed momentum and began to widen, deepen, and sustain themselves as communities.

These ELSA communities reflect the concept of *communities of practice* (CoP; Wenger, 1996), where groups of people are 'informally bound together' by their shared interests and expertise in a topic (Wenger & Snyder, 2000, p. 139). CoP connect in a variety of ways, for example, in-person, via email or online platforms (Shaw et al., 2022; Wenger & Snyder, 2000) but the overarching characteristic is that people share their knowledge and experiences in 'free-flowing, creative ways that foster new approaches to problems', which in turn supports others' learning (Wenger & Snyder, 2000, p. 140). CoP have been

recognised for the development of professional skills from other CoP members who act as mentors, and the way in which problems are resolved quickly (Bottoms et al., 2020; Wenger & Snyder, 2000).

CoP are referred to in the ELSA literature in relation to supporting whole-school change (Robertson, 2021). However, in the present study, it may be suggested that ELSA networks represent ELSAs' own CoP, separate from their schools. This extends the earlier suggestion of temporary teams to something that appears to be largely driven by ELSAs themselves, and exists outside of supervision. In doing so, it seems that ELSAs establish a lifeline with which to support themselves, each other, and their practice, and which bridges the gap between formal ELSA supervision sessions.

5.2.4. Theme 4 – 'They need to understand what I'm doing'

'They need to understand what I'm doing' portrays ELSA and EP experiences of how the ELSA project is understood by ELSA managers and SLT, and how it is positioned more widely within schools; however, these experiences seemed to vary. For example, some ELSAs spoke of having limited or no contact with their managers, whereas others described establishing and/or participating in regular meetings with SLT to discuss CYPs' needs.

Leadership is widely acknowledged to be a critical role at organisation and system level implementation (Durlak & DuPre, 2008; Fixsen et al., 2015; Fixsen & Blase, 2020; Weiner, 2009). Prior to implementing an intervention, 'consistent leadership' is described as being key in supporting organisations' readiness to change (Weiner, 2009, p. 3). At the point of implementing interventions, leadership is outlined as 'setting priorities, establishing consensus, and managing the process of implementation' (Durlak & DuPre, 2008, p. 337). Further, Fixsen et al. (2015, p. 23) suggest that leadership can relate to different people undertaking different kinds of leadership behaviours, which may adapt

over time as circumstances change. For example, *adaptive leadership* ‘champions change’ at the start of implementation and helps to resolve any problems that arise, whereas *technical leadership* styles are needed to manage ongoing implementation, to support programmes to run effectively in the longer-term (Blase et al., 2012; Fixsen & Blase, 2020). In some cases, the same people provide both adaptive and technical leadership, whereas in other cases, responsibility for leadership is more widely distributed (Fixsen et al., 2015).

In the context of the present study, it appears that ELSAs undertake leadership roles themselves. For example, where ELSAs have little involvement from SLT, they seem to be adaptive and technical leaders, manging both the initial and ongoing implementation of the ELSA project in their schools. Meanwhile, the ELSAs who initiated their participation in meetings appear to have taken on an initial role as adaptive leaders, which transitions into a shared role of technical leader with their SLT colleagues. Whilst the reason for variable experiences of management is unclear, it may be suggested that—as discussed in *Building on existing strengths*—the ELSA role situates ELSAs as holding credible positions within school, possibly meaning they are not perceived as needing managing. In these situations, therefore, the EP supervision and CoP discussed in *Connections and camaraderie* could act as a compensatory factor, which means that ELSAs’ wellbeing, progress, and implementation continue to be supported, beyond their immediate schools.

Despite the potential compensatory mechanisms in place to support ELSAs, it may also be suggested that SLT possibly need more information or support themselves to undertake ELSA line management. Fixsen et al. (2013) suggests that coaches (in this case, SLT) should also be supported with manuals and materials to further support their understanding of the intervention being implemented and their role in coaching or managing practitioners. This corroborates findings and implications for practice outlined by

Fairall (2020) and indicates that, although ELSA managers' roles are outlined in the *Guidance for schools* document (Burton, 2009, p. 11), and they are invited to one day of the ELSA training, they may require more guidance around their roles. This could be supported through more specific resources relating to the ELSA project and their roles within it, as well as possible opportunities for coaching themselves as they undertake a new aspect of their job. This has the potential to further support SLT management of ELSAs and, in turn, implementation of the ELSA project.

5.2.5. Theme 5 – 'What if we didn't get that funding?'

'What if we didn't get that funding?' describes the financial factors relating to the ELSA project. Participants discussed finances with regards to limited school budgets and the impact this has on schools in terms of staffing and being able to train and employ ELSAs. In addition, the finances of EP services were discussed, particularly in the context of traded services needing to cover the costs of delivering ELSA training and supervision.

As with the leadership factors which have been discussed in previous sections, contextual and systemic influences feature throughout the IS literature (Bond et al., 2024; Durlak & DuPre, 2008; Fixsen et al., 2009; Fixsen & Blase, 2020; Moir, 2018), which indicates their importance in implementation. Greenhalgh et al. (2004) conceptualises these as *outer context* factors (e.g., sociopolitical climate, policies, and mandates) as discussed in *Multiple roles and minimal time*. In AIF (Fixsen & Blase, 2020)—and possibly as a means of responding to outer context factors—systems interventions are identified as strategies which enable leaders and staff to work with external systems to ensure sufficient availability of the financial, organisational and human resources required to support practitioners' work (Blase et al., 2012; Fixsen et al., 2009, 2015).

Specific systems interventions may involve leadership intervening to resolve system issues (e.g., meeting with directors or senior leaders); nurturing an interest in the intervention outside of the organisation; and creating optimism by communicating success (Fixsen et al., 2015; Greenhalgh et al., 2004). These interventions (and others more suited to individual contexts) aim to help inform and influence external systems, to support their increasing awareness of the impact of external factors on successful implementation, such as funding priorities or policy (Blase et al., 2012). Alignment of external systems so that they support practitioners' work is considered an important aspect of systems intervention; they should create a context that is generally supportive, and allows for effective services to be provided, maintained and improved over many years (Fixsen et al., 2015).

In the context of the ELSA project, external systems might include MAT, LA, regional and governmental systems, and changes in national policy or political climates may directly influence the needs and priorities of schools and EP services (Moir, 2018). Some of the changes which have occurred within these systems during the lifespan of the ELSA project include changes to the SEN Code of Practice (2015) and the introduction of education, health, and care plans (EHCPs; DfE, 2015) and changes in how EP services work, such as moving to traded service models (Atfield et al., 2023; Division of Educational and Child Psychology, 2018). More recently, difficulties recruiting and retaining school staff (DfE, 2024; Hall & Webster, 2023b; Sutton Trust, 2024); school budget and public sector cuts (Dunton, 2024; Whitaker, 2024); pressures on LA budgets (S. Davies et al., 2023); and recruitment and retention difficulties for EP services (Atfield et al., 2023), have become prominent issues. All of these problems are referred to by participants in the dataset, which possibly indicates the prevalence of these matters.

Whilst it may be difficult to intervene with funding decisions and budget cuts, Moir (2018) emphasises the need to work collaboratively across systems to ensure success. Further, Fixsen et al. (2015) suggests that the need for adaptive leadership—as discussed in *'They need to understand what I'm doing'*— never really ceases, in order to accommodate these wider, systemic changes. With this in mind, practical steps to respond to the difficulties identified by participants could include the sharing of information about the ELSA project with LA service managers, school and MAT leaders and SLT, and other services which potentially overlap with ELSA (e.g., MHSTs, as discussed in the literature review) so that a wider understanding of ELSA can be developed, and its recognition within school and LA services is supported.

5.2.6. Summary

In summary, the ELSA and EP perspectives presented in this discussion portray a range of experiences of the things that are helpful in supporting implementation of the ELSA project, and some which appear to hinder its implementation. Of the helpful experiences, the role of training was identified in supporting the development of ELSAs' knowledge and skills to undertake their ELSA roles, and the opportunity the training offers to be adapted to suit different contexts. These experiences seemed to relate to the *adaptability* and *compatibility* intervention characteristics identified by Durlak and DuPre (2008), and the *hard core, soft periphery* outlined by (Greenhalgh et al., 2004), which ensure that interventions can be adapted to suit different contexts, and in turn support ELSAs to transition from 'novices' to practitioners with expertise (Harvey & Kitson, 2015).

The role of supervision in terms of the practical and emotional support offered was highlighted as being particularly important to ELSAs, and as part of this, the development and role of peer supervision networks was recognised for the ongoing thread of support

they offer ELSAs between formal supervision sessions, and the potentially compensatory role they play in mitigating some of the challenges discussed below. The role of EPs within supervision aligns with the concept of *ongoing coaching and consultation* (Fixsen et al., 2009), which support ELSAs to refine and develop the skills and knowledge acquired during training, and receive advice regarding their ELSA practice. In addition, ELSAs' peer networks and communities seemed to be reflective of *communities of practice* (Wenger & Snyder, 2000) in terms of the peer support, skill development, and mentoring described as part of these groups.

There appeared to be mixed experiences of ELSA line management within schools. Some ELSAs and EPs identified supportive line managers and SLT as being helpful in supporting the understanding and implementation of the ELSA project. However, this seemed to be an inconsistent experience amongst participants, with some ELSAs indicating that they do not receive regular input from SLT to support them in their roles, possibly owing to a lack of understanding of the ELSA project. The concept of *adaptive and technical leadership* (Fixsen et al., 2009)—and the flexibility in who undertakes this role—appeared to reflect the roles ELSAs undertake in holding responsibility for the running of the ELSA project within their schools in lieu of consistent involvement from SLT, and/or the initiatives they take to participate in meetings with SLT to discuss CYPs' needs.

In contrast to the above factors, a number of challenges were discussed, including the demands placed on ELSAs in terms of their time and availability due to the additional roles they undertake within schools. Similarly, EPs shared the limited capacity they have in terms of increased demands on their services, which risks reducing the time and availability they have to run ELSA training and supervision. The concept of the *outer context* (Greenhalgh et al., 2004) helped to consider the influence that wider, systemic issues may

have on implementing the ELSA project. Finally, although not an easy or immediate solution, *systems interventions* (Fixsen et al., 2009; Fixsen & Blase, 2020) were explored in terms of the types of approaches which could be used to mitigate these challenges, including raising awareness of the ELSA project with other services, and with LA managers.

Whilst there is the temptation to develop a framework of best practice for ELSA implementation from these findings, it is important to consider them in the context of the present research, which understands these experiences to be reflective of individuals' experiences, and my interpretation of these experiences. Nevertheless, it may be considered that these findings provide an insight into some of the positive experiences that ELSAs and EPs may experience in implementing the ELSA project—alongside some of the challenges they could encounter—and highlight the role of IS in helping to understand the mechanisms which may help or hinder implementation. As such, it is hoped that these findings help others to reflect on some of the wider considerations they may need to make in planning and implementing the ELSA project. Further, is hoped that this will help to safeguard the sustainability of the ELSA project, and other initiatives, in ensuring CYPs' access to interventions that support SE development.

5.3. Methodological review

In this section, I review the methodology of this study, including research quality and limitations. I end this section by discussing the possible implications of this research for practice and future studies.

5.3.1. Research quality

Quality in research is important because it helps to address questions about what or how a study contributes to existing knowledge (Willig, 2008). In Chapter 3 (section 3.5), I used the quality strategies outlined in Braun and Clarke (2022b, pp. 268–277) to guide my

research design. To evaluate the quality of this study in its entirety, I use the flexible quality principles outlined by Yardley (2000, 2017): sensitivity to context; commitment and rigour; transparency and coherence; impact and importance.

This research sought to address the research question: *What can we learn about ELSA project implementation from the experiences of ELSAs and EPs?* from a critical realist perspective. This considers that although knowledge of ELSA project implementation may be developed, it cannot be known in its entirety, and may be experienced differently by different people in different contexts.

Participants' perspectives were central to this research, and I consider the decisions I have made around this study's theoretical underpinnings and my role as researcher within the study to have supported my *sensitivity to their context* and individual views (as reported in section 3.3). The choice of RTA required me to be an active, reflexive researcher, and to consider how my values, experiences, decisions, and interpretations shaped the research. Semi-structured interviews gathered participants' unique views and perspectives, and orthographic transcription helped to preserve their stories as I moved through the analysis. Immersion in my dataset supported me to develop a familiarity with the experiences and people it represented, and to interpret and analyse these as authentically as possible.

As a novice researcher striving to produce quality research, I made the *commitment* to spend considerable time engaging with both the theoretical and methodological choices made within this study, to ensure theoretical coherence (as discussed in section 3.3). I consider the choice of a narrative literature review to have supported my in-depth engagement with the psychological theory and literature underpinning the rationale for this study. Drawing on guidance, best practice examples of

RTA (Braun & Clarke, 2022b; D. Byrne, 2022; Trainor & Bundon, 2021), and RTA reporting guidelines (Braun & Clarke, 2024a, 2024b) has helped me to learn and develop my skills in using this approach to thematic analysis, and to engage more deeply in my dataset by continually reviewing and refining my analysis. I consider this to have supported a *rigorous* analysis of the generated dataset.

Wherever possible, I have sought to present a *transparent* and *coherent* account of my research by making links between its critical realist position, my position as researcher within this study (as outlined in section 3.3) and how this has informed my choices and interpretation during the research process. This has been supported by clear descriptions relating to my decisions and the approaches used, and maintaining an ongoing audit trail (see Appendices).

Finally, the initial aim of this study has been to understand how the ELSA project—as an initiative which is used widely by EP services in the UK—runs. It is hoped that the *impact* of this will be to contribute towards its sustainability and longevity, and in turn, enable CYPs' access to early intervention and support with SE development. Further, I consider the study to have highlighted the *importance* of understanding how implementation science may be more widely incorporated into EP practice and education. These aspects are discussed further in sections 5.4 and 5.5.

5.3.2. Data generation

This study's dataset was generated through online, semi-structured interviews. Whilst the literature suggested that online interviews risked some limitations in terms of reduced visibility of facial expressions and body language, and limitations in terms of access to technology (Almujlli et al., 2022; L. Gray et al., 2020; Saarijärvi & Bratt, 2021), my interactions with participants felt natural, possibly because of the increased use of video

conferencing in recent years (Almujlli et al., 2022). In addition, the online nature of the interviews allowed for participants to be interviewed across the England, without the need to travel long distances, and it appeared that the flexible nature of online interviews meant that participants could attend as their schedules allowed, for example, at the end of their working day; on their day off, etc. I consider these benefits to have outweighed the potential limitations of online interviews.

As discussed in section 3.7.4, the questions asked during the interviews evolved as the data generation process progressed (e.g., asking *how* rather than *why* participants trained to become ELSAs). Although this meant that some participants were asked slightly different questions to others, the practice of reflexivity ensured that I was able to consider why the questions might be evolving (e.g., because the answers people gave provided a different perspective to the assumption I had originally held), and how to respond to this phenomenon. I decided, therefore, to alter the questions to more closely reflect the experiences participants were reflecting in their responses. As a result, I seemed to generate a wider range of perspectives, stories, and journeys about participants' experiences of the ELSA project. I consider this approach to the interviews to have added to the richness of my data, and to be in keeping with the experiential position of this study (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 164).

5.3.3. Limitations and considerations

Despite my commitment to research quality throughout this study, I have identified some limitations to the research presented. I explore these limitations below.

5.3.3.1. Recruitment

This research aimed to understand the perspectives of key stakeholders involved in the ELSA research project including ELSAs, EPs, and ELSA line managers; however, during

the recruitment process it proved difficult to identify and recruit ELSA line managers. This may, in part, be due to the approach to recruitment, which was largely centred on EPs and ELSAs via EP services and the ELSA area directory. Whilst I also attempted to recruit via the ELSAs who had expressed an interest in participating, this proved unsuccessful (and possibly links with some of the discussed findings). Although this research highlights ELSA and EP experiences, it should be considered that the inclusion of ELSA managers may have resulted in different findings.

Four ELSAs were recruited to participate in this study, which exceeded the minimum number sought (see section 3.7.2), however, as seven EPs participated, it is noted that the ELSA–EP balance was skewed towards the EPs, which risked privileging EP voices over those of ELSAs. This appears, in part, due to recruitment via gatekeepers (EPs, and EP services via the ELSA area directory); however, ELSA availability also seemed to contribute to this – a number of ELSAs expressed an interest in participating but were ultimately unavailable to partake in interviews. It may also be considered that the timing of ELSA recruitment—primarily from October half term to the Christmas break—may have contributed to recruitment difficulties, potentially owing to activities and events taking place within schools at this time. Future studies could possibly mitigate this by recruiting at a different time of year, or recruiting with more notice (e.g., recruiting in the summer term, for interviews in the autumn term).

5.3.3.2. Perspectives

I initially sought the experiences of stakeholders who had had difficult or negative experiences of the ELSA project, as well as those who had experienced maintaining the running of the ELSA project within their schools or EP services. However, it was difficult to find participants with these experiences. This was possibly due to the recruitment

approaches discussed above, alongside it being difficult to know where or how to find those who may have stopped running the ELSA project. It is, therefore, unclear as to whether similar or different experiences occur within in these contexts, and in turn, how these factors may affect implementation.

The study recruited participants from across England, to achieve a wide range of experiences. In the present research, four out of seven of the EPs were from one EP service. Whilst the interview process was designed to allow for individual perspectives, it should be noted that recruitment from one service risked only presenting one 'view' or angle of experiences relating to how the ELSA project is delivered. Nevertheless, I consider the transparent reporting of participant information (see sections 3.7.3 and 4.2) to have helped highlight this aspect of the present research.

5.4. Distinctive contribution

Much of the research discussed in the literature review focuses on stakeholders' experiences of the ELSA project or its efficacy, but few studies focus on how the ELSA project runs. Further, of the IS literature discussed in relation to education, the majority focuses on the implementation of whole-school interventions or initiatives, but very little relates to targeted interventions (Bond et al., 2024; Evans & Bond, 2021), even though these form part of the graduated response outlined by NICE (2022). The aim of this research was to bridge this gap by contributing to the body of research relating to the ELSA project and expanding our understanding of the factors relating to ELSA implementation.

Most of the previous studies relating to ELSA project implementation have centred on participants based within individual schools (Fairall, 2020; King, 2020; Nicholson-Roberts, 2019), whilst Robertson (2021) appears to have recruited ELSAs from different schools but within one region. The participant group in the present research were recruited

from across England, therefore, this study seems to be the first to consider the views of ELSAs and EPs within a larger participant group, and from different regions.

In the context of IS, whilst prior ELSA research has referred to aspects of IS, including facilitators and barriers (King, 2020; Nicholson-Roberts, 2019); implementation planning and intervention fidelity (Fairall, 2020); and communities of practice (Robertson, 2021), this study appears to be the first to be underpinned by IS in terms of the research rationale, data generation, and the theories and literature drawn upon to interpret the findings. As such, I consider this study to provide a different context in which to explore the ELSA project, and to potentially extend the view to incorporating implementation science more explicitly or centrally into educational psychology research.

5.5. Implications of findings

As mentioned in the methodological review (section 5.3) considering the importance and implications of research helps to inform how new studies contribute to existing knowledge. A number of implications have been highlighted in this study relating to how the ELSA project may run in schools, and the impact these may have on the effective and sustainable implementation of the ELSA project. In this section, therefore, I explore the implications of this study in relation to school and EP practice, and future research.

5.5.1. Implications for schools

A key finding of this research has been that of the numerous roles ELSAs may hold in schools alongside their ELSA positions. This finding highlights the importance for schools to consider, where possible, the number of additional responsibilities ELSAs may be asked to undertake, and how these are factored into their timetables. For example, allowing sufficient time, alongside classroom cover, for ELSAs to complete ELSA sessions and their

associated administration. In addition, where ELSAs hold safeguarding roles, considering the opportunities they have for peer support within school to manage the potential emotional demands of these roles alongside their ELSA work.

A further consideration for schools may be in how ELSAs are supported through line management. Whilst the findings indicate that some ELSAs work closely with their line managers and/or other SLT, these experiences were varied. The concept of shared or adaptive leadership—as discussed in section 5.2.4—could potentially be employed within schools, so that line management responsibilities are planned and shared. This may help to mitigate any challenges related to SLT workload and capacity, as well as allow for ELSAs to be integrated into a team alongside other key stakeholders or SLT in schools. In turn, the opportunity could be provided for ELSAs to keep SLT up to date on their work, and contribute to their wider knowledge of the ELSA project amongst SLT, so that potential issues relating to workload and capacity may be more easily understood.

5.5.2. Implications for EP practice

This study highlighted several implications for EP services in running the ELSA project, as well as for EP practice more generally. I discuss these implications below.

5.5.2.1. ELSA training

The findings highlight the potential benefits of being able to adapt the training content to make it compatible with ELSAs' contexts, which suggests that regularly updating the training materials ensures ELSAs have access to relevant and contemporary knowledge and research. Where EP services may not regularly update their training materials, this indicates that it could be beneficial to factor in time to review them between ELSA training cohorts.

Whilst the findings suggest that the adaptability of the training supports implementation, it raises considerations around how ELSAs are trained between different LAs. It may, therefore, be beneficial for EP ELSA leads in different LAs to review their individual training programmes together, to ensure they cohere with the original intention of the ELSA project, and to provide an overview of how the training has evolved. If appropriate, this could also support revision of the main ELSA training materials to be reflective of what EP services consider to be important and relevant to their schools, settings, and communities.

5.5.2.2. ELSA supervision

The findings highlighted ELSAs' perspectives on supervision, and how this provides containment and practical support, but also the opportunity for peer support. This was identified by the majority of participants, and the conceptualisation of this as communities of practice highlights the important lifeline that peer support groups offer ELSAs between supervision sessions. EPs may, therefore, wish to consider how peer support networks may be further fostered. For example, allowing sufficient time within supervision for 'free talk'; offering to establish social media groups; providing avenues to share resources, etc.

Within formal supervision, the findings indicate that ELSAs prefer a flexible structure to sessions, which adapts to their needs and preferences, as required. Where possible, it may be beneficial for EPs to provide opportunities for ELSAs to feedback on, or evaluate supervision to ensure it continues to meet their needs.

The findings indicated that ELSAs may have variable experiences of line management. This is also reflected in previous research (Fairall, 2020). EP services may wish to consider how to support line managers' knowledge of—and engagement with—the ELSA project. For example, offering information sessions prior to training new cohorts,

alongside inviting them to attend the managers' day, or by drawing on the IS literature relating to organisational readiness for change (Weiner, 2009) to support schools in being able to accommodate the ELSA project, prior to training ELSAs.

5.5.2.3. Implementing implementation science

Throughout this research, I have discovered that the field of implementation science is particularly broad and complex, but I also think its wider incorporation into educational psychology has the potential to underpin and ensure efficacy and sustainability across our work (Gaias et al., 2023). EPs may be considered as both implementation practitioners and researchers (Leppin et al., 2021), and the scope of IS in EP work could include: the planning, implementing, evaluating, adapting, and sustaining of interventions; considering the 'what, who, and how' (Wilson & Kislov, 2022) in systemic work; and supporting changes to EP service delivery (Chidley & Stringer, 2020). However, knowing where to start in implementing IS is perhaps an overwhelming prospect. Gaias et al. (2023, p. 207) suggest beginning with an understanding of researchers' 'knowledge, use, and interest' of IS constructs, and Schultes et al. (2021) outline a competency profile to identify practitioners' knowledge and skills. Both Schultes et al. (2021) and Gaias et al. (2023) suggest that IS skill and knowledge development could be supported through its incorporation into researcher and practitioner training. Whilst 'intervention and evaluation' are identified as core competencies in trainee EP training (BPS, 2023, p. 22), it may be suggested that more explicit inclusion of IS into trainee EP programmes could help to begin embedding this field of research into EP practice.

5.5.3. Implications for future research

The present research aimed to include the perspectives of three key stakeholders involved in the ELSA project – ELSAs, ELSA line managers, and EPs; however, as discussed in

section 5.3.2, ELSA managers were not recruited. Further research, therefore, could extend the present study by including ELSA line managers, and wider LA stakeholders. In addition, it may be beneficial to extend the research into other educational settings (e.g., secondary, special schools, and alternative provisions) to explore any similarities or differences in implementation.

With section 5.5.3 in mind, future research into IS in the context of EP services may be beneficial to the EP practice as a whole. This could involve exploring EPs' IS knowledge and skills (Gaias et al., 2023), and how IS may be used by EP services.

Finally, although the theoretical positioning of this study is integral to the research design, this position only presents one perspective of IS. Future studies, therefore, may wish to draw on different theoretical positions, which could provide different perspectives on implementation, as identified by Wilson and Kislov (2022, pp. 21–23).

5.6. Chapter summary

This chapter presented an analysis of the findings in relation to relevant psychological theory and literature, and provided a methodological review of the study, including discussion around identified limitations. Finally, implications for practice were discussed, in the context of schools, EP practice, and consideration for future research.

Chapter 6 – Conclusion

The ELSA project has been established and delivered by EPs across the UK over the past two decades, and a small but growing body of literature indicates that ELSA sessions help to support CYPs' SE development through individual and group interventions. However, less is understood about the factors that help the ELSA project to run. Further, in the wider field of IS, few studies have focused on targeted interventions in education. This study, therefore, sought to explore the factors relating to ELSA project implementation by addressing the following research question: *What can we learn about ELSA project implementation from the experiences of ELSAs and EPs?*

This study adopted a critical realist ontology and a subjectivist epistemology. Semi-structured interviews were held with four ELSAs and seven EPs, and reflexive thematic analysis generated five themes and four subthemes relating to: training, supervision, peer connections, workload and capacity, variable managerial involvement, and the impact of wider, systemic issues such as funding. Following analysis in relation to relevant psychological theory and literature, the findings of this study indicate that:

1. ELSA training supports ELSAs to expand on their existing skills and develop knowledge relating to psychological theory. Further, the flexibility and adaptability of the ELSA training resources allows for their compatibility with ELSAs' different contexts.
2. Both ELSAs and EPs experience limitations in terms of having the capacity and availability to deliver the ELSA project. This was attributed to ELSAs' multiple roles within schools, and an increase in demand on EP services, respectively.
3. ELSA supervision offers both practical and emotional support to ELSAs, and the balance of structure and flexibility appears to allow for a combination of learning and structured problem solving, along with opportunities to share resources, ideas, and

concerns with one another. Beyond supervision, however, ELSAs develop their own peer networks, which act as a lifeline between formal supervision, and take on the role of communities of practice in providing knowledge, problem solving, and support.

4. ELSAs reported having mixed experiences of line management within their schools; however, to mitigate this, ELSAs appear to undertake adaptive leadership roles in either manging the running of the ELSA project themselves, or initiating their involvement in meetings with SLT.
5. 'Outer context' or systemic factors including financial constraints, staffing concerns, and limited capacity appear to impact both ELSAs and EPs, and risk the sustainability of the ELSA project. This includes EPs' potential capacity to sustain delivering ELSA training and supervision, and whether schools can continue to fund ELSA roles longer-term. These issues are difficult to resolve easily, but exploration of systems interventions such as raising wider awareness of the ELSA project and its potential benefits with LA service managers could help to mitigate some of these challenges.

Overall and despite some limitations in terms of participant recruitment, this study has highlighted some of the factors that contribute to implementation of the ELSA project, along with some potential challenges, and contributes a unique perspective to the body of ELSA research, through a foundation of IS. Further, this research highlights the importance of incorporating IS into EP practice to support the efficacy and sustainability of both the ELSA project, and wider EP work. Owing to the small body of implementation literature relating to ELSA practice, it is suggested that future research expands on this study by exploring ELSA implementation across different educational settings and incorporating a wider range of stakeholders, to gradually build up a picture of implementation best practice, and to ensure the continuing availability of support for CYPs' SE development.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 – Ethical approval letter

School of Psychology
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SJ/tp

Ref: S1525

Thursday 1st June 2023

Dear Eloise Dalby & Russell Hounslow

Ethics Committee Review

Thank you for submitting an account of your proposed research 'What helps and hinders the implementation of ELSA in primary schools?'

That proposal has now been reviewed and we are pleased to tell you it has met with the Committee's approval.

However:
Please note the following comments from our reviewers.

Reviewer One:

- There is little information on how your interviews will be recorded and the process of safe transition from the recording device to electronic storage of audio/video and transcript data.
- If using a portal audio recorder - ensure it is password protected and upload the audio recording to a GDPR compliant university storage system as soon as possible after the interview and immediately delete from the recorder after it is uploaded.
- If holding interviews online, ensure you record using a GDPR compliant application and delete the audio/video recording as soon as the interview transcript has been created or corrected.
- Ensure all interview transcripts are stored securely on a GDPR compliant university storage system.
- You state that participants will be given a 1-month timeline for withdrawal, but this timeline is not explained in your information or consent forms.
- "I give permission for the written transcript of my interviews from this study to be shared with other researchers provided that my anonymity is completely protected." This statement on the consent form was likely written for statistical studies where anonymization is potentially easier. I would suggest that you explain processes you will take to ensure confidentiality but acknowledge there is a possibility that others may identify them if they have shared these experiences (but reassure on the small/unlikely possibility of it).
- If you will make the data publicly available (through online scientific data repositories) for journal or thesis requirements make this known to participants in the information sheet and seek their consent to share their data.

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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 2 – Participant recruitment poster

What helps and hinders the implementation of ELSA? Research project.

You are invited to participate in a research project relating to the implementation of the Emotional Literacy Support Assistant (ELSA) programme in primary schools. The research seeks to contribute to the growing body of research around ELSA, by exploring what helps and hinders the implementation of ELSA in schools from a range of different perspectives.

Who can take part?

I am looking for participants who have experience of ELSA, including:

- ELSAs working within primary schools.
- School staff who supervise or manage ELSAs (e.g., SENDCos, pastoral leads, etc.)
- Educational psychologists who deliver ELSA training or supervise ELSA groups.

What will happen?

Participants will be asked to take part in an interview around their experiences of ELSA, either in-person or virtually via MS Teams. The interview will involve questions relating to implementation science, with a focus on the adults who are involved in implementing ELSA in schools; the training and understanding stakeholders have of ELSA; how key stakeholders are supported; and how the impact of ELSA is evaluated.

If you would like further information, or would like to be involved, please email:

eloise.dalby@nottingham.ac.uk

[ethics approval number: S1525]

Appendix 3 – Participant information sheet

Standard Information Sheet Version 1 2015

School of Psychology
Information Sheet

Title of Project: **What helps and hinders the implementation of ELSA?**

Ethics Approval Number: S1525

Researchers: Eloise Dalby – *eloise.dalby@nottingham.ac.uk*

Supervisors: Dr Russell Hounslow – *russell.hounslow@nottingham.ac.uk*

This is an invitation to take part in a research study on the implementation of the Emotional Literacy Support Assistant (ELSA) programme.

Before you decide if you want to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully.

What is this study about and who will it help?

The study is about ELSA. The ELSA programme has been run for several years, and there has been a lot of research about its impact, but there is very little research into what helps ELSA to run in schools. The present research aims to establish what helps and hinders the implementation of ELSA, to further support the use of ELSA in schools.

Why am I being asked to take part?

You are being asked to take part because you are an ELSA, you manage ELSAs in your setting, or you are an educational psychologist who trains and supervises ELSAs. Your roles are considered to be important in the research because you are likely to have unique experiences and perspectives on implementing ELSA in schools.

What does taking part involve?

If you participate, you will be invited to attend an interview with the researcher (in-person or online). The interview will ask questions about your experiences of ELSA, particularly the things that have helped or not helped implement ELSA. The whole procedure will last approximately one hour.

Do I have to take part?

Participation in this study is totally voluntary and you are under no obligation to take part. If you have any questions about your participation, I can be contacted at the below email address.

What will happen to the information I provide?

The interview will be recorded for the purpose of the research analysis, but any identifying information will be anonymised. All data collected will be kept confidential and used for research purposes only. It will be stored in compliance with the Data Protection Act.

What if I change my mind?

You are free to withdraw at any point before or during the study, by contacting eloise.dalby@nottingham.ac.uk. If you choose to withdraw from the study, any data you provided will be deleted and will not be included in the final study.

What if I have any questions?

If you have any questions or concerns please do not hesitate to ask. I can also be contacted at the below email address:

- eloise.dalby@nottingham.ac.uk

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

Privacy information for Research Participants

For information about the University's obligations with respect to your data, who you can get in touch with and your rights as a data subject, please visit: www.nottingham.ac.uk/utilities/privacy/privacy.aspx.

Why we collect your personal data

We collect personal data under the terms of the University's Royal Charter in our capacity as a teaching and research body to advance education and learning. Specific

Appendix 4 – Participant consent form

School of Psychology
Consent Form

Title of Project: **What Helps and Hinders the Implementation of ELSA?**

Ethics Approval Number: S1525

Researcher: Eloise Dalby – eloise.dalbynottingham.ac.uk

Supervisor: Russell Hounslow – russell.hounslow@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)
- 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 they have agreed to take part.

Signature of researcher: Date:

Privacy information for Research Participants

For information about the University's obligations with respect to your data, who you can get in touch with and your rights as a data subject, please visit: www.nottingham.ac.uk/utilities/privacy/privacy.aspx.

Appendix 5 – Overview of semi-structured interviews

Eloise Dalby – Thesis semi-structured interview guide

What helps and hinders the implementation of ELSA in primary schools?

Based on the Implementation Components Framework (Fixen et al., 2009)

- Staff selection
- Pre-service training
- Consultation and coaching (supervision)
- Staff performance evaluation
- Data systems/facilitative or administrative support/systems interventions (external forces)

Questions for ELSAs

- What made you want to become an ELSA?
- How did the training you receive help your role?
- What access do you have to supervision in your role?
- How is your role evaluated?
- What external factors impact on your role (e.g., within the MAT, LA, government, etc.)?

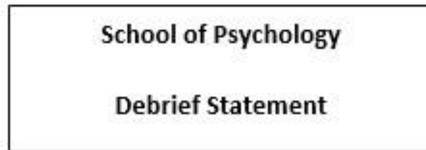
Questions for school leadership staff

- What helps you to choose staff for the ELSA role?
- What access to training or information on ELSA have you had?
- How do you supervise or manage ELSAs?
- How is ELSA within your school evaluated?
- What external factors impact on your role (e.g., within the MAT, LA, government, etc.)?

Questions for educational psychologists

- What qualities do ELSAs have?
- How does ELSA training support the ELSA role?
- How do you supervise ELSAs? What supervision do you receive in this role?
- How is the impact of ELSAs/ELSA training evaluated?
- What external factors impact on ELSAs/the training of ELSAs?

Appendix 6 – Participant debrief sheet



Dear Participant,

Thank you for taking part in the research on ELSA implementation – your contributions are greatly appreciated.

Your data will now be transcribed for analysis, and all recorded interviews will be deleted. The analysed data will be written up and discussed to inform the overall findings of the research, and to contribute to the final thesis.

Should you wish to withdraw from the study, or raise a concern about your participation in the research, please find below my contact details, and those of Stephen Jackson, the Chair of Ethics Committee at the University of Nottingham:

- Researcher (Eloise Dalby): eloise.Dalby@nottingham.ac.uk
- Chair of Ethics Committee (Stephen Jackson): stephen.jackson@nottingham.ac.uk

Should any of the discussions taking part today have caused upset or distress, please see below for details of the support available to you:

- Contact with your line manager or a trusted colleague.
- Contact with your link Educational Psychologist
- Employee wellbeing services which may be accessible through your organisation's HR department.

Further support is also available through NHS and mental health charity services. Please see:

- NHS Every Mind Matters – https://www.nhs.uk/every-mind-matters/
- Mind – https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/
- NHS Talking Therapies – https://www.nhs.uk/service-search/mental-health/find-an-NHS-talking-therapies-service/

Appendix 7 – Phase 1: Initial familiarisation notes

Eloise's Notebook | Quick Notes | Interesting Things | Thesis | ARM | Misc_ | Placeme

Phase 1 reflections

03 March 2024 16:01

Coming up: "time, resources, capacity". Also money. Subsidy through LA helps schools' access to LA? Does it also undermine their understanding - 'abuse' of access to training for staff who don't intend to be ELSAs?

The duality of ELSAs' roles. All of the ELSAs spoken to hold more than one additional role to their ELSA role (e.g., HLTA, safeguarding, behaviour, etc.)

Trying not to leap ahead and be distracted by these thoughts. Feel as though transcribing is evolving as I do it. How to reflect the sounds people make when talking - "prrrrhhh". "der-de-der". How to use punctuation to reflect when they interrupt themselves? And different accents, phrasing, and dialect. How to do people's voices justice - trying not to correct grammar or look as though I am being derogatory in any way ('dumbing down' speech). Possibly being defensive of my regional dialect and accent?

Sustainability/vulnerability of ELSAs' roles - two ELSAs mention discussions about how their roles will be funded going forward.

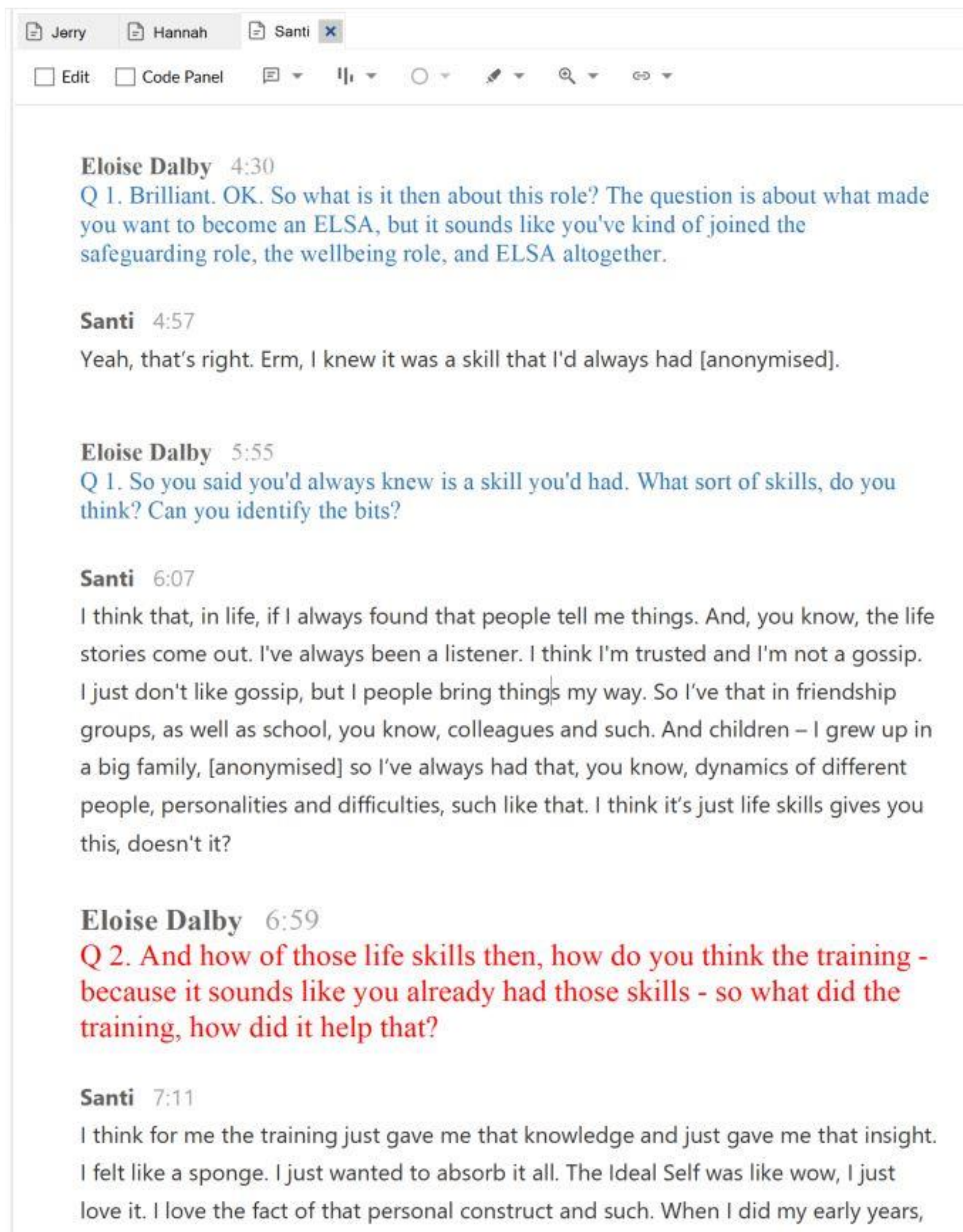
The role of assistant EPs in supporting ELSA training to run within the LA. Help with administration and booking.

Videos helping to be back 'in the moment'. Feel as though I am connecting more with them because I can see the participants (and myself)? Does this replace the perceived lack of connection through online interviews?

"So, who does what and how does it all fit together?" - Jerry. The essence of implementation science?!

The last interview feels more fluent than the earlier ones. I left enough time for pauses. It is also the longest. Concerned I may not have given the first few interviews sufficient time - perhaps this is reflective of my own journey as an inexperienced qualitative researcher. The last interview took place at the end of term - did I give it more time because I knew they were less busy? Was I overly cautious in keeping the earlier ones to time? Balance between my data quality and the demands on very busy participants. Interviewing not dissimilar to consultation skills?

Appendix 8 – Phase 1: Example of interview transcription


Jerry | Hannah | Santi

Edit | Code Panel

Eloise Dalby 4:30
Q 1. Brilliant. OK. So what is it then about this role? The question is about what made you want to become an ELSA, but it sounds like you've kind of joined the safeguarding role, the wellbeing role, and ELSA altogether.

Santi 4:57
Yeah, that's right. Erm, I knew it was a skill that I'd always had [anonymised].

Eloise Dalby 5:55
Q 1. So you said you'd always knew is a skill you'd had. What sort of skills, do you think? Can you identify the bits?

Santi 6:07
I think that, in life, if I always found that people tell me things. And, you know, the life stories come out. I've always been a listener. I think I'm trusted and I'm not a gossip. I just don't like gossip, but I people bring things my way. So I've that in friendship groups, as well as school, you know, colleagues and such. And children – I grew up in a big family, [anonymised] so I've always had that, you know, dynamics of different people, personalities and difficulties, such like that. I think it's just life skills gives you this, doesn't it?

Eloise Dalby 6:59
Q 2. And how of those life skills then, how do you think the training - because it sounds like you already had those skills - so what did the training, how did it help that?

Santi 7:11
I think for me the training just gave me that knowledge and just gave me that insight. I felt like a sponge. I just wanted to absorb it all. The Ideal Self was like wow, I just love it. I love the fact of that personal construct and such. When I did my early years,

Appendix 9 – Phase 1: Transcript familiarisation notes

Jerry 35:49

Yeah, I hope it does. And I don't know if there could be more of that within the content – some of it feels a bit old fashioned at times, in how we describe need. Or whether we should be describing need with ELSA, or just kind of describing responses and things that you might see in school.

Eloise Dalby 36:19

Q2. Which bits of it do you think feel old fashioned?

Jerry 36:22

Erm, content around social skills. I don't know as well, I delivered a different day last time and it just felt a bit old. Erm, I can't remember what day it was, it might have been day one. It was day one, talking about, like the content around emotional literacy. That shouldn't feel old fashioned, should it? It's literally the basis of the whole thing. But just some of the research was quite old. And not that the concepts were inappropriate or have changed significantly, but I think there's more relevant stuff. And I haven't seen -- I'm not too sure how much you're supposed to adapt to the content, but I have adapted day 2 a bit, so I can't remember what's originally there, but how they talk about adversity, at times, might've felt a little different to how I would want to talk about it.

Eloise Dalby 37:43

Annotations

Item	Content
1	If the ELSA training is flexible, and the content of the training is flexible, what actually is ELSA?
2	We need a baseline of attunement, etc. across all staff to support universal access, for ELSA to then be targeted.

Appendix 10 – Phase 2: Sample coding

trained to be ELSA.

Maria 4:11

Yes, it does. Yeah, I find that quite interesting myself, because I think it's a job where you've got to want to do it. So I used to be a solicitor, and I've always, always wanted to work with kids. And it was the kids who I would want to help were always the ones who were – for want of a better word – they were a bit naughty, they were the destructive ones; they're the one, and I just wanted to help them. So, I had the opportunity to work at a school. I took up an early years educator course – I thought, "ohh this could be an opportunity to get into education – perhaps this is the route I want to go. Then they mentioned ELSA, and I thought, "Oh my goodness, what is that? Brilliant!" And so my only speeding ticket I ever got was to attend the ELSA course.

Eloise Dalby 7:16

Ohh wow, so you hadn't heard about ELSA before you'd heard about it?

Maria 7:28

No, never heard of it, no! Yeah, as soon as I heard about it, I thought – I suppose in short, I could have done with it when I was at school. And so, and I've always had a sort of, erm, I don't know, a motivation, or a want, or something to help the kids who are perhaps struggling in some way, whatever it is. Whether it's socially, whether it's to regulate, whether it's parental split, just at that pastoral side. I've always, always had a want to help with that.

Eloise Dalby 8:10

Q1. Is there a specific part when you when someone told you about it? I don't how much of, a kind of insight, did you have of it before?

CODE STRIPES

- EPs consider the logistics of training and supervision for ELSA
- ELSA training empowers ELSAs
- ELSA is misunderstood or not known
- ELSA training is a shared experience
- EP role in ELSA supervision
- ELSAs are creative - adaptable - resourceful
- ELSA needs to complement other approaches MHST
- ELSAs are keen to learn
- ELSA overlooks universal access to attuned adults
- Parents want ELSA for their children
- ELSAs are part of the community
- ELSA management requires good managerial involvement - attunement
- ELSAs can be lonely - stressful - overwhelming - hard
- ELSAs don't all stay as ELSAs
- ELSAs come from a range of different roles
- ELSA supervision is not enough
- ELSAs are self-motivated - assertive - advocate for themselves
- ELSA is evaluated using a range of approaches
- ELSA training adds knowledge and skills to existing personal qualities
- ELSAs need time to practice
- ELSAs take on a range of responsibility
- ELSAs connect with each other using different methods
- ELSAs connect with each other using different methods
- ELSA supervision
- ELSAs are attuned to children
- ELSAs link in with parents
- ELSAs link in with parents
- ELSA has to compete with other demands in schools
- Schools' culture and ethos needs to align with ELSA
- School budgets are stretched OR struggle to fund ELSAs
- ELSA rooms

Coding Density

Appendix 11 – Phase 2: Code generation

Codes

Name	Files	References
Assistant EPs support ELSA delivery	5	24
Conferences connect ELSAs	3	9
Demand for ELSa is increasing	5	10
ELSA EPs can access supervision	1	2
ELSA has to compete with other demands in schools	10	28
ELSA is a preventative measure - systemic	3	5
ELSA is a priority for LAs	4	9
ELSA is evaluated using a range of approaches	9	30
ELSA is misunderstood or not known	11	28
ELSA is vulnerable to other demands on EPs	7	31
ELSA is widely known	5	13
ELSA management requires managerial involvement - attunement	10	24
ELSA needs to complement other approaches MHST	5	10
ELSA overlooks universal access to attuned adults	3	5
ELSA programme is unique	5	9
ELSA rooms	8	19
ELSA supervision	11	69
ELSA supervision is not enough	3	4
ELSA training adds knowledge and skills to existing personal qualities	11	40
ELSA training empowers ELSAs	7	14
ELSA training is a shared experience	6	8
ELSA training is better than doing other EP jobs	1	1
ELSA training is dense	1	1
ELSA training is flexible	5	28
ELSA training is in demand	3	4
ELSA training is used by schools as CPD	2	2
ELSA training materials are evolving	6	17
ELSA training needs to be ecologically valid	1	3
ELSA training requires EPs' interest	5	11
ELSAs and EPs share resources	5	5
ELSAs are attuned to children	11	32
ELSAs are creative - adaptable	7	16

Appendix 12 – Phase 3: Initial candidate themes

ise's Notebook ⌄   Quick Notes   Interesting Things   Thesis   ARM   Misc_

Phase 3 - candidate themes

26 March 2024   20:10

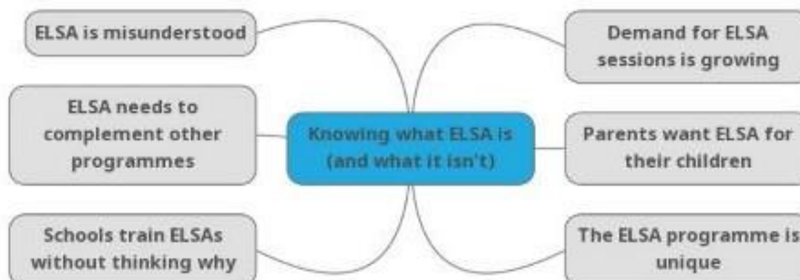
Codes clustered into groups they seem to align with. Some don't align with any - spent a long time staring at them (are they not useful or need re-coding?) then put in separate folder 'for later' as per suggestion in book. Feeling easier to move forward with this now as an option - I seemed to be holding onto some of them because they were interesting, or I liked them, or I liked that bit of the interview - but not necessarily because they were meaningful to the data set. I will have a 'cooling off' period and see how I go!

Initial candidate themes developed but they still feel quite messy. Tried to map them out but they don't work - too straggly or jumbled. When I've compared the codes to the data, they don't quite fit. I think I need to recode them. I think I am still doing as before - holding onto them because they are there, and not being flexible enough to see them another way around.

Working systemically
ELSA as part of the graduated response
ELSA evaluation?
ANSWER THE QUESTION!

Rip it up and start again... Phase 3 not working out quite right. Codes too jumbled up somehow. Better to separate out - keeping in mind 1) what helps and 2) what hinders, rather than combining together?

HELPS. HINDERS. Kept in mind. Post-its on monitor. Literally asked myself out loud. Reorganised candidate themes again. Shuffled some codes around. Renamed some. Understanding the fluidity between the phases now. Also, the idea of being lost - very lost! Starting to see the summit? (of this bit). Candidate themes mapped out and fitting a little better. Haven't actually kept them in separate groups now, but it seems to have helped me keep in mind the 'story'.



Appendix 13 – Phase 3: Further candidate themes

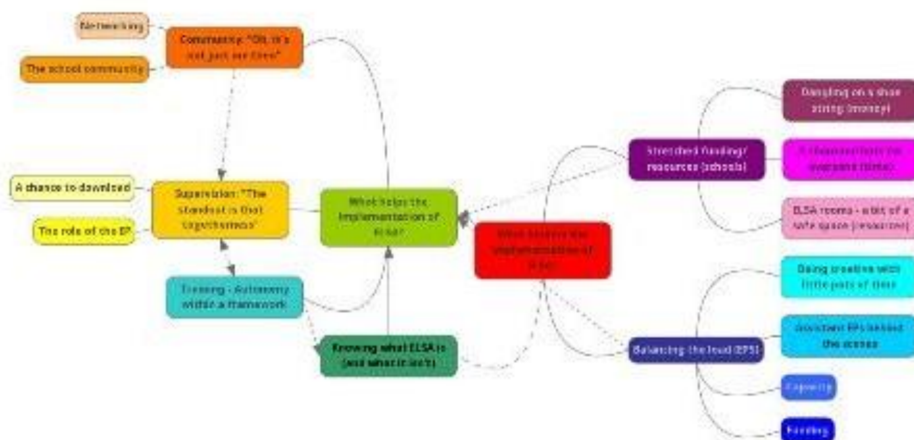
oise's Notebook | Quick Notes | Interesting Things | Thesis | ARN

Phase 3 continued

27 March 2024 18:00

Still some parts I'm unsure of. Personal qualities seem really important (and fit with CIC) but don't fit as a candidate theme? Split them up and associate with others? E.g. creativity -> resourceful > fit with resources? Maybe they will help show links in phase 4 if they are redistributed?

Mind mapping seems to be working out better than looking at words. Have set out the candidate themes and patched the research questions back in. B&C book advises against this as it risks constraining noticing or exploring patterns. However, as overall research question(s) is quite broad, and my questions within that have been loose (e.g., helpful? Hinderance?) this feels okay. If anything, reassuring to feel like I might be getting somewhere. More refinement needed, but I think the potential themes can stand by themselves with a bit more adjustment.



I need to be careful around community/supervision/training, because the three can crossover. ELSAs access community AS PART of training, and AS PART of supervision, but supervision works towards the guidance/support/CPD aspect, whereas community is the connection/sharing/networking/minimising loneliness. More work to do on this. Aim to consider B&C questions?

- Does this provisional theme capture something meaningful? *Left side more than right.*
- Is it coherent, with a central idea that meshes the data and codes together?
- Does it have clear boundaries? <- *I need to look further at this one*

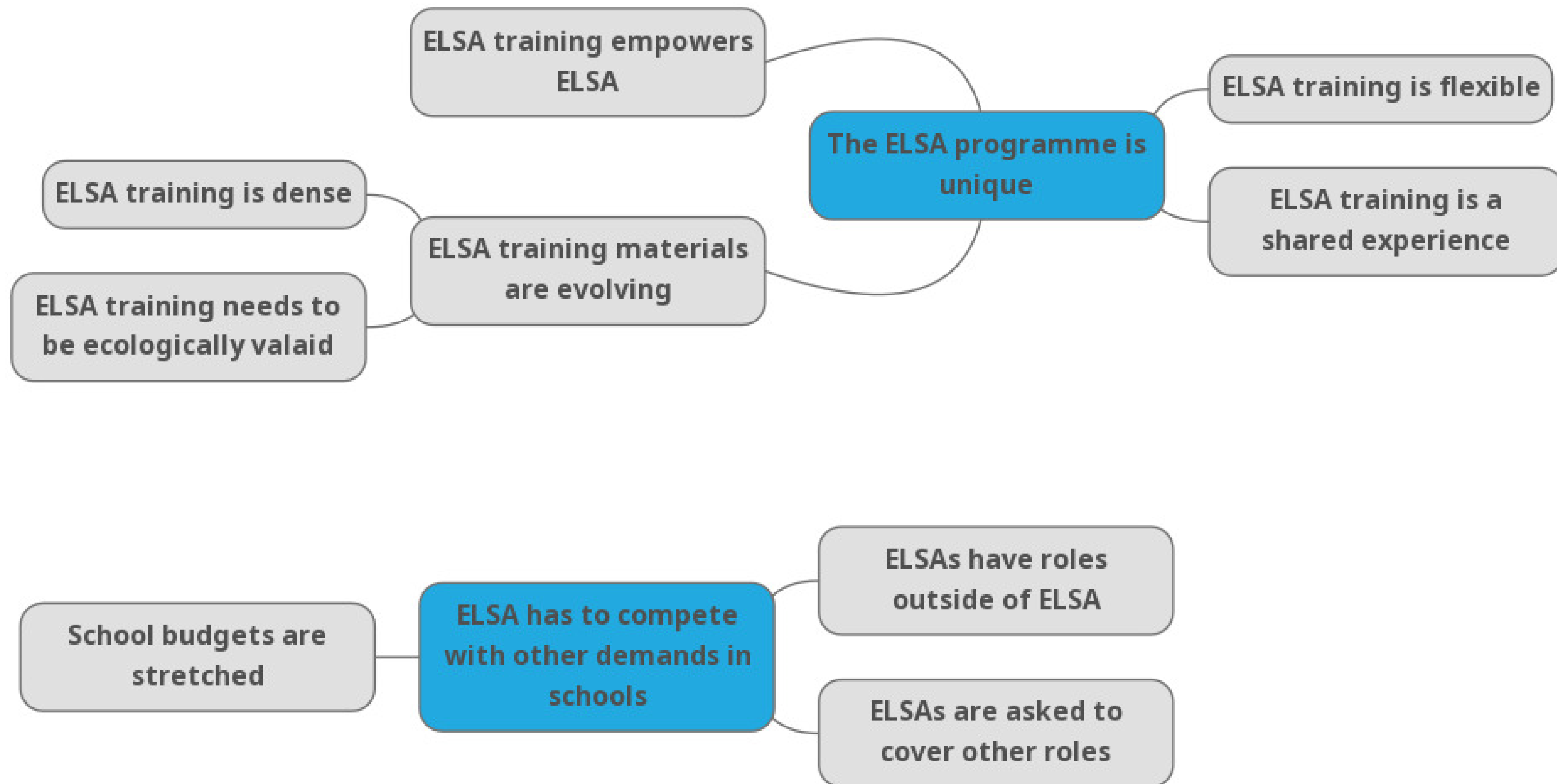
Time, resources, capacity (funding).
Themes on right: one for school, one for EPs, but the subthemes are much the same within them. Keeping them separate risks a division (in supervision, training, and knowing, they both give their perspectives on the same theme). Or maybe 'time, resources, capacity' is the theme. Or time / resources / capacity are themes? I need to go back and look at the data.

Is community a subtheme of supervision and training instead? But this overlooks the loneliness/solo working aspect.

Small panic about whether I should be analysing EPs separately from ELSAs (thrown up by the separate hinderance themes I think). My instinct says no (and is why I haven't so far) but I am struggling to articulate why. Current thoughts:

- The ELSA project does not exist without ELSAs or EPs - both are fundamental to the role/project.
- They connect at training, then continually reconnect through supervision. Perhaps this feeling would have been different if I had found ELSA managers to participate?
- Questions were based on the same theoretical model. The aim was to gather different perspectives on a central idea (implementation). Even from transcription, they raised a lot of similar ideas and perspectives.
- It also feels important to keep them together to 'balance' them out - support staff vs. 'professionals' (at least two ELSA mentions in the data of EPs being 'professional' or adding 'credibility' when ELSAs are already professional and credible.
- So then, exploring combining the hinderance themes seems appropriate. Double check the literature.

Appendix 14 – Phase 3: Initial thematic map

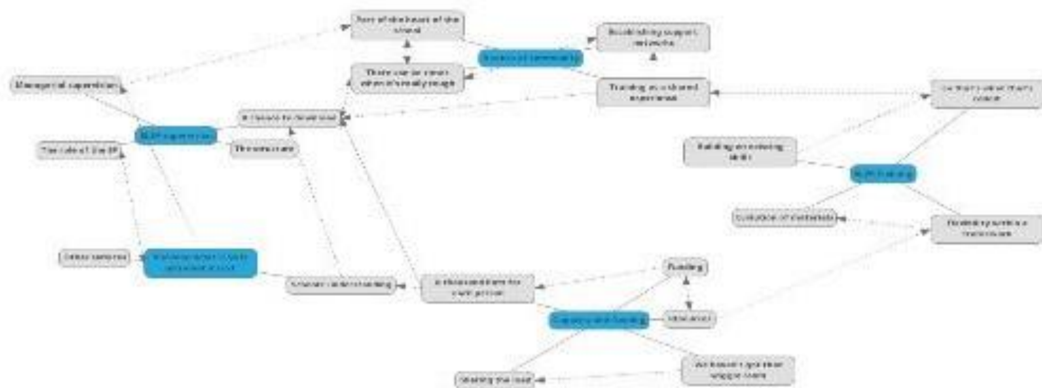


Appendix 15 – Phase 4: Reflexive journal example

Phase 4

28 March 2024 14:32

I think I'm at the point of the adventure where it's raining sideways and all the snacks have been eaten...
When I mapped out the refined themes, they still seem disjointed. In also think I'm missing central organising concepts - or they are not very central. Things just feel a bit 'off' and it is hard to articulate why. I think I need more development, or maybe start again? Going to sleep on it and see how things pan out tomorrow.



Taking a longer-range view, but sort of getting closer in doing so. Is this the stepping forward and back they talk about?

Okay, I think I'm closing in on something. I think thinking about my research question was a distraction before (although helpful as analytical arm bands to begin with). When I stepped back, I could drop that and look across the data. Then when I stepped forward, I looked back into the data and I've got the below. There's still some tweaking to do with the names of things I think. Training: Learning and evolving? Growing? There's something transformative in there I think, but I can't put my finger on what it's called. This might be a worry for phase 5. I think the central organising concepts make more sense now - it just took some digging around and a bit of switching things up. I think I've enjoyed this bit!

Subthemes. B&C say 'not many, if any' - I have fewer here than previously (when I looked at them again, some could be collapsed into one; others were looked at differently and became something new). I feel like the ones I have are justified, but it is difficult to stop thinking about whether, if I kept going, I could get this down to fewer subthemes. That said, maybe I just need them on this project, particularly as I have the relationship previously discussed between my participants - different groups but intertwined together. Different moving parts, maybe. Or just some self-doubt. Hopefully I'll reach a conclusion in phase 5.

Appendix 16 – Phase 4: Reviewing the themes

Memo Link | See-Also Link | Content | Quick Coding | Layout | See-Also Links | Relationships | Coding Stripes | Highlight | Code | Uncode From This Code | Spread Coding | Autocode | Uncode

Codes

Search Project

Name	Files	References
ELSA supervision - supports - guides ELSA practice	11	69
ELSA management requires good managerial involvement - attuneme	11	27
ELSA supervision is not enough	3	4
EP role in ELSA supervision	6	16
EPs are limited in the control they can have in schools for ELSA	3	4
EPs care for ELSAs	3	5
Knowing what ELSA is - and what it isn't	8	17
ELSA programme is unique	5	9
Misunderstanding what ELSA is	11	26
Other services	5	10
Schools' culture and ethos needs to align with ELSA	9	31
Schools' understanding	5	6
Stretching capacity and funding - and resources	11	21
A thousand hats for each person	5	8
ELSA has to compete with other demands in schools	8	23
ELSAs take on a range of responsibility	7	41
ELSAs' access to resources varies	7	12
Facilitated by funding	9	17
Sharing the load	5	24
time andCapacity	8	28
The flexibility of ELSA training	5	26
ABANDON ELSA training materials are evolving	6	17
Autonomy within a framework	4	5
ELSA evaluation supports the development of the training course (2) a	9	24
ELSA training adds knowledge and skills to existing personal qualities	11	38
ELSAs are attuned to children	11	34
The personal qualities ELSAs bring	1	1
ELSA training empowers ELSAs	7	14
ELSAs are keen to learn	7	10
Evolution of the resources	6	11
The need for connection	2	5
ELSA training as a shared experience	6	8
ELSAs and EPs share resources	5	6
ELSAs are part of the school community	6	25
ELSAs can be lonely - stressful - overwheleming - hard	7	13
ELSAs connect with each other using different methods	9	42
ELSAs link in with parents	3	9

Appendix 17 – Phase 5: Reflexive journal example

Phase 5

29 March 2024 22:00

- What is the theme about?
- What is the boundary of the theme?
- What is unique and specific to each theme?
- What each theme contributes to the overall analysis.

▶ **1) Evolving through training** is centred on the ongoing shift and growth in the training itself; the skills ELSAs get from training; and the formation of the group during training.

- *Adding to existing strengths* – the qualities ELSAs identify in themselves, and are recognised by EPs (congruence?); how the training builds on these to support the development of the ELSA role.
- *Autonomy within a framework* – the flexibility of the ELSA training programme from a delivery perspective, including the changes, updates and developments which have been made by EPS to the programme; the 'tools' and 'theories' the training gives ELSAs to use in their practice, (rather than pre-formed programmes).
- *Training as a shared experience* – the interactions between EPs and ELSAs, and the ELSAs themselves during the training programme.

The 'once upon a time': the starting point (of an ELSA's journey?)

▶ **2) Feeling the pinch** focuses on the competing demands EPS and ELSAs experience in delivering ELSA/training. It encompasses limited availability of EPs through workload; ELSAs through different roles, and resulting emotional impact on ELSAs.

- *A thousand hats for each person – the roles ELSAs split themselves between in school*
- *It's capacity, isn't it?* – demands on time/availability within schools and EPS.
- *There can be times when it's really tough* – the impact of the day-to-day demands of the ELSA role, contributed to by the above.

The 'what happens next' - the everyday realities and complexities.

▶ **3) Safety and containment** encapsulates the (support?) given to, and received by ELSAs which is unique to the ELSA role. EPs and ELSA dyad?

- *Supervision: the EP gives it the structure* – the 'input' – what they bring.
- *Supervision: you're in it together* – emotional experiences of supervision – the 'output'. What they get out of it. A sense of camaraderie and reassurance from other ELSAs.
- *ELSA rooms as a sanctuary* – practical space for keeping things and working in, but offers emotional (something) to ELSAs and others using the room. Putting things in (physically), and what they get out of it (emotionally?).
- *Connections with others* – making links in communities, within school, and between other ELSAs. A sense of networking beyond the 'school walls'.

The things that can mitigate/mediate, or repair the above.

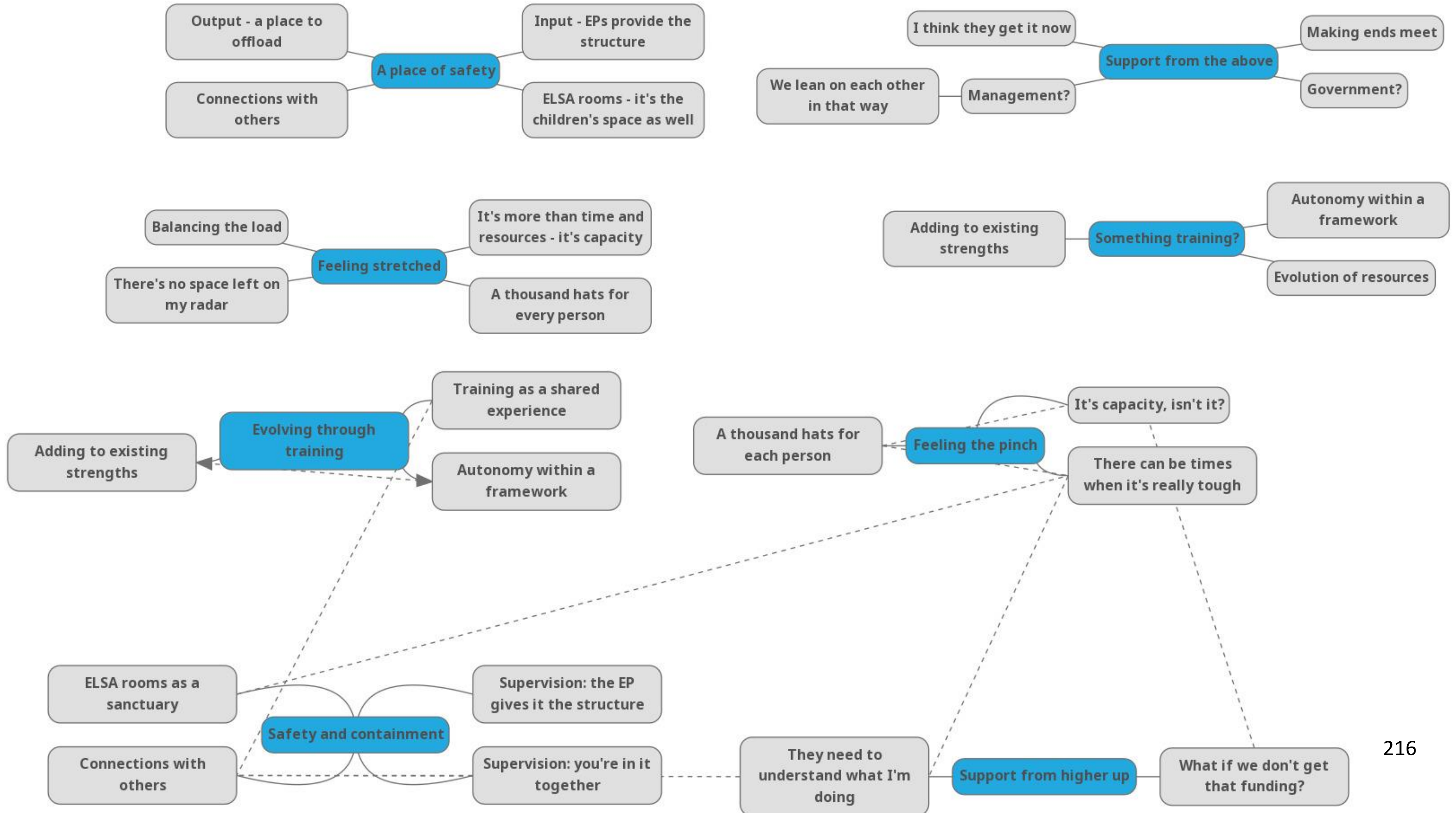
▶ **4) Support from higher up** focus on the systems around/beyond the EPs and ELSAs. Others need to know what ELSAs do; knowing/appreciating what they do contributes to funding which supports their roles/EP delivery of ELSA programme.

- *They need to understand what I'm doing* – knowing about the ELSA programme (SLT and other agencies)
- *What if we don't get that funding?* – the susceptibility/vulnerability of the ELSA programme (training and ELSAs) and the role funding plays in keeping it going.

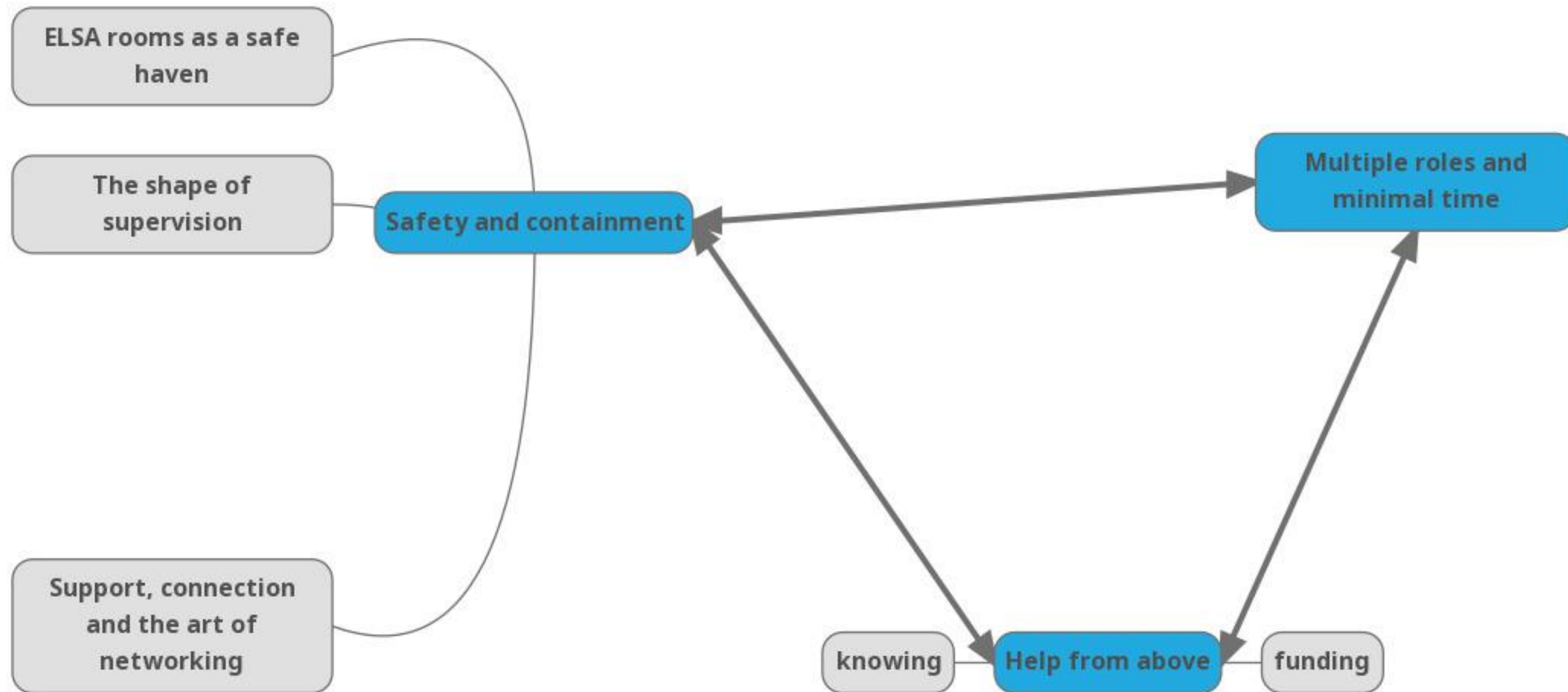
The systems around the ELSAs and EPs - the bigger cogs that need to be in place. A sort of moral of the story? *What must happen now.*

Naming - not quite sure about number 4. Derived from a quote ("it needs to come from above") but I was worried this could be interpreted as religious ('the heavens'). Higher up I think removes that, but as this also mentions 'other services (e.g., CAMHS and social care) I'm not sure if 'higher up' works. Technically, they are not, although I think they could be perceived as being 'more official. Going to proceed but keep this in the back of my head - I can't find the precise words for it.

Appendix 18 – Phase 5: Redefining the themes



Appendix 19 – Phase 4/5: Theme development and review



Appendix 20 – Phase 4/5: Theme redefining and defining (final themes)