

Time for change: The reformulation of applied psychology for LEAs and schools

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Introduction

Scenario 1

Imagine a privatised educational system in which a group of franchisees bid for the Educational Problems Section (EPS). The EPS is paid to take on problems of learning and behaviour associated with individual pupils who needed fixing.

And, at the heart of the system is the 'Catch 22.5': if the EPS successfully eliminates pupil failure it also eliminates itself. No failure, no pay, no jobs.

But don't despair. Highly trained psychometric athletes track down the struggling 'Two Per Cent' (every population has its 2 per cent of something or other) and only fully chartered EPS staff are licensed to identify and prescribe within the educational system. While most services tag extra attendants to failing pupils to keep them safely away from their peers, others operate a 'Happy Hour' or National Lottery ('It's You!') to transfer one or two out of the mainstream system entirely. If this fails to ensure enough work for the EPS, windfall money is channelled to all schools exceeding their target of 'two per cent' failure. It's a busy life in the EPS.

Of course, all of this is pure fantasy, and none of it relates to our practice as educational psychologists, does it?

Time for Change?

When *Reconstructing Educational Psychology* (REP) was published in the late 1970s (Gillham, 1978), it provided a voice for some of the developments in thinking and practice with which the profession was wrestling. Many services had been unable to vault beyond the circumscribed 'School Health Service' role of the post-Second World War years. As Bill Gillham commented in the preface: 'This book makes no pretensions to being radical except in the sense of reflecting the radical changes that are taking place in the profession of educational psychology as a whole' (Gillham, 1978).

Times *did* change in the years preceding and following REP, but few foresaw the impact of the 1981 Education Act (Special Needs), the 1988 Act and

subsequent legislation which introduced the National Curriculum, SATs and league tables; LMS and Ofsted inspections of schools.

The need for review is not to celebrate the anniversary of REP but to reformulate and reclaim the 'psychology' to our title and role. (My own copy of REP proudly donated to my mother – didn't the lad do good? – was discreetly consigned to a Nottingham jumble sale.)

The purpose of this paper is to urge that we look beyond daily professional practice to our *accountability* for the strategic consequences of our work – an accountability that is being tested not only in Special Needs Tribunals and the increasing intrusion of lawyers into our work, but also through Ofsted reviews of LEAs and the deliberations over the contents of the imminent White Paper on Special Educational Needs.

A recurrent sub-theme is that policy determines practice, but practice seldom feeds back into policy. For instance 'what educational psychologists (EPs) do' is highly influenced by LEA policy and procedures, and affects our accountability. Yet EP practice seldom feeds back into policy until the financial or political implications bite.

What do we do? There is clearly wide divergence of practice across LEAs. In a straw poll, I phoned some current and ex-colleagues across different services. Most told me their time was dominated by individual assessment and advice, writing for as many as 70 or more Formal Assessments (in some cases many more) each year, the purpose of these being to allocate resources to children or divert children to resources (that is in special schools). No wonder so many EPs are exhausted. It is not that we are not hard-working, nor that we are doing a bad job. We are doing the wrong job.

In many LEAs, the costly and time-consuming process of statementing children solely to allocate resources is one example of 'routinised' practice – self-sustaining procedures with no feedback loop into policy, and from which organisations are unable to learn or develop (Kauppi, 1998).

We have all seen examples of well-intended initiatives producing unintended, routinised consequences. For instance, the way in which resourcing via statements resulted in 'bounty hunting', the off-loading of responsibility for high-need pupils to external support services, and the use of the least qualified educational

Shout - cases?
pulling out of rivers?
Gillham & Phillips over

personnel to work with the 'hardest to teach' children are but three examples. Such procedures nullify the efforts of teachers and EPs seeking to create a good education for the child.

'Routinisation' impinges not only on our practice, but also on how we are perceived and defined by others. While we possess psychological knowledge and skills relevant to the problems faced by teachers and pupils, many EPs remain frustrated by procedures which suppress their potential contribution. Hence the complicit focus on 'demand-led' resourcing, rather than re-appraising how existing 'whole-school' resources and opportunities might be creatively interwoven to meet the child's individual needs.

When the 1981 Education Act (Special Needs) was introduced in 1983, a leading HMI (and ex-EP) praised it as an 'Educational Psychologists' Charter' (by which, presumably, he meant 'jobs for life'). And despite a decade of public-sector cutbacks, we certainly have seen a growth in EP posts. Regrettably, however, our role within the 1981 Education Act procedures has often reverted to little more than administering norm-referenced achievement and IQ tests (the case against the latter already well made in REP by Bill Gillham, Bob Burden and others). Some 'Psychologists' Charter'.

Without revisiting the arguments in REP, the history of psychometry is tarnished by the eugenics movement, the use of IQ tests to justify claims of racial inferiority, and the practice of segregating children on the basis of test scores. Ironically, Alfred Binet, one of the founding figures of the psychometric movement, saw 'standardised' mental measurement tests both as a basis for identifying children for special education and, crucially, for evaluating the success of the teaching they received. The problem has not been psychometric measures per se, but the use and misuse to which they have been put (Leydon, 1978).

Psychometric labelling is just one of the professional myths based on a medical model still prevalent within special education. Myths, for instance, that particular children only learn via 'one-to-one teaching', and achieve more in special schools. Twenty-one years after REP, where is the evidence? Why are summer-born children and boys still 'routinely' over-represented in MLD schools (Williams, 1964; Bibby et al, 1966)? And what do we know about the post-school circumstances of these pupils and their vulnerability to life-long social segregation (Freshwater and Leyden, 1989)?

This is not a criticism of teachers in special schools - we give them an impossible task - but a comment on values which condone isolating children from their peers without fully evaluating the consequences.

Why the resistance to inclusion? For some teachers and EPs it may reflect conflicting value systems. But for others it represents self-doubt, anxiety or simply

lack of information. Any of these may emerge under the guise of excessive demands for resources, or in-house arrangements which 'internally segregate' high-need pupils. Information about strategies for inclusion and transparently fair funding models may allay some of the anxieties but, un-addressed, they will continue to undermine good educational practice.

Too much of our professional history illustrates the psychology of segregation and the segregation of psychology. By this I mean our role has been characterised by assessing children as potential candidates for special education. In so doing, we have not only marginalised children but also marginalised ourselves and the contribution of psychology. We need to reformulate our role - and the psychology we practise - from rubber-stamping educational failure into promoting inclusion and achievement for all pupils.

Without a strategic reappraisal the EP role is curtailed at the very point it might make a difference. The answer is not 'more, quicker and better statements', as I heard advocated at a recent conference. We either 'design out' the serial inflation in statements, and our contribution to it, or it will be done for us. And it would come as no surprise to find ourselves designed out in the process.

Reformulating practice: time for change

The strategic application of psychology in the LEA

A strategy is a 'plan that integrates an organisation's major goals, policies and action sequences into a cohesive whole' (Mintzberg and Quinn, 1996). Ask yourself the question, 'how "cohesive" is the role of my EPS within our LEA strategy, and how "coherent" the contribution of psychology?'

The partial answers (in both senses) that follow are mine, although highly influenced by colleagues with whom I am fortunate to work. (I would welcome comments from practising EPs; see address for correspondence at the end of this paper.)

The process of de-routinising practice starts at home. If we believe that certain psychological principles, such as evaluation, underpin change and development, we need to demonstrate this within our own work and its strategic contribution to LEA goals. For instance, our role provides a privileged close-up of LEA SEN support and funding policies as they directly impact on the pupil in the classroom. A strategic approach within existing practice can start as simply as feeding these findings back, not only into pupil files, but also to LEA policy-making and review mechanisms.

One example of a creative, strategic reappraisal is

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the Nottinghamshire special needs resourcing policy, developed in the context of a high and burgeoning rise in statements and special school rolls. Following a review of LEA funding and provision for pupils with SEN, Dessent and Gray from the EPS designed a sophisticated yet simple procedure for reducing the heavy reliance on 'resourcing by statements', simultaneously increasing teachers' skills and mainstream schools' facilities for providing for pupils with SEN (for further accounts of this rationale see Dessent, 1988; Gray and Dessent, 1993; Gray 1997).

Under this model, additional funds for SEN are allocated to schools via the delegated budget (ASEN funding) and Mainstream Support Groups (MSGs). The ASEN budget includes differential funding for 'predictable' SEN, using free school meals and clothing allowance as a proxy indicator.

'Unpredictable' or highly exceptional needs are catered for by MSGs, which have their own budget, are managed by a team which includes SENCOs, advisory and support services (including the EPS), and are chaired by the Area Education Officer. The MSG meets termly to consider written bids from schools for individual pupils augmented by information from the EPS and support services. The MSG may allocate additional cash for schools to 'buy in' extra staffing for individual pupils (eg 15 hours per week for a classroom assistant to support a named pupil), or it may recommend targeted input from 'outreach teachers' based in designated special schools. All school requests for additional resources to meet exceptional needs are therefore channelled through the MSG *without the need for a statement*. The significant financial savings from reducing the number and costs of statements are recycled back into the delegated school and MSG budgets to support more children in mainstream. The reduction in special school numbers also allowed the transfer of funds from special school budgets into MSGs.

Day-to-day responsibility for matching the SEN budget to individual pupils is devolved to schools, with the LEA retaining responsibility and oversight to ensure equity and accountability. The transparency of the process enables schools to see the balance between LEA funding policies (including the financial costs of special schooling) and the budget available to support individual pupils in mainstream schools (see Audit Commission, 1992, for a 'case study' of the Nottinghamshire model).

At the time of the Green Paper (DfEE, 1997), Nottinghamshire recorded the lowest percentage of statements in new unitary and non-metropolitan counties, radically reformulating the EPS role and logging one of the lowest national rates of tribunal referrals.

Policy determines practice. To change our practice we need to change policy. To change policy we need to think and act strategically. The future could not be clearer.

Escalating increases in the number and costs of statements, the Green Paper recommendations, and the accumulating evidence from Ofsted inspections of LEAs will inevitably bring about change in the EPS role. Nor can we assume that EPSs will continue to be centrally retained unless there is hard evidence that we make a significant, cost-effective difference to the LEAs' 'special needs' and school improvement strategies.

Strategic psychology in schools: the people factor in change

If we assume that a major aim for LEAs and services is to bring about constructive change and improvement within schools, and thus enhance their capacity to include all pupils and raise achievement levels, where do we find the most relevant fields of psychology?

Without doubt, occupational psychology has a lot to tell us about both the 'occupation' of teaching and organisational change. Think back to our undergraduate studies of the 'Hawthorne' experiments at the Western Electric Company in Chicago in the 1930s, which researched the effects of illumination on work output. The major findings, endorsed by a wide range of subsequent studies, highlighted the significance of *subjective, emotional and psycho-social* factors in organisational change; in particular, the power of informal work groups and internal social systems to develop their own work norms, and stifle or support organisational change. (see Hollway, 1991; Arnold et al, 1995 for current overviews of work psychology). Successful change involves the subjective as well as objective systems within organisations. People count.

Strategic psychology in schools: 'occupational' psychology examples

Some of the applications of this approach, and the broader picture it paints of what *applied* psychologists can offer are well illustrated by examples from teacher stress, violence in schools, and the role of ergonomics in SEN planning.

High levels of teacher stress have long been recognised as damaging to the health of teachers and the effective functioning of schools:

'Teachers under stress can exhibit high degrees of irritability, become inflexible in their thinking, and are resistant to new ideas . . . Where large numbers of teachers are involved, an entire school environment may be negatively effected'. (ESAC, 1990)

Cox and his co-workers in the 'Centre for Organisational Health' at the University of Nottingham have focused on the relationship between teaching, its

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organisation in schools, and stress. Their research culminated in a 'psychological' model of the 'healthy school' characterised by the link between the well-being of its staff and the effective functioning of its teaching, problem-solving and developmental sub-systems (Cox, Boot and Cox, 1989; Cox, Leather and Cox, 1990; Kuk et al, 1994).

As EPs we recognise at first hand that teachers under stress or teaching in 'unhealthy' organisations are less able to respond positively to perceived changes or threat, whether these come in the guise of a pupil with severe and complex learning difficulties or a teenager with aggressive and challenging behaviour. If school improvement involves reducing stress levels among teachers, effective stress reduction means tackling its organisational sources.

Concerns about school violence have escalated during the last five years, during which we have witnessed the brutal murder of a London headteacher, a frenzied machete attack by an intruder in a Wolverhampton infant school and the tragic shooting of 16 pupils and a teacher in Dunblane Primary school. As Gill and Hearnshaw (1997) concluded, 'The number of incidents of violence in schools is a cause for concern, but equally worrying is the fact that schools are not adequately addressing the problem'.

EPs may be called in as part of the LEA response for dealing with the aftermath of a tragic incident (O'Hara et al, 1994; Mallon and Best, 1995). Leyden (1999), drawing on the USA 'Safe Schools' research and the work of occupational psychologists in the UK developed a proactive organisational approach to making schools safer through a five-stage problem-solving cycle. This includes: recording, risk assessment, staff training and contingency planning (see also Leather et al, 1999, for further applications of psychology to violence reduction in the workplace).

School improvement, and teachers' capacity to meet challenging needs, are enhanced when we take into account the psychological well-being of the staff, and the perceived 'healthiness' and 'safety' of the school in which they work.

Finally, we tend to overlook the potential contribution of ergonomics in planning for children with SEN. Ergonomics deals with the design of equipment and work environments to ensure they fit the individual's physical and intellectual capabilities and needs. As an example, educating or transferring children with physical disabilities into mainstream settings may founder at any one of a number of barriers, which go way beyond the provision of ramps and adaptations to cloakrooms. Ergonomics provides a methodology and techniques for working with the young person to design a welcoming and 'user-friendly' classroom and school environment, tailored to his or

her physical, personal and individual needs (see Stewart-Evans, 1979, for an ergonomically designed 'home economics' area for pupils with physical disabilities).

Strategic psychology and schools: current EP examples

If occupational psychology provides a rationale and strategy for understanding the psycho-social systems of schools, it is equally true that a number of 'educational' psychologists have become skilled in working with teachers and whole-school systems. Inclusive tools such as MAPS (Forest et al, 1996) and PATH (Pearpoint et al, 1993) tap into school, community and family resources – formal and informal – to create strategies for individual and organisational change. Checkland's (1980) 'Soft Systems Methodology' provides an alternative way of working with the whole-school staff, while the work of Galvin and his colleagues in the area of behaviour management is probably the best known example of EPs working at the whole-school level (Galvin et al, 1990). Miller's work also emphasises the effectiveness of drawing on knowledge about teacher culture and attitudes when working within the ecosystem of pupils who present severely challenging behaviour (Miller, 1996).

We are learning the lesson: apparently 'soft' systems are 'hard' to change using a narrow perspective and traditional techniques. However, models of school development that combine an understanding of subjective pupil and teacher systems, might achieve just that – and significantly redefine the EP role (see Miller and Leyden, 1999, for an account of a 'coherent framework' for applying psychology in work with schools).

The specifically *psychological* component of school development should be a distinguishing feature of applied psychologists working in LEAs.

A consistent argument within this paper is the need to get the school and LEA context right in order to support pupil learning. In so doing, I have attempted neither an exhaustive nor balanced review of all EP practice and achievements. And achievements there have been. My personal list includes a respect for the creative and courageous efforts of EPs in supporting the inclusion of more pupils in mainstream settings; SEN curriculum planning and modification; the management of pupils with 'difficult' behaviour (including the introduction of tools such as 'Circles of Friends' (Wilson and Newton 1999)), and the provision of high-quality INSET to schools.

EPs have also produced convincing evidence on the effectiveness of collaborating learning, peer tutoring and paired reading for supporting pupil learning (see Leyden and Miller, 1996). The Vygotskian principles

underlying peer-assisted learning initiatives have proved successful in scaffolding the learning of a wide range of children, including those with significant learning difficulties (Lewis, 1996; Lamb et al, 1997 and 1998). Further, the application of these principles within 'Dynamic Assessment' is a welcome shift from merely 'testing' children to supporting and promoting their classroom learning (Stringer et al, 1997).

The effectiveness of the above *psychological* strategies in supporting learning and boosting educational attainments is part of the EP contribution to the 'value-added' components of school development.

The role of psychology and communication technology: 'planning for the future'

It is a further, encouraging recognition of what psychology can offer that the DfEE and the British Educational Communications and Technology Agency (BECTA) turned to a developmental psychologist, Professor David Wood, for an evaluation of computer-assisted learning in respect of the educational achievement of secondary-age pupils, and the UK ILS Report (BECTA, 1998) is essential reading for psychologists or advisers likely to be consulted in this area by schools.

Wood's work, and that of his colleagues at the ESRC (Centre for Research, Development, Instruction and Training (CREDIT), University of Nottingham, highlights the capacity of instructional communication technology for unifying and energising the currently disparate fields of training, practice and research – lessons we could learn in regard to our own training and practice. (see Wood, 1993, for speculation on the future impact of educational technology on curriculum, training, classrooms and work environments.)

Scenario 2

Imagine another future situation. One in which the principal psychologist identifies a specific training, practice or developmental need and approaches the psychology department of the local university, which offers educational/applied psychology training to doctoral level. Part of this training is organised around trainee projects which have to be delivered as multimedia packages integrating text, video, diagrams and graphics. The research projects derive directly from real LEA/Service needs identified by the principal and her or his team.

The university provides the theory, background technology and support for the production of the multimedia product. The final product – training material, dissemination, examples of rare and good

practice – goes back with the trainee to his or her home site. Just one example of how we could start to integrate the teaching of technology with professional practice and training – once we start thinking creatively about the mutual benefits of collaboration between service providers and those who train.

Of course, none of this is fantasy, and it could happen if we wanted it to, couldn't it?

Psychological Services of the near future – integrating training, practice and research – can become learning organisations in action and exemplars for other professions.

'Putting our own house in order'

To start 'putting our house in order', we need a change of name. The 1968 review of our role by the Department of Education and Science was entitled '*Psychologists* [my italics] in the Education Service'. If we are truly to 'put psychology to work' within schools and LEAs we need to become and be recognised as *applied psychologists*, not restricted solely to traditional domains of 'educational' psychology. This requires knowledge and skills in other areas of applied psychology if we are to become 'solution' rather than 'problem' focused across the LEA.

We also need to make explicit the *values* which permeate our work and the ethical dilemmas we confront. There certainly are dilemmas! To name but one, our Code of Ethics stresses the need for '*informed consent*' by the child or client. Yet, how informed is the 'consent' of a young person in agreeing to a psychological assessment which may lead to a change of school and separation from peers and community? How often do we resort to 'consent by proxy', whereby others give permission on behalf of the young person? Are we confident of our answers?

The core values for applied psychologists working in educational services relate to the human rights of children and young people. The AEP took a step forward by recognising the 1994 UNESCO Salamanca Declaration, which advocates mainstream schooling for children with SEN. We must ensure words match deeds on behalf of members and, above all, the children for whose well-being and interests we work. Inclusion will not happen overnight and we should actively support groups such as the 'Alliance for Inclusive Education' in bringing it closer.

I have worked as an EP since training at Swansea in 1964/5. After that, like many others, I became responsible for a school population of approximately 30,000 pupils. My area comprised a 'newtown' overspill area outside Liverpool, with high levels of

Values → can inform success

social disadvantage, crime, unemployment and low educational achievement. Services in most parts of the country at that time were small, school populations were high and expectations of us were generally low. It was even possible for a large LEA (Nottinghamshire) and a small one (the Scilly Isles) to operate without any psychological service at all.

However, I have no doubt that for today's EPs, despite covering a fraction of that 30,000 school population, the role is more onerous, accountable and demanding than ever. The practice of being an EP requires courage and commitment seldom recognised by others. It also requires second sight, sensitivity and a thick skin. While there never was a 'golden age' of EPs, there was a greater degree of professional latitude, and current accountability is part of the price for becoming a more central service within the LEA. Like it or not, the EPS is now an instrument of LEA policy to an extent unthinkable 30 years ago.

From personal observation, morale in many services appears low, for whatever reason, and 'early retirement' on health or other grounds has been endemic. Nor are there the range of alternative career outlets available at the time of the Summerfield Report (DES, 1968). The health and stress levels of the professional as a whole constitute a real problem, yet to be fully identified and tackled by the AEP as our union. If the 'coping response' to increasing workloads, expectations and accountability is for EPs to work longer and harder, the inevitable result will be professional burnout (see also Leyden and Kuk, 1993).

Time for change! And time to be upbeat. I think most EPs welcome a radical review of our role, training and support needs. But I suspect many of us may be anxious about the outcome – and whether we are equipped for significant changes in our work. Reformulating our role and the psychology we apply are necessary but not sufficient conditions unless supported by the appropriate professional values, service structures and individual opportunities for developing new knowledge and skills.

Yet, if we can get it right, the revolutionary changes currently being planned in the structure of initial training and the new CPD doctorates can bring much of the above within our grasp. It is up to initial training courses, services, the AEP and BPS to take the present opportunity for a radical review of the content and structure of applied psychology in LEAs, and to bring training closer to the LEA workplace and practitioners closer to the university training departments. Each one of us can play a part in making it happen through our links with and membership of training courses, services, LEAs and our professional bodies.

The 'external' arguments for change, from tribunals and LEA inspections and the Green/White Paper, echo

the 'internal' disquiet voiced by many EPs. If we see these external pressures as 'win-win' opportunities for all of us, rather than as threats to the status quo, we may finally achieve and consolidate the reformulation that was so tantalisingly close 21 years ago.

You may not agree with the picture I have painted of applied psychology in LEAs of the (near) future. But it is important you make your own views heard clearly and strongly in the debates ahead. Unless we, individually and collectively, take advantage of the current opportunities to 'redesign' the psychology back into our work, we may well find that psychology and ourselves have been 'designed out'.

Acknowledgements:

I am grateful to colleagues from the University of Nottingham and the Nottinghamshire County and Nottingham City psychological services for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

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