

# Reconstructing educational psychology practice

JACKIE LOWN, GLENYS FOX, IRVINE GERSCH, SUE MORRIS and ROB STOKER

---

**As the authors of this article point out, clarification about what constitutes the core functions of an educational psychology service is long overdue. Their summary of the recently published DfEE Report on the current role of educational psychology services leads to a discussion of some of the implications for the future which will be of particular interest to SENCOs. In keeping with the theme of equity they discuss the dilemmas caused by, for example, the wide variation in staffing levels across EP services.**

‘Certainly during the last ten years there has been, among educational psychologists, an increasing questioning of their role.’

(Gillham, 1978)

## Introduction

*The Educational Psychology Services (England): Current Role, Good Practice and Future Directions. Report of the Working Group* was published by the DfEE in July, 2000. It contains sections and recommendations on the role, aims and core functions of educational psychology services for the future. The document (hereafter referred to as *Future Directions*) raises pertinent points in relation to the issue of equity. It states:

‘It is our expectation that all educational psychology services will provide these core functions, and that irrespective of their locality, children, parents, schools, LEAs and other agencies will have access to the same level of service in respect of core areas of operation.’

(DfEE, 2000a, p.7)

The report was produced as a result of the consideration given to the issue of the current and future role of educational psychology services (EPSs), which arose from *Meeting Special Educational Needs: A Programme of Action* (DfEE, 1998). This in turn had been prompted by the Green

Paper *Excellence for All Children: Meeting Special Educational Needs* (DfEE, 1997). Implicit in the title of this last document is the expectation that support for children with special needs rests within an equal opportunities framework. The content of all three documents reflects this expectation.

The *Future Directions* report on the role of the educational psychologist (EP) grew from the deliberations of the working group set up by the DfEE in 1998, to consider the current role, future practice and training of educational psychologists. (A subgroup, charged with the task of pursuing the ‘training’ issue was set up, and completed a consultation paper in December, 2000). The group included educational psychologists, and individuals representing a range of professions, e.g. Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCo), parent partnership officer, local authority officers, health and social services. A range of views about the future role of educational psychology services was gathered through a research undertaking which included direct submissions to the DfEE by interested parties, postal questionnaires to every LEA and 500 mainstream and special schools, and 12 more detailed LEA studies which included interviews with a wide range of stakeholders within each authority visited. Detail concerning the research exercise is available in an accompanying report (DfEE, 2000b).

*Future Directions* contains sections concerning the current picture of educational psychology services in England, aims and key principles, core functions, good practice, recommendations, barriers to progress and performance indicators. It does not have statutory force, and does not deliver extra resources for implementation. However, it is intended that the report is borne in mind during OFSTED inspections of LEAs.

The following sections of the current article aim to:

- give a brief overview of the content of the *Future Directions* document
- consider some implications of this document for local education authorities (LEAs), EPSs, schools and SENCos
- examine its content in relation to the issue of equity.

## Summary of report

Part One, the introduction to the report, sets out the remit of the working group, and sets a forward agenda to map the linkages between educational psychology services and other emerging strategies such as the Connexions service.

Part Two sets out the aim or purpose defining the contribution of educational psychologists as follows:

‘To promote child development and learning through the application of psychology by working with individual and groups of children, teachers and other adults in schools, families, other LEA officers, health and social services and other agencies.’

(p.5)

Key principles are also set out in this section, namely, all EPSs should:

- apply psychology to promote the attainment and healthy emotional development of children and young people from 0 – 19 years;
- ensure that early intervention at a preschool level is a priority;
- be linked to LEA strategies to meet local and national priorities for raising standards in schools and supporting inclusion;
- be delivered in school settings as well as in local authority and family settings;
- focus on assessment, intervention and consultation;
- develop multi-agency approaches to support schools and parents; and
- be accessible to users independently of schools. (p.5)

Critical success factors are identified in this section, including the point that educational psychology services should ensure that they can ‘respond in a creative and dynamic way to new situations and challenges which children and young people may face in the future’ (DfEE, 2000a, p.6).

Part Three of the *Future Directions* report, *Core Functions*, addresses the need to ensure greater equity of service delivery within educational psychology services, by setting out the core functions to be performed by them. This chapter identifies three core areas of activity, namely:

- early years work;
- work with schools; and
- multi-agency work

and states that these should be provided by all educational psychology services, with the focus on assessment and intervention at a number of levels. Part Three also sets out how educational psychology services can approach these core functions by working with individual children, working with groups of children, working with institutions such as schools and early years providers, working with the LEA and working with other agencies such as social services in planning and intervention. Finally, the chapter sets out how

services may engage in areas outside those stated in the core functions, such as mediation, crisis work and critical incidents, in response to local needs.

Part Four presents an overview of the findings of the research process (DfEE, 2000b), highlighting areas of ‘good practice’, with a series of boxed ‘vignettes’ setting out how stakeholders would like to see educational psychology services develop in the future. Importantly, this chapter also sets out recommendations in terms of work in schools, work with parents, work at the LEA level, multi-agency work and the organisation, management and delivery of an educational psychology service.

Several recurrent themes are apparent in Part Four, which are worthy of note, and include the need for:

- consistency of service delivery within each EPS
- a changing balance within the work of EPs, with a reduced involvement in statutory procedures and an increase in preventative work and early intervention
- clearer communication to stakeholders about the range of services offered by EPSs and how to access them
- greater access to EPSs independent of schools, particularly for parents
- the need for professional specialisms within each EPS
- the establishment of quality assurance and benchmarking procedures to monitor EPSs’ work, inform future planning and maximise responsiveness to service user needs.

Part Five considers ‘barriers, opportunities and the way forward’ in changing the focus of educational psychology services. It identifies eight factors which are likely to influence the future development of EPSs in relation to the recommendations in Part Four. These influences concern those at the level of LEA, such as policy, structures and resourcing; factors concerning the position and profile of the EPS within the local context vis-à-vis other agencies and support services; and other factors such as the expectations of service users and the attitudes and perceptions of the EPS held by schools.

Part Five makes nine recommendations, most of which re-state those outlined in Part Four. Notable additions are that firstly, best value reviews of EPSs should have regard to a set of Performance Indicators outlined in Annex C of the report. Within these, the quality of management of the EPS is emphasised, with reference to five core criteria:

- consistency of service delivery
- equitable access
- support for optimal learning and the promotion of the healthy emotional development of children and young people
- effective use of available resources
- impact on performance or ‘making a difference’ through the application of psychology.

Secondly, local mechanisms should be established to increase the influence which individual schools can exert on the services they receive from their EPS, within the

agreed time allocation, and thirdly the independence of the EPS should be safeguarded, in the sense that it should be free to challenge school practices, where circumstances so warrant.

The report concludes optimistically, stating that 'It is clear that the contribution of educational psychologists is valued and that educational psychology services face some major challenges in the future', adding a note of confidence that 'they will rise to and meet these challenges' (p.48). Evidence of the success in meeting these challenges will become apparent, as Ofsted inspections in the future will consider the report recommendations in their visits to LEAs.

#### *Implications for LEAs and educational psychology services*

*Future Directions* was published just over a year ago (July, 2000). The degree of change apparent in EPSs (and the LEAs of which they are a part) will vary considerably across the country. Impact will have depended to a great extent on the starting point of each LEA. There will be some who have seen the document as an opportunity to review the EPS and develop its role, recognising and incorporating the core functions, taking note of the good and best practice described. Some may have reached the conclusion that the document affirmed existing practice, and simply 'tweaked' around the edges, whilst taking the opportunity to congratulate themselves. Still others, where educational psychologists have been spending too large a proportion of their time on statutory assessment, and who needed change most, may have gone in one of two directions:

- the EPS may have used the document as leverage to persuade its LEA officers and elected members of the need for radical change in order to bring them more in line with other services, provide a more effective and efficient service and more successfully produce impressive Performance Indicator data
- in an LEA context where the EPS had a low profile, and was not seen as having the potential to contribute to a wider agenda, the battle may not be won, and may have barely started. Some will view the *Future Directions* document as liberating for EPSs, but critics could view the document as having no 'teeth', and therefore risk being ignored or resulting in only minimal changes.

The readiness, willingness and ability to take the opportunity further to develop the EPS will have depended upon the existing context of the LEA, as well as the perceived need for change (by the EPS itself, as well as stakeholders), the vision and dynamism of the principal EP and EP team, and the receptiveness of LEA officers and elected members. Readers may wish to ask themselves what changes, in terms of the educational psychology service they have observed, could have resulted from the implementation of suggestions/recommendations from the document? Examples might include:

- information to stakeholders about the EPS and what it can offer
- service level statements
- redirection of EP time, away from statutory assessment and into early intervention, and preventative work
- a more consultative focus; and/or
- a link with LEA strategies to meet local and national priorities for raising standards in schools and supporting inclusion.

#### *Implications for schools/SENCOs*

The implications which *Future Directions* has for schools and SENCOs will be varied across the country, depending on the existing LEA/EPS context and the existing relationships and working practices between schools and their support services. Some may experience little difference as a result of a close match between the existing situation and the recommendations contained within the document. Others may be seeing enormous changes. Change will continue to unfold over the coming years, as the cycle of LEA inspection unearths reactions to the Performance Indicators set out in the document, and future benchmarking criteria are established.

Changes will also arise from the intention to carry out a further mapping exercise. The document states that 'a further exercise should take place to map linkages between educational psychology services which are developing around local and national strategies such as LEA behaviour support plans, learning mentor schemes and the emerging Connexions service for youth support' (DfEE 2000a, p.47). Presumably the role of the SENCO will form part of this analysis.

Perhaps the mapping exercise will serve to carve out a more definite boundary around the work of the EP in relation to other professionals, but some, perhaps especially SENCOs, will be concerned about the possibility of collecting extra duties from EPs, such as more testing of children. Are there, in turn, others to whom SENCOs can delegate aspects of their work? Changes at all the related professional boundaries may be part of the future agenda.

#### *Issue of equity*

*Future Directions* gives an excellent foundation to address issues of equity across the country, in terms of educational psychology services at least. The Research Report (DfEE, 2000b) comments that 'there is a wide variation in staffing levels across educational psychology services and whilst there is some correlation between staffing ratio and service delivery, it is clear that services with similar resources can vary significantly in terms of the quality and range of provision' (p.4). Such variation could be due to the model of service delivery adopted by an EPS (e.g. consultation model, referral-based, time allocation model), or due to the particular strengths and perspectives of the service or the

individual EPs within it. It could be argued that variations have been inevitable, in view of the different emphases possible on issues such as individual or systems approaches, preferred psychological paradigms underpinning individual practice and the dilemmas inherent in working within a local authority setting with a range of stakeholder needs.

*Future Directions* sets out in some detail the suggested future role, aims and core functions of EPS, but avoids being prescriptive about how this should be attained, and falls short of giving minimum staffing levels, or guidelines for the ratio of EPs per child population.

Given all that has been said in previous sections about the possibility of varied responses to the document from LEAs, it is sincerely hoped that *Future Directions* will provide the basis for more equitable services to schools and other stakeholders within and between LEAs. The information gathered in the research process should provide support to those LEAs/EPs/schools wishing to monitor and enhance equality of access by potential service users. Consideration given by EPSs/LEAs to means of collecting data about the services they provide, monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of those services, and responding to stakeholder comments, will further strengthen consistency, equity and transparency in delivery of EP services.

The Research Report (DfEE, 2000b) states: 'There should be safeguards for ensuring consistency, equity and transparency in the service provided to schools, pupils and their parents both within a service and across services' (p.8). *Future Directions* gives the best chance of this there has ever been: not only is the role of the EP clearer to the full range of stakeholders, but the clear, accepted definition will potentially help EPs become more confident in the role they themselves fulfil. Clarity about what constitutes the core functions of an EPS has never been provided before; the closest this came was the DES working party set up to look at EP services (DES, 1968), but this provided little about role definition.

*Future Directions* makes an important contribution to the debate around equity, within the context of the Government's current education agenda. However, there are unresolved questions which will require further consideration by EPSs themselves and the LEAs/LAs within which they operate. For example, there are tensions inherent in running services which aim to meet the perceived needs of a wide range of stakeholders (LEAs, children and families, schools, other agencies); these varied needs exist within the context of limited EP time, and require mechanisms/management systems which can enable fair and equitable prioritisation. For example, it is perplexing to consider how to ensure that access to EPS is equitable for all stakeholders, particularly parents/carers, when other service users (e.g. schools, LEAs) arguably have a more powerful voice. Even more importantly, consideration should be given as to how to ensure equality of access to the same quality of EP service, particularly for different cultural and minority groups.

*Future Directions* notes: 'Almost all schools said they want more educational psychologist time ... Schools also want consistency in the service, and the same quality of support from individual psychologists irrespective of personalities' (p.7). Hopes are high for more clearly defined EP services and more consistency in the role of the EP. It remains to be seen whether these hopes will be realised.

#### *Further thoughts...*

There are certain tensions which were perhaps inevitable in the nature of the debate regarding future directions for educational psychology services.

The desire to create educational psychology services which deliver highly predictable, consistent services could stifle creativity and fail to take account of the particular needs of individual LEAs and local communities. That the report was not a highly prescriptive document may have been a disappointment to some, but may in the future prove invaluable to EPSs and their stakeholders, in permitting flexibility in a changing world.

Given the status of the document (i.e. having no statutory force) and the brief Performance Indicators carried within it, is there a risk that some LEAs may choose to reduce the role of the EP to the bare minimum – i.e. only providing statutory assessment from central LEA services, whilst leaving schools to purchase the rest?

Would it have been a step too far to direct LEAs to minimum levels of staffing for EP services? The danger here would clearly have been that some better staffed LEAs may have been tempted to reduce staffing levels to provide the minimum level. Was this a risk worth taking, in order to see others increase their levels?

*Future Directions* could be accused of offering far too general a picture of the role of the EP. The core functions and good and best practice examples demonstrate the wide range of EP services which are valued by stakeholders. This carries with it, however, at least two tensions. Firstly, if all these services are to be offered within existing staffing levels, there needs to be careful thinking within EPSs about the range of skills offered by individual EPs in the service. In these times of severe recruitment difficulties, it may not be possible to appoint staff, resulting in pressures on the system. Secondly, if such breadth of services is to be available within EPSs, and this may signify a broadening role for some, there needs to be time released from other activities. Removal of EPs from writing statements and work with exam dispensations seem to be the only time savers mentioned in the document, apart from the redirection of EP time away from statutory assessment and into early intervention. Such change is highly dependent upon supportive action by the LEA.

*Future Directions* has been available for just over a year, yet it still seems to be early days in terms of impact. It



provides an opportunity for EPSs and stakeholders to re-establish working practices within a context of equity: an opportunity not to be missed, for it may not present itself again for some time to come.

## Note

The views of the authors do not necessarily reflect those of their employers, other colleagues who made up the DfEE Working Group, the DfEE, or other formal associations and societies associated with the profession of educational psychology.

## References

DES (1968) *Psychologists in Education Services, The Summerfield Report*. London: HMSO.

- DfEE (2000a) *Educational Psychology Services (England): Current Role, Good Practice and Future Directions*. Report of the Working Group. Nottingham: DfEE publications.
- DfEE (1998) *Meeting Special Educational Needs: A Programme of Action*. Nottingham: DfEE publications.
- DfEE (1997) *Excellence for all Children: Meeting Special Educational Needs*. London: The Stationery Office.
- DfEE (2000b) *Educational Psychology Services (England): Current Role, Good Practice and Future Directions The Research Report*. DfEE publications.
- Gillham, B. (1978) *Reconstructing Educational Psychology*. Billing and Sons.
- Morris, S., Fox, G., Gersch, I. S., Lown, J. and Stoker, R. (2000) EPs are valued – it's official. In *Special Children*, October, 132, 25–27.

## Correspondence

Jackie Lown  
City of York Educational Psychology Service  
10-12 George Hudson Street  
York  
YO1 6ZG



# The British Journal of Visual Impairment

The British Journal of Visual Impairment (BJVI) is for all professionals concerned with children and adults who have a visual impairment and is national forum for all views on related subjects.

The BJVI regularly features articles of current interest on research, education, health, rehabilitation, welfare, employment and technology.

## Publication and Subscription Details:

The Journal is published in January, May and September. It is available in inkprint, Braille, audiotape and on computer disk (ASCII format). Tape copies can be obtained by sending three C90 cassettes in a padded wallet with return label enclosed.

The annual subscription rates for 2001 are:

UK subscriptions	£35.00 (three issues)
Overseas	£41.00 (three issues)
Individual copies - UK	£13.00 each
Individual copies - overseas	£15.00 each

Articles and correspondence on relevant topics welcome.  
Please contact the Editor via NASEN House.

Thank you.