

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF  
PRINCIPAL EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGISTS

**PARENT AND CARER  
FEEDBACK ON THEIR  
EXPERIENCE OF EDUCATIONAL  
PSYCHOLOGISTS**

**REPORT**

2012

Hampshire's Educational Psychology's Research & Evaluation Unit conducted this research on behalf of NAPEP. The original data are available should anyone wish to check, question or challenge the information reported. Any opinions expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of either NAPEP or Hampshire's Educational Psychology.

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## **BACKGROUND TO THIS REPORT**

In recent years there has been a growing trend for services to seek feedback from parents whose children have been the focus of Educational Psychologist (EP) involvement (e.g. Dowling & Leibowitz, 1994); a practice further endorsed by national reports (DfEE, 2000; Scottish Executive, 2002; DfES, 2006; DCSF, 2009a). Parents<sup>1</sup> constitute a crucial user group, and are particularly well-positioned to offer insights into the services provided to their children<sup>2</sup>. Feedback from parents about the quality of service received provides the opportunity to review arrangements and amend the way in which aspects are offered (Anthun, 2000; Cuckle & Bamford, 2000; Squires et al, 2007). Moreover, the act of collecting the views of parents may of itself be of value. Anthun's (2000) study of EP services in Norway suggested that facilitating parental participation was likely *per se* to improve parents' perceptions of service quality and effectiveness. As such, evaluation of parental views of the EP service seems an important area to pursue. A number of government reports and published articles have examined parents' views of EP services. Such studies offer a useful insight into the aspects of EP practice that parents value, as well as criticisms of practice.

There are two main caveats to studies of parent views. The first relates to the issue of sample size and associated questions about the representativeness of findings. Dowling and Leibowitz (1994) acknowledged the unreliability of some findings, due to low response rates. The second relates to wide variation in the structure of EP services within the UK, and the particular role a service plays within its Local Authority. These differences make it difficult to generalise findings from one service to another as the implications will alter when translated into another context (Cuckle & Bamford, 2000). With these points in mind, the following section offers a summary of studies examining parental views on EP services.

## **PARENTS' VIEWS OF EP SERVICES**

### **Existing studies of parent satisfaction with EP services**

Several national reports indicate that parents value the service they receive from EPs (DfEE, 2000; Scottish Executive, 2002; DfES, 2006). For example, the DfES (2006) report noted that 97% of parents felt that EP services were needed and 88% rated EP involvement through casework as either 'helpful' or 'very helpful'. Individual service evaluations of parental views have found similar results. Dowling and Leibowitz (1994), for instance, conducted semi-structured interviews with 18 families who had received EP support and found that parents were highly satisfied with the service they had received, although they generally wanted more input (see also DfEE, 2000; Scottish Executive, 2002; DfES, 2006). Similarly, Cuckle and Bamford (2000) conducted telephone interviews with 30 families and sent a questionnaire to 500 parents of children who had recently been seen by an EP (which received a 17%

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<sup>1</sup> The term 'parent' has been used for simplicity to encompass both parents and carers.

<sup>2</sup> As above the terms 'child' and 'children' have been adopted throughout this report to relate equally to children and young people from 0 – 19 years of age.

response rate). Again, the majority of parents expressed satisfaction with the service received, with 87% rating their satisfaction level as either 'very good' or 'reasonable'. Despite these findings, parents also had reservations and made suggestions for improvement. The following sections provide a summary of the main issues to have arisen from these studies, starting with parents' views on the positive aspects of EP involvement, before moving on to the areas for improvement.

### **Positive aspects of EP involvement**

As might be expected given the high levels of satisfaction reported, the literature outlines a number of areas in which parents perceive EP involvement to be positive. In brief, EPs are seen to i) be a useful source of information and support, ii) be a helpful mediator between parents and other agencies and iii) have a positive impact on the children they are supporting.

#### *Useful source of information and support*

The research indicates that EPs are viewed as experienced, knowledgeable, and a useful source of information, in relation to Special Educational Needs (SEN), and in sign posting parents to other agencies (DfEE, 2000). With regards to the specific type of information that is perceived to be helpful, parents reported that they valued detailed verbal and written feedback that named their child's condition (although this might not always be deemed appropriate by EPs), provided practical strategies for intervention, as well as information about other sources of support, and which is presented in a supportive way (Squires et al., 2007).

In line with this, parents in Dowling and Leibowitz's (1994) and Cuckle and Bamford's (2000) studies reported that information provided by the EP service was useful because it had helped to give them a new insight or a different way of interpreting their child's behaviour. Cuckle and Bamford's study indicated that this depended on the age of the child and the nature of the support given. On one hand, EP input for pre-schoolers and Early Years children was seen as particularly helpful in offering a new perspective on their child's behaviour. On the other hand, parents' surgeries that offered a one-off consultation session were perceived as less helpful, with parents reporting that they wanted more information about procedures and the specialist help available. Thus, whilst EPs were generally viewed as a useful source of support, this depended on the context in which it was provided.

#### *Mediation between parents, children and other agencies*

Parents also viewed EPs to play a useful mediating role (DfEE, 2000; DfES, 2006; Dowling & Leibowitz, 1994). The DfEE (2000) found that parents perceived EPs to be helpful intermediaries between themselves and their child's school, acting as an advocate for their child and able to influence the school in ways that the parent could not. Parents in the DfES (2006) study expressed a similar view, suggesting that EPs helped to facilitate access to certain types of support and made the child's school more accountable, both in terms of providing support and in monitoring that support once it was in place. Ninety seven per cent of the parents also reported that the EP service was a key element of the multi-agency package their child had received.

### *Impact on the child*

Encouragingly, EP input was viewed by parents as having a positive impact on their child. The majority of the parents who took part in the DfES's (2006) study felt that the EP's contribution had had a positive impact on their child's future life prospects and on their emotional well-being, particularly in terms of their ability to develop positive relationships with others.

### **Areas for improvement**

Whilst parents were positive about the contribution of EPs, they nevertheless expressed some concerns. These generally centred on the need for more information about the EP role, the specific nature of the EP's involvement with their child, and the extent to which the parent was included in the EP's work.

### *Information about the EP role*

Parental dissatisfaction often emerged because of a lack of information about what was going to happen as a result of EP involvement (Squires et al., 2007) and a lack of understanding of the role of the EP. Role confusion often centred upon the distinction between an EP and a child psychiatrist (DfEE, 2000), which in some cases had resulted in parental opposition to allowing their child to be seen. Unsurprisingly therefore, a number of the published reports indicate that parents were keen to have more information about what EPs do (Squires et al., 2007; DfEE, 2000; Scottish Executive, 2002), as well as information about services and procedures, why particular information might be sought, the likely time scale for input, and possible reasons for delays (Cuckle & Bamford, 2000). The DfEE (2000) report also found that parents wanted information on how to access EPs directly, without the need to go through schools. Parents reported problems in accessing an EP via their child's school, and this was often perceived to be due to the different priorities assigned by parents and the school (DfES, 2006). In this respect direct telephone access was seen as particularly valuable and even if it was not used, the fact that it was available was reassuring (DfEE, 2000).

### *The nature of EP involvement*

Parents also expressed some reservations about the nature of the EP involvement. Specifically, parents were keen for EP involvement to be earlier, more in-depth, continued, and impartial.

*Earlier involvement:* The length of time it took for an EP to become involved with a child was a commonly cited problem. For example, Squires et al. (2007) noted that parents were concerned about the time taken by a school to recognise a difficulty and to subsequently make a referral and 30% of parents in Cuckle and Bamford's (2000) study reported that they were dissatisfied with the time it had taken for an EP to become involved. Similarly, parents who took part in Dowling and Leibowitz's (1994) study wanted to know how they could contact EPs earlier, before problems became unmanageable and parents who took part in the DfEE's (2000) study reported that early involvement was particularly useful in the case of a child with complex needs.

*In-depth involvement:* Parents were keen to receive a more in-depth service from EPs. EP involvement was perceived to be particularly helpful where the

EP took time to explain a report, allowed time for questions, explained the child's needs, and offered advice on how to provide support at home (DfEE, 2000). However, parents often felt that EPs did not have adequate time to deliver the depth of service required (Scottish Executive, 2002) or to provide sufficient time for discussion, particularly without the presence of school staff (Dowling & Leibowitz, 1994).

*Continued involvement:* Parents were also keen to receive continued support from the EP service (DfEE, 2000). This was felt to be particularly important after a child had been Statemented. A number of parents in the DfEE study reported that, although the EP had been supportive during the statutory process, there had been little follow-up afterwards.

*Impartial involvement:* Some parents expressed concerns about the independence of the EP, given that they were employees of the local authority. This was highlighted in relation to providing impartial information about resources that might be available in the private sector, and gaining a second opinion in the case of disagreement (Dowling & Leibowitz, 1994; Scottish Executive, 2002).

#### *Greater parental involvement*

Finally, parents were eager to be fully involved when an EP worked with their child. In this respect, they wanted their views to be listened to and taken into account, and to be informed about what was happening; for example, parents were unhappy if the EP worked with their child, or their child's teachers, without providing them with feedback (Squires et al., 2007). Nevertheless, Dowling and Leibowitz (1994) reported that parents felt that EPs took them seriously and acknowledged the legitimacy of their concerns, thus for some parents at least, this issue had been addressed.

## **THE CURRENT STUDY**

The research review indicates that, whilst parents' views of EP services are overwhelmingly positive, there are areas in which improvements could be made. Such findings highlight the need for services to be aware of the views of the parents they serve when looking to make changes to delivery arrangements. However, a survey for NAPEP (2010) found that only half of EP services regularly surveyed the views of parents, although many others were persuaded of the need to do so. Consideration was consequently given to a survey tool which could be used as a common feedback mechanism across all services in the UK. Such an approach seemed to offer several advantages:

- Having a universal tool to sample the views of parents means that individual services do not need to "re-invent the wheel" by devising their own.
- It offers some defence against assertions from managers and others that the outcome has been biased through the selection of questions or the way in which questions were worded.

- Having responses from a number of services enable them (for the first time) to compare their feedback with that of other services, although the implications would still need to be interpreted against the background of local arrangements and constraints.

It was also acknowledged that having a common core of questions would not preclude services from adding questions that reflect their own particular context or explore questions pertinent to local priorities, thus providing services with the opportunity to probe issues relevant to local agendas.

The development of a universal feedback tool for evaluating parents' views of EP services therefore has the potential to make a contribution to service developments. With this in mind, a workshop was held in the summer of 2011, which included services from every region of the UK. This workshop considered the findings of the literature review and a questionnaire evolved from the discussion that followed. The aim of the questionnaire was to obtain feedback about the quality of the service parents received, with the view that it might prompt changes in the way EP services operate. It was not intended to be a tool by which managers appraise the performance of individual EPs hence it could be sent anonymously.

## **SCOPE OF THIS REPORT**

The aim of this report is to provide feedback on these arrangements. It is intended that the survey continue into the academic year 2012-13 and that there be a meeting of all those concerned in the Autumn term 2012 to discuss amendments, review the outcomes and decide a way forward.

This report starts with a description of the services who participated and the nature of the cases upon which the feedback was offered. This should enable others to consider how relevant these data are to their own context. It then looks at the quantitative feedback and the ratings parents gave particular questions. Lastly it discusses the qualitative feedback parents made about the service they had received and about the questionnaire itself.

### *Service participation*

To the end of the academic year 2011/2012, 775 responses from 16 EP services<sup>3</sup> had been reported via SurveyMonkey to the NAPEP questionnaire entitled *Feedback from Parents and Carers*. Whilst the questionnaire was available from the end of September 2011 it took time for many services to set the necessary arrangements in place for its usage. Consequently the relative amount of data received reflected the size of the service, the sampling arrangements adopted and the date data started to be collected. Data for individual services are also reported in Appendix A so that they can compare their responses with those of others. All of these data are coded to preserve anonymity and the codes for participating services can be obtained from the

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<sup>3</sup> Barnet, City of York, Derbyshire, Durham, Essex, Hampshire, Hertfordshire, Kent, Kingston-upon-Thames, Powys, Slough, Solihull, Southwark, Walsall, Wokingham & Worcestershire

authors<sup>4</sup>. Other services are still welcome to participate in this exercise. A copy of the questionnaire and details about how to return data can be obtained from NAPEP.

#### *Type of cases on which the feedback was provided.*

The questionnaire was intended to be used only where there has been a substantial level of involvement. It was not envisaged that it would be used to evaluate training or therapeutic intervention as these are likely to be evaluated separately. The other critical criterion was that it needed to be work of which parents had some knowledge, either through a meeting or associated paperwork (report or letter describing what was done or found). As parental views may differ as a function of the type of involvement experienced, information about the type of contact, nature of the need being discussed and the sex and age of the child were requested.

#### *Sex of child*

Not all services reported the sex of the child concerned (omitted in 164, or 21.16%, of the returns). Where this information was provided, 75.29% of cases were boys and 24.71% girls. As cases included in this exercise are unlikely to have been sampled with specific reference to the sex of the child this implies that on average EPs tend to see approximately three times as many boys as girls.

#### *Age of child*

As above 236 returns (30.45%) did not specify the year group of the child concerned. Of the rest, the bulk of work related to children in their younger years. Most children were in their pre-school years (18.74%, although this represents a range rather than a year), 51.95% were at Key Stage 1 or younger and 84.60% were at Key stage 2 or younger. In only two cases did the feedback relate to young people above the age of 16 years. In addition there were only 12 young people in year 10 and five in year 11 (see Table 1 for distribution by age). As above this may be reflective of the general pattern of work of EPs (i.e. a strong emphasis on work with younger children).

#### *Type of contact*

Type of contact was broken into crude categories, which were defined in the following way:

- 1) **Consultation and discussion.** The child can be at any stage of the code of practice. The nature of the contact is primarily a discussion with parents or professional staff about meeting his or her needs and the educational psychologist (EP) may have no direct contact with the child.
- 2) **Non-statutory.** The child is at School Action or School Action plus and the EP has some direct contact with him or her (e.g. through observation, assessment etc).

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- 3) **Statutory.** The contact is primarily targeted at completion of an Appendix D.
- 4) **Post-statutory.** The contact is primarily to contribute to an annual review or less formal follow-up on a child already subject to a Statement of Special Educational Need.

The types of contact on which we received parental feedback are shown in Table 2. Again the type of contact was not provided in 202 (26.06%) cases. Of the rest, approximately a third (33.68%) of cases related to non-statutory work, a third (33.51%) to statutory work, a quarter (22.86%) to consultation or discussion and ten percent (9.95%) to post-statutory involvement.

**Table 1:** Distribution by age of the child upon whom the feedback was made

<i>Year group</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Pre-school	101	18.74%
Reception	67	12.43%
Year 1	52	9.65%
Year 2	60	11.13%
Year 3	49	9.09%
Year 4	44	8.16%
Year 5	48	8.91%
Year 6	35	6.49%
Year 7	20	3.71%
Year 8	20	3.71%
Year 9	24	4.45%
Year 10	12	2.23%
Year 11	5	0.93%
Post-16	2	0.37%
<i>Total</i>	<i>539</i>	<i>100</i>

**Table 2:** Type of contact to which responses refer

<i>Type of contact</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Unspecified	202	26.06%
Non-Statutory	193	24.90%
Statutory	192	24.77%
Consultation/Discussion	131	16.90%
Post-statutory	57	7.35%
<i>Total</i>	<i>775</i>	<i>100.00%</i>

### ***Type of need***

There was also an attempt to classify responses by need [as defined by the Pupil Level Annual School Census (PLASC) codes<sup>5</sup>]. However, it is acknowledged that it is difficult to summarise children's needs in this simplistic fashion and these arrangements are not totally satisfactory. Where needs were defined in a way which placed them outside the PLASC range we attempted to force a fit. Consequently Asperger's syndrome, Autistic Spectrum Continuum and social communication difficulties were subsumed under ASD; severe anxiety, obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) and gifted under OTH and learning difficulty under MLD (on the basis that they had not been defined as severe). There is however acknowledgment this decision may be criticised and a direct knowledge of the child might have suggested a better categorisation of need.

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) was the only addition made to the PLASC codes. The decision to include this was based on the number of references made and the lack of a more appropriate category. A further issue was that some needs were complex and a number of categories applied. Where this was reported the case was counted in respect to each category. Hence whilst only 523 responses were made, the total exceeds this. Table 3 indicates the categories of need reported.

**Table 3:** Distribution by type of need relating to the child upon whom feedback was offered (N = 523)

<i>Need</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
BESD	145	25.13%
ASD	111	19.24%
SLCN	105	18.20%
MLD	102	17.68%
SpLD	24	4.16%
SLD	22	3.81%
PD	21	3.64%
OTH	14	2.43%
ADHD	13	2.25%
HI	8	1.39%
VI	8	1.39%
PMLD	3	0.52%
MSI	1	0.17%
<i>Total</i>	<i>577</i>	<i>100.00%</i>

<sup>5</sup> SPLD = Specific Learning Difficulty, MLD = Moderate Learning Difficulty, SLD = Severe Learning Difficulty, PMLD = Profound & Multiple Learning Difficulty, BESD = Behaviour, Emotional & Social Difficulties, SLCN = Speech, Language and Communication Needs, HI = Hearing Impairment, VI = Visual Impairment, MSI = Multi-Sensory Impairment, PD = Physical Disability, ASD = Autistic Spectrum Disorder and OTH = Other Difficulty / Disability

## QUANTITATIVE FEEDBACK FROM PARENTS

### Rating of statements

The first part of the questionnaire asked parents to rate their overall satisfaction level (question 16) and how closely their opinion matched the proposition expressed in respect to 15 statements relating to the input provided by the EP. All of these responses were managed in a similar way. By way of explaining the process adopted, responses to question 16 are discussed first.

#### *Overall level of satisfaction*

Parents were asked to rate their overall satisfaction with the contribution made by the EP on a four point scale which ranged from *Dissatisfied* to *Very satisfied*. The number of responses under each category has been aggregated and is shown in Table 4. This suggested a high level of satisfaction. Less than 1% expressed dissatisfaction, most (56.33%) were *very satisfied* and nearly 95% of parents were either *satisfied* or *very satisfied*.

Assuming the categories of responses represent a continuum (which may not be true), and to facilitate statistical analysis, the categories were given a numerical score which ranged from 1 to 4 (with *dissatisfied* equating to 1, *not very satisfied* to 2 etc.). Thus the midpoint for this scale would be 2.50. On this basis the overall rating made by parents was 3.50 (SD = 0.63, n = 773) placing the rating mid-way between *Satisfied* and *Very satisfied*. The data tables relating to each service are given in Appendix A.

**Table 4:** Parent/carer ratings of satisfaction with the EP's contribution

	Dissatisfied	Not very satisfied	Satisfied	Very satisfied	Total
Number	7	34	296	436	773
Percentage	0.90%	4.39%	38.24%	56.33%	100.00%

To investigate how the rating of statements related to some of the other variables a 3-way univariate ANOVA was conducted with sex (boy or girl), school year (pre-school to post-16) and type of contact (consultation, non-statutory, statutory and post-statutory) being between-subject variables. The type of need was not included as there were concerns about the validity of these data. The ANOVA indicated no significant main effect of sex, type or year. The implication being that there was no marked difference in parents' ratings of this statement relative to these variables.

#### *Parental comments on specific aspects of the service provided.*

Parents were also asked to rate their level of agreement with statements about particular aspects of the service they had received. This time it was done on a five point scale which ranged from *Strongly disagree* to *Strongly agree*. There was also a *Not applicable* option if parents had not encountered

that issue or they considered it was too soon for them to comment. As above the number of responses under each category was aggregated and these raw data are shown in Table 5.

**TABLE 5:** Rating of parents to the statements provided and percentage in each category (excluding *Not applicable*) to nearest whole number.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree	Not applicable	Total
1. I knew why the Educational Psychologist was going to be involved.	13 2%	10 1%	20 3%	231 30%	492 64%	6	772
2. The Educational Psychologist seemed to value my views and take them into account.	19 3%	7 1%	27 4%	201 27%	505 67%	12	771
3. I was able to share my views and any concerns.	15 2%	12 2%	19 3%	194 25%	524 69%	10	774
4. I consider the Educational Psychologist provided independent advice	16 2%	12 2%	40 5%	263 34%	433 57%	9	774
5. I was fully involved in the discussion about my child's needs and what was going to happen to address them.	20 3%	26 3%	42 6%	216 28%	456 60%	14	774
6. Sufficient time was provided during this contact to discuss my child's needs.	21 3%	38 5%	39 5%	247 33%	415 55%	11	771
7. The Educational Psychologist seemed knowledgeable and assisted in finding ways to help.	17 2%	18 2%	51 7%	241 32%	435 57%	9	771
8. All of my questions and concerns were addressed.	21 3%	31 4%	76 10%	250 33%	382 50%	14	774
9. The involvement provided a better insight into the situation.	16 2%	23 3%	88 12%	272 36%	357 47%	14	774
10. Actions agreed were relevant, useful and able to be done.	18 2%	25 3%	79 11%	303 41%	318 43%	26	773
11. At the end of the Educational Psychologist's involvement it was made clear who would be doing what.	18 3%	41 6%	95 13%	303 42%	271 37%	45	755
12. Things improved as a result of the Educational Psychologist's involvement.	23 4%	41 7%	204 32%	181 29%	180 29%	144	773
13. The Educational Psychologist did everything they had agreed to do.	13 2%	18 3%	91 13%	261 37%	320 46%	70	773
14. I would have liked the Educational Psychologist to have been involved sooner.	22 3%	59 9%	152 22%	174 25%	291 42%	75	773
15. I am confident that my child's needs will be met more effectively as a result of this involvement.	21 3%	28 4%	122 16%	261 35%	319 43%	21	772

All of the statements were worded in a positive direction<sup>6</sup> and the net impression is that parents expressed a high level of satisfaction. On average only 2.36% of parents disagreed, most (49.23%) strongly agreed and 80.32% of parents either agreed or strongly agreed. As discussed in relation to *level of satisfaction*, to facilitate statistical analysis the categories were assigned a numerical score which in this case ranged from 1 to 5 (with *Strongly disagree* equating to 1 and *Strongly agree* to 5 etc.). Hence the range was 1 to 5 with a midpoint of 3. Table 6 provides a summary of the responses and is ordered on the strength of endorsement by parents. Comparative tables for the services that participated in this exercise are again provided in Appendix A.

**Table 6:** Rating of statements rank ordered by average rating

<i>Statement</i>	<i>Average rating</i>	<i>St. Dev</i>
3. I was able to share my views and any concerns.	4.57	0.78
2. The Educational Psychologist seemed to value my views and take them into account.	4.54	0.83
1. I knew why the Educational Psychologist was going to be involved.	4.54	0.79
4. I consider the Educational Psychologist provided independent advice.	4.42	0.84
5. I was fully involved in the discussion about my child's needs and what was going to happen to address them.	4.40	0.93
7. The Educational Psychologist seemed knowledgeable and assisted in finding ways to help.	4.39	0.98
6. Sufficient time was provided during this contact to discuss my child's needs.	4.31	0.89
8. All of my questions and concerns were addressed.	4.24	0.98
9. The involvement provided a better insight into the situation.	4.23	0.92
13. The Educational Psychologist did everything they had agreed to do.	4.22	0.93
10. Actions agreed were relevant, useful and able to be done.	4.18	0.97
15. I am confident that my child's needs will be met more effectively as a result of this involvement.	4.10	1.06
11. At the end of the Educational Psychologist's involvement it was made clear who would be doing what.	4.05	0.90
14. I would have liked the Educational Psychologist to have been involved sooner.	3.94	1.12
12. Things improved as a result of the Educational Psychologist's involvement.	3.72	0.99

<sup>6</sup> Although question 14 *I would have liked the Educational Psychologist to have been involved sooner* has critical implications and has been omitted in the calculation of the total mean.

The strongest endorsements were given to the statements *I was able to share my views and any concerns* and *The Educational Psychologist seemed to value my views and take them into account*. The ratings for both of these exceeded 4.50, placing them midway between *agree* and *strongly agree*. At the other extreme the statement *Things improved as a result of the Educational Psychologist's involvement* received the lowest mean rating at 3.72 which would place it between *neither agree nor disagree* and *agree* and closer to the latter.

As with the *level of satisfaction* item a 3-way ANOVA was conducted with sex, school year and type of contact being between-subject variables. The outcomes of these analyses were very different depending on the statement. To report these outcomes a summary is provided below but each statement is reported on in detail in Appendix B. As a general point, no effect was found to be significant in respect to the sex of the child for any of these statements but elsewhere the full permutation of possible outcomes was observed. These have been categorised here as those statements in which no significant effect was found; those in which the type of contact was significant; those in which the age of the child was significant and those in which the interaction between type and year was significant. Significant was defined as  $p < 0.05$ . Statements are reported in respect to each category that applies, hence some will appear in more than one. As a general point, where a difference was identified no formal testing (i.e. with t-tests) of where this difference lay was undertaken because of the volume of work this would have entailed. However a visual inspection of the means was undertaken.

*No significant effect.* As with the level of satisfaction discussed earlier no effect was found in respect to questions 7<sup>7</sup>, 11<sup>8</sup> and 14<sup>9</sup>: Hence there was no marked difference in parent or carer ratings of these statements in respect to the type of intervention experienced or the age of their child.

*Effect of the type of intervention parents experienced.* The general observation was that where an effect of type was identified the mean ratings for consultation, non-statutory contact or both almost invariably recorded the lowest means. By way of example, for Question 3: *I was able to share my views and any concerns* the cases, where the contact was consultation or discussion the mean rating was 4.11. All of the other means exceeded 4.48. This finding was counterintuitive and it is difficult to explain why this was the case as listening to the views and concerns of the parents would seem to be fundamental to the process of consultation. In respect to questions 13<sup>10</sup> and 15<sup>11</sup> only the means for consultation and non-statutory contact registered

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<sup>7</sup> Question 7: *The Educational Psychologist seemed knowledgeable and assisted in finding ways to help.*

<sup>8</sup> Question 11: *At the end of the Educational Psychologist's involvement it was made clear who would be doing what.*

<sup>9</sup> Question 14: *I would have liked the Educational Psychologist to have been involved sooner.*

<sup>10</sup> Question 13: *The Educational Psychologist did everything they had agreed to do.*

<sup>11</sup> Question 15: *I am confident that my child's needs will be met more effectively as a result of this involvement.*

below 4.00. If we take the first of these statements, statutory and post-statutory contacts may have more actions arising which are required to be met because of the statutory context. However, it seems idle to speculate on an explanation as parents were not asked to expand on their ratings, hence there is no information upon which to interpret these findings.

In respect to the question 12<sup>12</sup> whilst the overall rating of this statement was 3.72, that for statutory contact was 4.00. Moreover the means for consultation, non-statutory and post-statutory contact were all at a similar level to each other. For questions 2<sup>13</sup>, 4<sup>14</sup>, 5<sup>15</sup>, 6<sup>16</sup> and 9<sup>17</sup> there were similar discrepancies but the lowest means were in respect to non-statutory work.

*Effect of the age of the child concerned.* For a number of statements ratings were found to be related to the age of the child. This was the case for questions 1<sup>18</sup>, 2, 3<sup>19</sup>, 4, 5, 6, 8<sup>20</sup>, 9, 10<sup>21</sup> and 15<sup>22</sup>. The general pattern was that the mean ratings for secondary aged children were lowest and the mean generally declined with the age of the child. By way of illustration, the mean rating for question 2 across Key Stage 1 was 4.59, across Key Stage 2 was 4.50, across Key Stage 3 was 4.27 and across Key Stage 4 was 3.50. To explore this decline in ratings with the age of the child we examined the relationship between rating and year group of the child in respect to question 15. A Spearman's Rho was found to equal - 0.18 which was significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). This supports the observation that parental ratings generally decline with the age of the child. However there is a caution in respect to these findings as contact with older secondary-aged children was extremely low (see Table 1). Hopefully such findings will become more robust, over time and as these data sets increase.

*An interaction between year and type of contact in respect to ratings.* For the first four questions there was also a significant interaction between year and type of contact. As might be anticipated from the earlier discussion, in the first three cases the lowest means related to consultation and non-statutory contact. The year groups for which the lowest ratings were made however varied (see Appendix B). As a general finding, consultation for years 5 and 6 and non-statutory contact for years 8 and 10 tended to be associated with the lowest means. Question 4 differed from this pattern, however, in that the lowest means were related to non-statutory work and statutory work. For non-

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<sup>12</sup> Question 12: *Things improved as a result of the Educational Psychologist's involvement.*

<sup>13</sup> Question 2: *The Educational Psychologist seemed to value my views and take them into account.*

<sup>14</sup> Question 4: *I consider the Educational Psychologist provided independent advice.*

<sup>15</sup> Question 5: *I was fully involved in the discussion about my child's needs and what was going to happen to address them.*

<sup>16</sup> Question 6: *Sufficient time was provided during this contact to discuss my child's needs.*

<sup>17</sup> Question 9: *The involvement provided a better insight into the situation.*

Inspection of the mean indicated that those for non-statutory work received the lowest ratings.

<sup>18</sup> Question 1: *I knew why the Educational Psychologist was going to be involved.*

<sup>19</sup> Question 3: *I was able to share my views and any concerns.*

<sup>20</sup> Question 8: *All of my questions and concerns were addressed.*

<sup>21</sup> Question 10: *Actions agreed were relevant, useful and able to be done.*

<sup>22</sup> Question 15: *I am confident that my child's needs will be met more effectively as a result of this involvement.*

statutory work the lowest means related to the first two years at secondary school (years 7 and 8) and for statutory work the last two age groups (year 11 and Post-16).

## **QUALITATIVE FEEDBACK FROM PARENTS**

A thematic analysis was conducted on responses to questions 17 (“What did you find the most helpful part of this contact?”) and 18 (“How might the educational psychologist’s involvement have been improved?”). Many of the comments also ranged across several themes and have consequently been counted in relation to each theme to which they applied, hence the total number exceeds the total number of responses made. Many of the responses to section 19 (“Any other comments?”) also seemed more appropriate as answers to questions 17 & 18. For simplicity these have consequently been included in the appropriate sections.

In all cases only themes that were expressed by 10 or more parents have been included in this report.

### **Any other comments**

Addressing these questions in reverse order, those comments to question 19 not included elsewhere fell into two categories. Firstly, some comments were critical of how their child’s case had been managed overall; whilst of general interest and highly pertinent to the parents concerned, these were not reflective of the EP support they had received.

- *I think that the speech therapist should have done more. My child already knew the shapes, colour, and numbers before she went. She did not take 4 months to just learn big and little?*
- *I would like to know why [school named] did not recommend [child] for a statement sooner? I feel that for this to have been refused before people properly assessed her caused more delay.*
- *There seems to be a huge communication barrier between the NHS & Education.*

Secondly some parents (n = 66) just used this section to offer thanks for the service they had received. These responses either constituted general thanks, favourable comments on the advice offered or comments on the subsequent progress that had been made. The following provide a flavour of these:

- *My child has improved in his attitude to work and school thanks to this gentle and considerate intervention.*
- *Outstanding work from the EP. I have been made to feel involved, supported and understood, she has helped my son immensely - couldn't praise any higher.*
- *Thank you, you made me feel like I wasn't going mad as you also saw the thing I did but the school couldn't.*

- *We are very pleased with the help, reassurance and advice that the EP has provided. Our daughter was never "labelled" just helped and understood.*
- *He has made a miraculous improvement, after years of seeking help I cannot express just how grateful we both are.*
- *Don't ever fire her: Keep it up*

### **How might the educational psychologist's involvement have been improved?**

Table 7 provides a summary of the number of responses to this question by theme.

**Table 7:** The number of responses by theme to the improvement suggestions offered

<i>Code</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
To have been seen sooner	119	24.44
Positive comments about EPs	111	22.79
The need for follow-up meetings	45	9.24
Concerns about whether advice would be implemented	30	6.16
Lack of direct contact with the EP	26	5.34
More involvement with child	25	5.13
More time with the EP	18	3.70
Where do we go from here?	14	2.87
More involvement	13	2.67
Delay in receiving the report	11	2.26
Miscellaneous	75	15.40
Total	487	100.00

#### *Positive comments*

The aim of question 18 was to identify criticisms of the service parents had received, with the view that this would identify aspects that services might need to consider. However, building on the point above, a number of responses (n = 111, 23% %) ran counter to the direction of the question and stated (strongly in some cases) that the contact had been excellent and in their judgement no improvement was necessary or even possible.

- *No improvement is needed. EP was great. We felt totally lost as parents and EP explained and reassured us - really excellent*
- *Cannot think of anything - we were very happy with the involvement*
- *I thought it was brilliant - thank you*
- *It couldn't. She was fantastic and always available when needed.*

### *To have been seen sooner*

The theme in the greatest number of responses (n = 119, 24%) was not critical of the actual service they had received but just wished their child had been seen earlier. In some cases they were sympathetic about the pressure on EP services but felt that there had been a deterioration in their son or daughter's difficulties whilst waiting for them to be seen.

- *Could have been a lot sooner than it was.*
- *If we had met the EP earlier we feel things for [child] would be different to how they currently are.*
- *it would have been very helpful if the situation had been handled sooner.*
- *It took a year from first seeking help to get the appointment with the EP - too long.*
- *It would have been great to have had her input earlier but she has been excellent and I appreciate she has a lot on her hands.*

Rarely was the delay between referral and the child being seen raised as a concern. For most parents the school was perceived to be responsible for the delay. Concerns expressed by the parents had not triggered contact with the EP until the situation had deteriorated further. This raises questions about the role of the school as gatekeeper to EP services. Should parents have more open access to EP services or does the school perform an important role in filtering cases with the greater need (i.e. a triage function)?

- *EP only seemed to get involved when the situation began to spiral downwards. Convenient for school: not for us.*
- *Being involved earlier. Too much red tape getting the necessary help for a child who is clearly struggling.*
- *It would have been useful to have involved the EP 3 years ago when we expressed our concerns to the school*
- *Much earlier involvement when issues first arose - I had to insist the school put him on a waiting list to see the EP, the involvement was not easy to obtain, even though there were a range of issues that needed addressing.*

In some cases the limitations of EP time was felt to be responsible and in other cases parents felt they could have been more proactive.

- *Very disappointed in the waiting time to see the EP as the school only receives a limited number of visits per school year.*
- *Support and involvement was outstanding I just wish I'd have thought to contact [named EP] earlier.*

### *Follow-up meetings*

A significant theme (n = 45, 9%) was that parents wanted the reassurance of follow-up meetings. Essentially they were requesting review meetings in order to check progress and to set new targets. This was described by one parent as "after care". In some cases this view was based on the fact that as the

initial referral had proved so difficult they wanted to be assured that future contact would be easier to achieve. From a service perspective it could be argued that the school are essentially responsible for much of the ongoing monitoring and it would always be possible to re-involve the EP at some point in the future.

- *Getting feedback within 8-12 weeks to see if the actions that have been taken have helped my child.*
- *If there was funding for follow-up visits.*
- *It takes too long to get an appointment and when things are agreed they need to be followed-up.*
- *Continuing support of the EP assigned to a child/school with regular updates/reviews possible if school/parents have questions or concerns.*

#### *Implementation of advice.*

For parents (n = 30, 6%) the gap between the EP advice (as a Local Authority officer) and the school's response was problematic. Part of the reason parents wanted there to be follow-up meetings was that they were not confident the school would actually implement the ideas suggested. Consequently they felt that having the EP review developments would place pressure on the school to comply. In some cases parents' comments went further, they were seeking to place the EP in an inspectorial role in relation to schools although this fails to recognise the true complexity of the relationship. Presumably part of the frustration was that the whole procedure of referral and EP involvement would be pointless unless things changed to help their child and in most cases the school held the resources to enable this to happen.

- *By school being able to implement all agreed actions, not just those that suited them.*
- *Follow-up 'spot-checks' at the school - unannounced to check that the school are following up the recommendations.*
- *I felt that the school excluded my son from aspect of school life, it felt at times that the EP's hands were tied. I feel that she was as frustrated with things as I was.*
- *School did not put in place many of the agreed actions, so things were a little half-baked.*

#### *Direct contact with EP*

A theme in some of the comments (n = 26, 5%) was that whilst the EP had been involved with their son or daughter they had not been given an opportunity to discuss the advice on a face-to-face basis with the EP concerned. In some cases the school had been briefed with the understanding that they would mediate with parents and in others they had only received a written report. In some cases this meant that parents had been given no opportunity to express their views on the issues concerning their son or daughter.

- *I had no involvement whatsoever. I was not asked for any views. All I have is a written report.*

- *If I could have met them or spoke to them.*
- *We were not given much notice of the EP visit and therefore had to discuss things over the phone. After he met with my son he phoned again and we were able to speak at greater length which was helpful. Would like to have linked the EP with the school so the visit could have been more co-ordinated and covered our concerns while really setting up strategies with the school. As it happened it felt a bit like his visit 'ticked a box'.*
- *There was no contact with myself. The EP's contact was direct to the school and I did not know about any contact until after it had already been done.*

#### *More involvement*

Some parents seemed perfectly happy with the contact they had experienced but essentially wanted more of it. The reasons given tended to fall under several headings. Firstly there was a general and non-specific wish for more (n = 13, 3%).

- *I want the psychologist input more often now as the school has at last seen there is a problem after years of me complaining there was something wrong.*
- *I would have liked more involvement with him.*
- *More advice and assessment.*

Secondly there was a wish for more regular contact, which we have already discussed under the heading "follow-up" meetings. The third category was for more time for the discussion that took place either before or after the child was seen (n = 18, 4%). Several parents suggested that they felt the meeting they had, had been rushed or that additional issues had come to mind following the meeting that they would have liked to have had advice on. Some parents also indicated that they would have preferred to have an opportunity to talk to the EP without either the child or teacher being present.

- *Overall a positive experience but more time to discuss would have been nice.*
- *I would have expected a more lengthy consultation.*
- *Would have been nice to speak more to EP without the teacher present.*
- *A bit more time for discussion before and after the involvement for explanation about what would happen.*
- *Not enough time allocated to the meeting - it was rushed at the end.*

The last category was that many parents wanted the EP to see their child in other contexts or over time (n = 25, 5%). They were aware that their child's behaviour varied on a day-to-day basis and was different in other lessons or at home. The main reason appeared to be a need parents had for the EP to be fully informed about their child and to be able to arrive at an independent conclusion that was not skewed by comments of the school or others. Whether this would have improved the quality of advice is a moot point. Given

that parents had also commented that the EP seemed to have summed their child up accurately, presumably EPs collect all the information they need to inform an intervention or to form the bases on which to offer advice and a more comprehensive picture may not have been required. Some commented that the EP would not have had much insight into some issues without the information they provided, yet such information, from parents and teachers, forms a key part of the overall assessment.

- *It would have been good if he could have spent more time observing my little boy in class.*
- *More observations - almost impossible to observe a child's typical behaviour in 20 minutes!*
- *I only wish that my child could have been observed on more occasions.*
- *It might be useful if the EP could have more time observing my child so as to form a fully independent assessment.*
- *Spend more time with child as each day is different - worse - to better - well to tolerable - to bad?*
- *To visit the children on regular occasions to get accurate evidence for their assessments.*

#### *Where do we go from here?*

Some parents (n = 14, 3%) appeared confused about what would happen following contact with the EP. The general impression was that they were happy with the advice given but were not sure what, if anything, the school would do in response. In many cases the EP had outlined what they thought should be done but had failed to secure any concrete agreement from the school about what they were prepared to do. Presumably where this would require the school to commit additional resources this would require agreement from the Head teacher (or equivalent) who might not have been party to the discussion between the EP, parent and teacher.

- *A meeting after the report with the appropriate people from the school to understand what happens next - should he get extra help?*
- *At the end of the involvement suggestions were made but there was no clear agreement about who would be doing what - it was implied that school would be doing a lot of it.*
- *It was not clear what the outcome of the meeting would be, other than a report (i.e. will the recommended amount of support be provided?)*
- *It was clear what the recommendations were, but the school didn't make clear to me what would happen as a result.*

#### *Delay in receiving a report*

A number of parents (n = 11, 2%) expressed frustration about the delay between the EP seeing their child and them receiving a report or equivalent. The point was made that there was often so much change during this period that the report was totally redundant or of little real value. Some of the comments both here and elsewhere also talk critically about the quality of the correspondence received.

- *Report didn't reach me until 3 months after visit - by which time some of it was out of date.*
- *We had to wait nearly 5 months for the written report which only summarised what was already known.*
- *He was observed in September 2011. I did not receive a report until March 2012. This is ridiculous.*
- *I am disappointed with the quality of the consultation record provided. This also took a very long time to receive. It does not add anything of value to us.*

### **What did you find the most helpful part of this contact?**

The main themes in response to the question about the most helpful aspects of the contact are cited in Table 8.

#### *Everything.*

A number of parents (n = 11, 2%) responded that everything about the contact had been helpful and useful. Whilst endorsing of EP practice no further elaboration was provided.

- *All of it - wish it had happened sooner.*
- *Overall everything was good.*

#### *Opportunity to discuss the problem.*

Many parents (n = 59, 9%) simply cited the fact that the most helpful aspect was that they could discuss the problems their child had with someone and by implication be listened to. They often expressed feeling relief simply at being able to finally share their concerns with someone who was prepared to listen supportively and sympathetically to them. In many cases the underlying worries had been building for some time and there was a need to share these with others. In other cases attempts to raise issues with the school or others had been thwarted or not met their need.

- *At last someone is listening to me*
- *[EP named] has been an angel sent from above - finally someone has listened to what we have been saying for years*
- *I feel that I was finally being listened to and that they also believed my child was having problems.*
- *He answered all my questions with as much detail as possible and in a way that I could understand.*
- *The in-depth discussion we had about our child, independent of others involved.*

The fact that this involved face-to-face contact with someone who had actually met their son or daughter was also a recurring point

- *Being able to voice my concerns face-to-face.*
- *The opportunity to discuss the EP's findings in a face-to-face meeting.*

- *A person able to comment on our child and not just a paper study from a person who has never met our son.*

**Table 8:** Most helpful part of the contact (The coding adopted by frequency of occurrence and percentage of the total number of comments made.)

<i>Code</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Listening skills of the EP	92	14.79
To be given ideas and strategies to support child	62	9.97
Opportunity to discuss the problem	59	9.49
To be given a better understanding of child's difficulties	54	8.68
External, independent & unbiased perspective	44	7.07
The information or explanation provided	40	6.43
Gatekeeper to additional support	36	5.79
Professional and knowledgeable	35	5.63
Reassurance, confirmation or acknowledgement of needs	30	4.82
The assessment	25	4.02
Understanding of the process	18	2.89
The report or documentation	18	2.89
Relationship established with my child	15	2.41
Producing a plan to move things forward	14	2.25
Everything	11	1.77
Advice for statement	10	1.61
Miscellaneous	59	9.49
<i>Total</i>	<i>622</i>	<i>100.00</i>

### *Listening skills*

A more substantial theme (n = 92, 15%), however, related to the nature of the contact. Parents felt that the EP had been supportive and non-judgemental in the discussion. They were seen as approachable, put parents at ease, were good listeners and seemed to quickly grasp the issues being conveyed. The following words were commonly used: *approachable, attentive, courteous, empathetic, friendly, insightful, interested, kind, pleasant, positive, reassuring, respectful, supportive, understanding, and warm*. Parents generally perceived there to have been a good two-way exchange of information, in which their contribution was valued and properly respected. Parents felt relaxed and at ease in the company of the EP and this made it easier for them to talk openly about concerns that may not have been previously voiced.

- *Being listened to; she seemed to understand my concerns.*
- *The EP listened without judgement.*
- *I was able to ask questions that up until that point I felt unable to ask.*
- *I appreciated her warmth and down to earthiness. She made us feel at ease at this nerve-wracking and stressful time. I was very happy to have landed with her!*

One of the factors parents cited as contributing to them feeling at ease was that they did not perceive the contact as rushed. They thought they had been given sufficient time to explain their perspective and subsequently hear what the EP had to say. The net outcome was that parents perceived that they were not only listened to but properly understood.

- *Having the EP understand our concerns more than previous people had.*
- *Talking to someone who understood.*
- *She listens and makes time to speak to me even when she is busy.*

In some comments this trust was also perceived to extend to their child (n = 15, 2%). The EP was seen to have given their son or daughter sufficient time to be able to build a rapport, develop trust and this had enabled the child to discuss difficulties more openly.

- *She ... gave my son [child's name] time to open up to her about his difficulties.*
- *She's the only person my daughter has trusted to tell about how she feels.*
- *The EP was very adept at making [child's name] feel comfortable and able to discuss his feelings.*
- *He was very good with our child and he made us feel at ease. A genuinely nice man to work with.*

A related point was that some parents perceived the EP to have shown a genuine commitment to support their son or daughter and hence were trusted to advocate in his or her best interests. This was typically conveyed by actions that were felt to go beyond those considered adequate to discharge their professional responsibilities.

- *[Child's name] was clearly her only concern and she wanted to help him and do what's best for him*
- *It felt like she was on my side and had my daughter's best interests as her priority.*
- *Pre-school contacted him to keep him updated and even though he was on leave he talked with them for over an hour in his own time.*

*To be given a better understanding of my child's difficulties.*

The fourth most common theme (n = 54, 9%) was that contact with the EP had provided them with a better understanding of their child difficulties, either in respect to learning or some of the drivers underpinning his or her behaviour. In some cases it was said to have provided them with genuine insights into the situation which had caused them to revise how they perceived the issues. This was often achieved by reframing the locus of the problem from a within child-issue to how they were responding to contextual factors.

- *An insight into what the causes of my child's behaviour is in class.*
- *Having a different view - school is or has only been looking at [child's] behaviour, not the whole picture.*
- *The EP gave us different ideas and changed the way we looked at things.*
- *It was very helpful to be able to sit with the teacher and EP and understand why my child behaved the way he did in certain situations and what could be done to change this*

In part, this understanding was based on the information that arose from the assessment of the child. Use of the term 'assessment' in this context does not necessarily imply a psychometric assessment but extended to a wide range of techniques including observation of the child.

- *Finding out about how my son is at nursery I found the most helpful aspect of this contact.*
- *To hear what was observed in the classroom - as parents we have no knowledge of it.*
- *The results of the test which showed areas of difficulty for my daughter.*

*To be given ideas and strategies to support their child.*

Parents (n = 62, 10%) were also grateful for advice on the interventions that could be used. This was particularly the case where suggestions were practical, introduced approaches not previously tried and gave them practical things they could do with their child.

- *I was given good advice about how to deal with my son's behaviour and hair pulling.*
- *The advice that [EP named] gave and tips on how nursery and I could help my daughter.*
- *The list of things to help my child with communication and learning.*
- *I think the EP feedback to the school was useful in pinpointing actions that could be taken.*
- *The EP helped me re-evaluate strategies to use in coping with tantrums.*

A number of comments (n = 14; 2%) indicated that whilst the EP contact had not produced an intervention strategy as such, it had been invaluable in helping to establish a plan of action which would enable the situation to move forward.

- *Advice on plan of action where to turn to next and plans to be put in place.*
- *The meeting to discuss findings and ways forward for my child.*

*Gatekeeper to additional support.*

As might be anticipated, for many parents (n = 36, 6%), the most important outcome was that the contact resulted in some tangible support for their child.

This was often in the form of additional support assistant time or occasionally teacher support.

- *Getting help and support for my son's learning difficulties.*
- *Getting extra support for him to make sure he doesn't slip through the net.*
- *Getting my child the help he needs.*

In some cases parents felt that the EP had placed pressure on the school to make additional time available to their child. However for others the contact had predominantly focussed on enabling the statutory assessment procedures to proceed (n = 10, 2%) and hence it facilitated access to additional resources, special provision or a special school through this mechanism.

- *She was a voice of authority, which forced the school to take our concerns seriously.*
- *His report assisted with a successful application for a statement*
- *Helped my daughter get a statutory assessment which will be a big help in future.*

*An independent, external and unbiased perspective.*

For some parents (n = 44, 7%) a key aspect was that the EP was perceived to provide an independent view of their child's needs. Moreover it provided a view from someone with professional knowledge who was neutral and not directly involved in the situation.

- *That there was an independent look at what was happening*
- *It is always useful to have a qualified "outsider" look at a situation as they often see the issues and solutions more clearly as they are not "emotionally" involved.*
- *I appreciated his independent view on [child's] development and future needs.*
- *An unbiased external opinion of my child.*

Use of the term 'independent' begs the question as to what they were independent of. This was not always made explicit but for many it was the fact that the view was external to that of the school or preschool setting. Some parents appeared already to have raised the issues with the school but were dissatisfied by the response. Involving the EP had provided a mechanism for breaking the deadlock and ensuring a review of the issues.

- *Being able to put forward my concerns to a person not connected to the school.*
- *Having someone independent from the school involved so my issues were heard.*

Linked to this was the fact that the EP's views were conceived to be independent in the sense of being impartial and unbiased. They were not

perceived to collude with the school but could be trusted to voice their own views about their child.

- *That I had a professional assessment of my daughter and was give an unbiased opinion.*
- *I felt my child's needs were foremost in her mind and she had an unbiased opinion of the situation.*
- *His best interests were in my child and I can't thank him enough.*

#### *Professional and knowledgeable*

An issue related to listening skills was an acknowledgement of the professional knowledge the EP brought to the situation. Parents (n = 35, 6%) perceived themselves to be talking to someone who was knowledgeable and experienced about the issues that concerned them and hence readily understood the issues (got under the skin of the problem). It was not merely someone skilled at listening but someone who was also well informed. The term 'expert' was often used in this context.

- *Their previous knowledge and experience applied to the situation.*
- *Being able to talk to someone who understood what I was saying.*
- *The EP picked up all of my concerns and summed my child up within a morning. I felt understood and supported.*

#### *Information or explanation provided*

Some parents (n = 40, 6%) commented on the information provided during this contact as being the most helpful aspect. In some cases this was advice about what could be done about their child's difficulties. In others the information extended to information about SEN, the associated legislation and how the SEN system operated in the Local Authority. Hence this helped ensure that parents were in a better position to make informed decisions about the options open to them. This information was either conveyed during the meeting or was sent afterwards.

- *Explaining things to us that we were new to.*
- *The EP was the first (and only) person to sit down and explain everything that was going on - procedures, people etc. Before her involvement I was completely lost.*
- *The EP gave us a full, knowledgeable explanation about the process.*

In some cases this information also included signposting parents to (local or national) support groups or agencies who might be able to provide them with support or assistance in relation to their particular circumstances.

- *That he gave me groups to contact regarding [child's] issues.*

#### *Reassurance, confirmation or acknowledgement of needs.*

Linked to the need to be listened to, many parents (n = 30, 5%) felt that the contact had provided them with reassurance. This was either assurance that their son or daughter's needs were (at last) properly acknowledged, being

taken seriously and attempts were being made to ensure they were addressed (validated), or that their fears were unfounded.

- *He confirmed the difficulties we thought our son was having which made us feel reassured.*
- *Just to have people acknowledge she has a learning difficulty.*
- *I felt that my daughter's problems are now known and we can move forward to offer her the help she needs.*
- *Hearing what I thought I knew confirmed.*
- *Finally having someone explain that [child] did have a problem i.e. delayed speech but that it was nothing to be really concerned about.*

Comfort was also provided where there was confirmation that the arrangements already in place were appropriate to their child's need.

- *Confirmation that the school are doing all they can and are taking the right steps.*

In some cases (n = 18, 3%) this point was also linked to the report which publically recorded these needs, which could be shared and used as evidence of what had been established.

- *Evidence of my son's "problems" are now documented and have passed to his senior school ready for start September 2012.*
- *Someone put on paper what I have been saying for over a year.*

## **FEEDBACK ON THE QUESTIONNAIRE**

As part of the questionnaire we included two questions about how we might improve the survey. Question 20 (*How can we improve the questionnaire?*) was directed at capturing general points parents wanted to make and Question 21 (*Can you identify which (if any) questions were difficult to understand and need to be clarified?*) to identify any specific questions they found difficult to understand. There was considerable overlap in the responses made. To avoid repetition these will be combined where appropriate.

In total we were left with 144 responses to question 20 and 176 to question 21. One parent enigmatically suggested all the questions were problematic, although there was no further elaboration on why this might be the case. Of the rest 103 (71.5%) and 105 (59.7%) respectively opposed the direction of the question and indicated that they were satisfied with the questionnaire as it was. Whilst such answers failed to add to our understanding of the problems, they did affirm that many parents found the questionnaire easy to answer. They generally thought it was comprehensive, allowed them adequate scope to voice their views and was easy to understand.

- *It was basic and easy to read. I don't like forms but it was fine for me.*
- *Leave it as it is very understandable.*

The most substantive theme in response to question 20 related to the timing of the questionnaire. Parents either felt the questionnaire had been sent too early or too late in the process. Whilst these positions appear contradictory they are reconcilable. Some of the questions related to the quality of interaction between parent and EP, these impressions can fade over time and hence need to be collected relatively soon after the contact. In contrast, questions relating to the impact of the intervention require a period of time to have elapsed before it is possible to judge their effectiveness.

- *By delivering this questionnaire much sooner after the appointment with EP.*
- *No time has been allowed to have had any results yet.*

This point about it being too soon to judge also arose in the criticisms of the questions (responses to Question 21). The four questions most commonly cited as being problematic are shown in Table 9. Comments here either related to the fact the contact had been a brief meeting which did not seem to offer much potential for influencing change or that it was still too early to see any improvement or judge whether agreements had been honoured.

- *It was one meeting, what's supposed to improve?*
- *It felt difficult to say, as so far the advice has not been achieved - process still happening.*
- *How can you ask this when no time has been given to give chance to do stuff.*

**Table 9:** Most commonly cited questions causing parents concern.

<i>Statement</i>	<i>Frequency</i>
12. Things improved as a result of the Educational Psychologist's involvement.	15
18. How might the Educational Psychologist's involvement have been improved?	9
10. Actions agreed were relevant, useful and able to be done.	7
13. The Educational Psychologist did everything they had agreed to do.	7

The point about it only being a brief meeting would already seem to be catered for by the *not applicable* option within the questionnaire. The latter point suggests that whilst valid, these questions may have been posed too early in the process. These comments suggest that it might be possible to split the questionnaire into two: an immediate feedback section and a follow-up review focusing on impact.

The second theme in response to question 20 related to the rating scales in questions 1 – 15. A small group of parents (n = 8) felt that this was a restrictive format that provided them with no opportunity to expand on why they had responded in a particular way, hence they were asking for a box in which they could offer elaboration. We have some sympathy with this point. However, having open-ended responses for each question would make the

questionnaire longer which was against the direction of other comments. A compromise might be to include one open-ended question at the end of this section, to allow an opportunity for additional comments.

- *It would be useful to have a designated space under points 1-15 to write down extra comments.*
- *Not all questions justify such a simple reply as disagree or agree.*

The third theme was that many of the questions were not applicable to their particular circumstances. This could partially be addressed by dividing the questionnaire into two as discussed above. Whilst this criticism has some validity it would imply that each questionnaire would need to be adapted to the needs of each circumstance (as one parent requested). This would be almost impossible to achieve and were it to be done would make it difficult to collate responses.

- *Some of the questions seem a bit wide to apply to our situation.*
- *Questions need to be made to suit individuals, not one for all.*

One parent criticised some of the questions as having a lack of precision and two more requested questions be clearer, which may relate to the same point. Again we would acknowledge the validity but they were deliberately worded in this way to make them applicable to a wide range of circumstances and service arrangements. To make them more precise would require them to be tailored to the individual circumstances (bespoke), which takes us back to the problem above.

- *Simple easy to understand, without double questions/statements within the question and more focussed e.g. question 12 what are 'things'? Question 15 - 'will be met' by whom? the school? Pre-School? the teacher? The LSA?*

Dealing briefly with the other points:

- Some parents (3 comments) wanted more physical space on the form for answering questions 18 to 20. This is essentially a formatting issue. It is always difficult to know how much space to present. Providing too much space can be construed as placing pressure on people to write more than they deem necessary. In this case we simply wanted the questionnaire to fit on two sides of A4. We might however indicate that parents could expand their comments onto additional sheets if they wish.
- Two parents were critical of the scaling structure and suggested a rating of 1-10. The literature on scaling is complex. There appears to be limitations with any option chosen and it is more about understanding these limitations rather than moving towards an optimum arrangement. A key point is that rating systems with an even set of options force a response in one direction or the other and those with an odd set of numbers provide scope for those who genuinely have no extreme view. In addition it appears erroneous to assume that

providing a larger set of options necessarily adds more accuracy. In a dated article Symonds (1924) argues statistically that the optimum number of options to provide is seven and that going beyond this fails to add accuracy. The most usual format is to scale 1-5 (Robson, 1997) and we are not persuaded of the need to change. However one parent went on to argue that "*to agree is absolute so there really is no difference between agree and strongly agree*". This is a more substantial point and will need to be accommodated in any revision to the questionnaire.

- One parent indicated that they did not want the questionnaire to be anonymous, so that there would be the potential for a dialogue around issues. However this would change the function of the survey and might make some parents reluctant to voice genuine views.
- Our favourite comment was simply - *Put a Fiver in it!* We acknowledge this might well be deemed an improvement.

Addressing the other points made about specific questions (Question 21) most were identified by at least one parent, although they did not always elaborate on why. Comments elaborating on why a question was identified included the following:

- 18 *How might the Educational Psychologist's involvement have been improved?* These primarily queried what the question was trying to get at - the intention was merely to seek improvement suggestions.
- 10 *Actions agreed were relevant, useful and able to be done.* These made the point that some forms of contact had not led to any clear actions being specified.
- 14 *I would have liked the Educational Psychologist to have been involved sooner.* These made the point that the contact may not have been parent driven (e.g. as part of the statementing process and they had not necessarily been aware of the EP's role until this point). Whilst valid we know that not all questions would be relevant and parents could signify this via the *not applicable* option.
- 4 *I consider the Educational Psychologist provided independent advice.* Respondents reassuringly appeared genuinely surprised by the question and indicated their underlying assumption was that the EP was acting in the child's best interest, irrespective of local policy positions.

Three responses expressed concern about the use of acronyms although the original version does not contain any. It is possible that the original was modified locally in a way that introduced acronyms or that they were expressing a more general concern about the complexity of the language. Building on this point one parent indicated that they had received support from their child's school when responding to these questions. Others had experienced difficulties because of literacy difficulties or because English was not their first language. Consideration has already been given to the need to produce a more parent friendly version and different language formats once the questions have been decided upon.

- Received support from [child's] school and they helped clarify.
- All questions are difficult when you struggle to read. A phone call or a personal contact would have been more helpful (NB: supported to complete).

**Table 10:** Overview of other responses.

<i>Statement</i>	<i>Frequency</i>
4. I consider the Educational Psychologist provided independent advice	6
11. At the end of the Educational Psychologist's involvement it was made clear who would be doing what.	5
14. I would have liked the Educational Psychologist to have been involved sooner.	5
15. I am confident that my child's needs will be met more effectively as a result of this involvement.	2
17. What did you find the most helpful part of this contact?	2
1. I knew why the Educational Psychologist was going to be involved.	1
3. I was able to share my views and any concerns.	1
5. I was fully involved in the discussion about my child's needs and what was going to happen to address them.	1
7. The Educational Psychologist seemed knowledgeable and assisted in finding ways to help.	1
9. The involvement provided a better insight into the situation.	1

## **SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION**

Use of this questionnaire was open to all EP services in the UK. The current report was based on feedback from 775 parents and was provided by sixteen services. As such this represents the largest study of parental views on EPs undertaken to date. However it is difficult to comment on responses rates as only the services involved know how many questionnaires were distributed. As indicated below the outcomes largely confirm many earlier findings. However, one of the biggest contributions of this study is in providing services with an opportunity to consider how the ratings of their parents compare with other services.

In line with previous studies (Dowling and Leibowitz, 1994; DfEE, 2000; Cuckle and Bamford, 2000; Scottish Executive, 2002; DfES, 2006) parents generally expressed a high level of satisfaction with the service they had received from the EP. On a four point scale ranging from Dissatisfied to Very satisfied less than 1% rated themselves 'dissatisfied', most (just over 56%) were 'very satisfied' and approximately 95% of parents were either 'satisfied' or 'very satisfied'. This was broadly proportional with other studies that quote satisfaction levels (Cuckle and Bamford, 2000; DfES, 2006) and if anything exceeded the levels identified although a direct comparison is not possible because of differences in the scaling arrangements adopted.

Parents also commented<sup>23</sup> on particular aspects of the service they had received. As might be anticipated there was more variation in response but again there was a high level of agreement with the propositions posed: approximately 80% of parents also 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' with these statements, with all but one proposing that it had been a positive experience.

The two statements rated highest were *I was able to share my views and any concerns* and *The Educational Psychologist seemed to value my views and take them into account*. Ratings of both of these registered midway between 'agree' and 'strongly agree'. Whilst there was no opportunity for parents to expand on why they rated these points in the way they did, these issues also featured in the open ended responses about the most helpful aspect of the contact. Parents frequently expressed relief at being able to share their concerns. In some cases worries had been building for some time and attempts to raise them with the school had proved difficult. Consequently there was a need to share these with someone whose opinion carried some authority, particularly with the school. Moreover EPs were seen to be approachable, put parents at their ease and were good listeners. Parents also indicated that the EP quickly grasped the point they were trying to convey. There was consequently a good two-way exchange of information, in which their contribution was valued and respected (this is consistent with Dowling and Leibowitz's 1994 findings). In some cases comments indicated that the EP was able to build trust and develop a good rapport which had enabled their son or daughter to 'open up' about his or her feelings or difficulties, often for the first time.

Another statement to receive strong endorsement was *I consider the Educational Psychologist provided independent advice*. Again this point was elaborated upon in the comments made in the open-ended section. The EP was regarded as neutral and external to the school or preschool setting. They were perceived to be impartial and would voice their own views independent of the school's position. In some cases parents had already raised their child's difficulties with the school but were dissatisfied by the response. Involving the EP had provided a mechanism for raising the problem on the agenda again. A related point also featured in responses about the questionnaire. Many parents seemed genuinely surprised that this question had been posed, indicating that their underlying assumption was that the EP would act in the child's best interest. Thus the interpretation of independence adopted by parents in this study does not necessarily counter the concerns registered by some parents in previous studies about independence from Local Authority influence (Dowling & Liebowitz, 1994; Scottish Executive, 2002).

At the other end of the spectrum the three statements to receive the lowest ratings were 'At the end of the Educational Psychologist's involvement it was made clear who would be doing what', 'I would have liked the Educational Psychologist to have been involved sooner' and 'Things improved as a result of the Educational Psychologist's involvement'. Before discussing these in

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<sup>23</sup> On a five point scale which ranged from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*.

more detail it needs to be recognised that the term lowest is relative. In reality the ratings fell at, or just below, 'agree', consequently even in respect to these there was a high level of parental endorsement.

Again there was no opportunity for parents to elaborate on why they rated statements in the way they had but responses elsewhere suggested some possible reasons. Taking the first of these points there was a suggestion that some parents felt the case had been left in limbo after the EP involvement. To some extent the EP had outlined what they considered should be done but they had failed to secure any concrete commitments from the school about what they were prepared to do. Clearly schools control most of the resources available and this may have been because further consideration would need to be given to what, if any, resources could be made available to carry out the intervention. There were also echoes of this issue in respect to a need for follow-up meetings. Some parents were not confident that the school would actually implement the ideas suggested and felt that having the EP review progress would place pressure on the school to comply. Consequently the relationship between the EP and school lies at the heart of some of the problems about '*what follows the EP's involvement*'. Some parents sought to resolve such frustrations by placing the EP in a role that required the school to comply although this fails to recognise the true complexity of the existing position. As such, this, like a number of other criticisms provided by parents, does not lie entirely within the hands of the EP service to resolve. This point however does highlight the need for the EP to attempt to broker firm commitments from the school where at all possible.

The question about the EP involvement being sooner differs fundamentally to all the other propositions, in that although it is positively worded the implications are negative. Consequently although parental ratings fell just below 'agree' this represents a more significant problem. Dissatisfaction with the time taken for an EP to be involved has been a recurring theme through the literature (Dowling and Leibowitz, 1994; Cuckle and Bamford, 2000; DfEE, 2000; Squires et al., 2007). As above, we have no direct information about the reasons underpinning these ratings but this theme also received the greatest number of comments in the open-ended section on improvements parents would like to see. Some parents indicated that they perceived there to have been deterioration in their son or daughter's difficulties whilst waiting to be seen by an EP (as expressed by parents in the feedback to the Dowling and Leibowitz, 1994, study). However, how easy this would be for services to address is a moot point. Parents themselves acknowledged that EPs were a scarce resource which already appeared over-stretched by the demands placed upon it. It was more common for parents to view the school as being responsible for such delay. Often the early concerns they had raised failed to trigger EP involvement and this did not happen until the situation had deteriorated further. The time taken by schools to recognise a difficulty and make a referral also featured in the Squires et al. (2007) study. However, it needs to be recognised that this only represents the perspective of parents. Whilst it may be accurate it could be that the case was not sufficiently serious to warrant a referral, which in turn leads back to EPs being a scarce resource. Alternatively the earlier referral issue may be valid which raises questions

about services providing access to parents in ways which are less dependent on schools. This has been a long standing issue and it was detailed in the DfEE (2000) report that parents wanted information on how to access EPs directly, without the need to go through schools.

The lowest ratings were for the proposition that '*Things improved as a result of the Educational Psychologist's involvement*'. This may have been because things did not always improve, for whatever reason. The advice may have been poor. Alternatively, research suggests that no matter how well considered it is recognised that an intervention will not always prove successful (Carr, 2000). The points discussed above also imply that advice may not always be implemented. However, an alternative hypothesis was suggested in the section seeking feedback on the questions. Parents indicated that the EP contact had merely constituted a brief meeting which did not offer much potential for influencing change or that it was too soon to see any improvement. Hence part of the problem may be that this question was being raised at the wrong point. Support for this view can also be found in the DfES's (2006) report where parents expressed the view that the EP's input had a positive impact on their child.

Before moving on it is worth noting that a 3-way ANOVA was conducted looking at the impact of certain characteristics of the contact (child's sex and age, type of contact) on the ratings given. A general finding was that no effect was found to be significant in respect to the sex of the child. Needless to say there was a wide variation in outcome depending on the actual statements examined. However where there was an effect of the type of intervention parents experienced, the general finding was that the mean ratings for consultation or non-statutory contact almost invariably recorded the lowest means. In a similar way Cuckle and Bamford (2000) had found that one-off consultation sessions were perceived as less helpful, although there seems to have been an increase in this form of service delivery over recent years. Similarly where there was an effect of age the general finding was that the mean declined systematically with the age of the child and was lowest for secondary aged children. Again this supports Cuckle and Bamford (2000) finding that parental satisfaction is dependent on the age of the child and is highest for parents of children in their Early Years.

The qualitative feedback fell into three basic categories - areas for improvement, positive feedback and comments on the questionnaire itself. Some of the discussion above has already drawn upon these sources but other points are outlined below.

The most significant theme within the areas for improvement was not a criticism of the service provided but a statement that they wanted more. This was also a theme in the Currie Report (Scottish Executive, 2002) where parents indicated that EPs often did not have sufficient time to deliver either the breadth or the intensity of services they required. This is also consistent with a wide range of earlier studies into parental views (Dowling and Leibowitz, 1994; DfEE, 2000; DfES, 2006). The comments that elaborated on why they wanted *more* fell into several categories. Firstly, some wanted more

on-going contact, in the form of follow-up meetings. This had also been found in the DfEE (2000) report which indicated that even continued support in the form of a contact line or drop-in centre would be welcomed. In this study this wish frequently seemed motivated by a desire for the EP to keep their child's progress under review, assurance that future contact would be easier to achieve than the initial meeting and, as discussed earlier, to place pressure on schools to implement the advice offered. The need for follow-up would seem to be well considered. We know that for many kinds of psychological issues the '*best available*' treatment does not work in up to one third of cases (Carr, 2000) and some children will actually get worse in response to high quality interventions. As Good, Simmons & Smith (1998 p.68) indicate: '*No matter how great an intervention sounds, no matter how much it costs, no matter how much research has been published, and no matter how many criteria or belief systems it satisfies, if the intervention does not change the child's trajectory, then it is not effective for that child and a change is indicated*'. In addition Frederickson (2003) argues that EPs are legally responsible for ensuring the advice provided enables successful outcomes to be achieved (House of Lords judgement re: Phelps). Hence this point seems to be well grounded if it is not happening.

Secondly, some parents wanted more time for discussion with the EP (as found in DfEE, 2000). Several parents mentioned that they felt the meeting had been rushed or that additional issues had arisen that they would have liked to have some dialogue about. The last category was that parents would have liked the EP to have spent more time assessing their child. To see their child in other contexts or over time were themes often expressed. The main driver here appeared to be a need for the EP to be fully informed about the child. Whether this would necessarily have improved the quality of advice is debatable. Presumably EPs had collected all the information they need to inform an intervention and a more comprehensive picture was not functionally required. Given that resources are finite the problem with trying to provide more time is that EPs would need to spend less time elsewhere which also conflicts with the wishes expressed elsewhere.

Other criticisms of the service received included not having had any direct contact with an EP. This meant that in a few cases parents had not been given an opportunity to discuss the advice on a face-to-face basis. In some cases the school had been briefed with the understanding that they would explain to parents, presumably with the aim of saving time. This supports the findings of Squires et al. (2007) that parents are unhappy if there has been EP contact with their child without them receiving direct feedback about this. It also conflicts with assertions in the DfEE (2000) report that EPs are bound by a professional code of ethics to consult with parents whenever they are involved with a child. A few parents also expressed frustration about the delay in receiving a report or other correspondence outlining what had been discussed. In some cases the report was already said to be out of date when received. Whether this is problematic depends on the function of the report. For many EPs the emphasis is likely to be on the discussion with staff and they should have been able to put things in place following this. The report is primarily a formal record of what was actually said and agreed.

In terms of the positive feedback not already discussed one of the most commonly expressed theme was that the contact had provided them with strategies to support their child or at least a plan of action which would enable the situation to be addressed (also in Squires et al., 2007). Parents also suggested that contact with the EP had provided them with a better understanding of their child's difficulties. In some cases this constituted a genuine insight which had caused them to revise how they perceived their child's difficulties. This is in line with the Dowling and Leibowitz's (1994) and Cuckle and Bamford's (2000) studies which found that parents reported this to be a major contribution of the EP.

Parents also felt that an important aspect was the professional knowledge EPs brought to the situation. It was not merely someone with good listening skills but someone who was knowledgeable, well informed and experienced about the issues that concerned them and hence readily understood the issues.

We have already discussed the need to modify arrangements to ensure that sufficient time has elapsed before seeking feedback on whether there has been any improvement. This represented the most substantive issue raised in relation to the design of the questionnaire itself. Parents also wanted an opportunity to expand on why they rated some of the questions in the way they had. This could be accommodated by including an open-ended section to allow an opportunity for comments. It was also pointed out that to agree is an absolute and hence there is no genuine difference between the term *agree* and *strongly agree*. This will need to be addressed in any revisions made to the questionnaire. Having made these points it needs to be recognised that most parents indicated the questionnaire had worked well as it currently stands. A few parents clearly had difficulty with the language used and an attempt to make the questionnaire more parent friendly would be desirable. Consultation with parent groups on re-writing the content would be a welcome consideration in this respect.

In conclusion, it was reassuring that this feedback indicated such a high level of parental satisfaction with the input they had received from their EP. The response was overwhelmingly positive, with 95% indicating they were *satisfied* or *very satisfied*. Whilst asking for improvement suggestions identified issues of concern to some parents, the ratings of many related propositions remained high. Throughout the report a lack of confidence in the school to address their child's needs was a recurring theme and the EP was perceived to be a strong ally in responding to these issues. Some of the criticisms of the service received strayed outside of factors over which services had direct control. This was particularly the case in referring children at a more appropriate point (sooner) and confirming the response they would make to the advice offered. The request for more input also presents problems in the current economic climate but the need to provide appropriate follow-up of casework seems an essential aspect of the service offered. Parents generally welcomed the fact that EPs had good listening skills, used their professional knowledge to form an accurate picture of the problem,

provided them with a better understanding of what was happening and could offer well considered strategies to support their child.

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