



PARENT AND CARER FEEDBACK ON THEIR EXPERIENCE OF EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGISTS

Roger Norgate

Research & Evaluation Unit, Hampshire educational psychology

INTRODUCTION

This report is based on the feedback from 877 parents submitted by ten Educational Psychology (EP) services between 1st April 2013 and 1st April 2014. These arrangements were designed to enable services both to review parental perceptions of the work they undertake and to compare their performance with the national average that has evolved as a result of this exercise. Data for the financial year 2014-15 started being collected in April 2014, if any other services wish to participate they should contact NAPEP for further details.

KEY FINDINGS

Satisfaction levels

It needs to be acknowledged that parental satisfaction with the input they receive from EPs has consistently been found to be good (DfEE, 2000; Cuckle and Bamford, 2000; Scottish Executive, 2002; DfES, 2006). In this survey 776 responded to a question relating to their overall level of satisfaction and approximately 93%¹ were either '*satisfied*' or '*very satisfied*' with the input they received. This is consistent with the response obtained last year (i.e. approximately 95%) and only 2% indicated they were dissatisfied. This represents a strong endorsement of the service EPs provide to parents.

Parents also rated their degree of agreement with various aspects of the service they received (reported in Table 1). As might be expected there was considerable variation in response to individual questions, with the level of agreement generally ranging from 96% ("*I knew why the Educational Psychologist was going to be involved*") to 79% ("*I am confident that my child's needs will be met more effectively as a result of this involvement*"). The exception to this pattern related to the statement "*I would have liked the Educational Psychologist to have been involved sooner*". As well as being the only statement with negative connotations, this was agreed to by 66% of parents (up 4% from last year). This issue has also been a recurring theme within the literature (Dowling and Leibowitz, 1994; Cuckle and Bamford, 2000; DfEE, 2000; Squires et al., 2007, NAPEP, 2013) and attracted nearly a third (30.81%, n=357) of comments to the open ended question about what aspect of the service could be improved upon.

¹ The actual figure was 93.43% with 59.15% being "very satisfied" and 34.28% being "satisfied".

- *The advice offered was invaluable. My only comment is that I could have done with it a lot sooner.*

How easy it would be for services to address this concern is contentious and depends to some extent on the service delivery model being employed. Some comments suggested the service response had been slow but in most cases the difficulty seemed to lie in trying to convince the school to initiate a request for EP involvement (also found in Squires et al., 2007).

- *It took me 3 years to get help via school.*
- *The process for a parent to get an EP involved is confusing and complicated especially if the school are not supportive of the need for involvement.*

It also needs to be recognised that this notion of delay is solely a parental perspective and may not necessarily be valid. To an extent, services depend upon schools to filter requests and it is possible that some of these cases were not sufficiently serious to have warranted an earlier referral. It does however, raise questions about providing parents with independent access to EP services (also identified in DfEE, 2000). As one parent worded it, perhaps services could provide: *Easier access for us to contact and discuss issues.*

There was surprising consistency between the responses this year and those reported in 2013. Where the questions posed had not changed parental agreement was either at the same level or had risen by up to 4%. The two biggest increases were in respect to the questions *“At the end of the Educational Psychologist’s involvement it was made clear who would be doing what”* and *“Actions agreed were relevant, useful and able to be done”*. It is not possible to assert definitively that this indicates an improvement in standards, as the parents who participated are different, as are some of the services involved. Conversely, however, there was no evidence to suggest standards had deteriorated. It is perhaps more important for services to look at trends in their own data and any changes that have occurred in service delivery arrangements.

In last year’s questionnaire there had been a statement relating to the impact of EP involvement (*“Things improved as a result of the Educational Psychologist’s involvement”*). Only 49% of parents agreed with this statement and 24% were unsure. However, many parents indicated that this question had been posed too soon to be able to say one way or the other. If this statement was to be retained it was argued that it should form part of a review, some six months or more after the initial contact. There were also more fundamental questions about whether asking such questions was the best approach to assessing impact. It was thought that assessment of impact warranted a separate study in its own right. Consequently *“The Educational Psychologist did everything they had agreed to do”* was substituted and 81% of parents agreed with this statement. There was also changes to the statement *“I consider the Educational Psychologist provided independent advice”*. In 2013 90% of parents agreed with this statement but there was a lack of specificity about what that advice was independent of. It was clear

from the qualitative comments that many parents had interpreted this as advice independent of the influence of the school, hence it was changed to “*I consider the Educational Psychologist provided independent advice which was not compromised by Local Authority policy*” to make it relate more directly to the parental confidence issue identified in the Lamb Inquiry (DCSF, 2009). Eighty three percent of parents agreed with this proposition and this provides some endorsement to the role adopted by EPs in this respect.

There were two other amendments to the 2013 version of the questionnaire. These were in response to criticism that it had omitted any reference to the paperwork that arose from the contact. Consequently, one question related to promptness (83% agreed there had been no undue delay) and one about the quality (86% agreed the paperwork had been accurate, constructive and helpful). Despite the level of endorsement this infers, addressing delays in paperwork ranked fifth in the improvement suggestions and this represented 5% (5.04%) of the suggestions made.

- *Faster turn round of the report.*
- *The school and I had to wait 3 months for the report which is too long.*

Criticisms

In response to a request for improvement suggestions, several criticisms were made. Two of these have already been discussed.

As found in the 2013 report, a significant theme was that parents wanted more input from the EP (15.13% of the comments made). This response has also featured in a number of other studies (Dowling and Leibowitz, 1994; DfEE, 2000; Scottish Executive, 2002; DfES, 2006; NAPEP, 2013). There were two main themes under this heading. Firstly many parents wanted more direct contact time with the EP (also in DfEE, 2000) either longer in the initial discussion or in the provision of follow-up meetings. There seemed to be some resonance here with the issue of “sooner”; in that having had to wait for this contact they wanted to extract as much as they could from it.

- *More time! Meeting was for an hour but still ran over and out of time.*
- *Allow more time to discuss child's situation with parents. One visit is not enough.*

Secondly, parents would have liked the EP to have spent more time assessing or observing their child, either across different settings or over time. The comments suggested parents wanted to be assured that the EP had fully understood their child and that this view had been arrived at independent of the school. There were concerns that a one-off observation may have provided an atypical impression.

- *I feel more time needs to be spent monitoring the child in order to make better decisions.*
- *I do feel that studying a child - perhaps spend a day in a class - as a lesson isn't long enough or go in during a lesson in which he is weaker.*

Whilst there is a logical basis to this argument, whether spending more time in this way would necessarily improve the quality of advice is debatable. In reality the EP reaches his or her conclusions by synthesising information from a variety of sources and the point that behaviour is context related is well understood. Given that EP resources are finite, the problem in trying to provide *more*, poses the question of where *less* time should be spent and introduces the competing demands of other stakeholders.

This issue of more time also resurfaced in requests for follow-up meetings. Parents wanted reassurance that this was not the end of the involvement and further advice could be made available if it was required. In some cases the EP had offered reassurance that they would be visiting the school again and would check on developments but no specific dates had been set. In other cases parents were left uncertain as to whether any further involvement would occur at all. Part of the purpose for wanting this follow-up was to check on their child's progress but behind this was often the notion of placing pressure on the school to implement the advice that had been provided.

- *I would be grateful for knowing I could get more advice in the future if required. I am not sure whether she'll be seeing Alex again*
- *A review to ensure that recommendations are implemented - otherwise this will become the responsibility of parents who do not have the same influence.*

Positive feedback

Parents were also asked to identify what aspect of the contact with the EP they found most helpful. The four most common themes, all of them cited by over 60 parents, are discussed below. They are in no particular order and rather than representing discrete factors there is an obvious inter-relationship between them.

EP involvement provided parents with the opportunity to share their concerns with someone well informed about such issues. The meeting was frequently undertaken on a one-to-one basis after the EP had assessed or observed the child and consequently the EP was able to contribute information from their own independent perspective. A related point was the professional knowledge EPs possessed. It was not just anyone they were discussing this with but someone who was knowledgeable, well informed and experienced about the issues that concerned them, hence it was someone whose opinion they respected.

- *Just talking to someone who understands what we were going through*
- *Just to discuss Jesse's behaviour and get her views.*

Reference was also made to the skills EPs used in listening to parents. EPs were generally viewed as approachable, interested, put them (parents) at their ease, were empathetic, quickly grasped the point trying to be conveyed and were responsive to the questions being posed. Consequently parents felt able to talk openly about their concerns without feeling they were being judged. There was consequently a good two-way exchange of information, in which they perceived their contribution to be valued and respected (these points had also been identified in the NAPEP, 2013 report and by Dowling

and Leibowitz, 1994). In contrast to the earlier criticism about wanting more time, many parents perceived that the discussion had not been rushed and they had received quality time with the EP.

- *Her non-judgemental attitude and friendliness.*
- *Approachability, I felt I could ask questions, no matter how basic, without being made to feel silly*
- *She was generous with her time, listening and acting on my concerns during a very difficult period for my son.*

The aspect commented upon most frequently was that parents believed it had led to a better understanding of their child's difficulties: (also in Dowling & Leibowitz, 1994, and Cuckle & Bamford, 2000). Discussion went beyond superficial description and often used psychological constructs to provide parents with a new insight into what was happening. This was described variously as "*Getting to the bottom of the problem*", "*Helping me understand what was going on*", "*Pinpointing why...*" etc.

- *That I now have a reason for A's difficulties. This was new to me - I had never thought about it before, but it all seems to make sense.*
- *The information and insight. They saw the cause of the problem not just the behaviour.*
- *He helped me understand what my child must be going through.*

The last of the main themes was that the contact had provided strategies designed to support their child (also in Squires et al., 2007) or at least a plan of action which had the potential to improve the situation. As well as new approaches the school could try, parents particularly welcomed being given things they could do to support their child at home.

- *The whole situation was broken down and explained in detail so I knew what was happening then and in the future.*
- *She gave me tasks which I could do at home with child. She explained his weak points and ways to help him improve.*

Other services

With the view to developing sold services, the survey included a question about "*What other types of service would you like to see Educational Psychologists provide?*" However, responses did not identify any points of real interest but just tended to reiterate points already raised as criticisms, in that they wanted:

- a swifter response soon after they first became concerned
- more time spent observing or assessing their child
- EPs to be more available to them, including keeping their child under review and providing regular feedback

The majority of responses indicated that they felt unable to make a suggestion as they did not really know what EPs were able to provide, hence

they would need more information about what EPs could do before they could respond. This seems to accord with the adage that people do not know what they want until you tell them and places the onus on EPs to publicise more what they can offer (also identified in DFEE, 2000). The other points made failed to raise any new issues, as most services are likely to be providing these to a lesser or greater extent:

- Workshops for parents addressing what they can do to support their child, what the implications of a diagnosis is, strategies for addressing behavioural challenges and most commonly, information to enable them to understand what other services might be available for their child.
- Therapeutic support for their child. The approaches cited included cognitive behavioural therapy, anger management and mediation.
- Contact line or website for informal contact and advice.
- Home support to enable parents to manage difficulties being experienced outside of the school setting.

Conclusion

There has been consistency between the responses of parents to the quality of EP service they have received this year and last year. Whilst there were some changes to the detailed questions, the one relating to their overall level of satisfaction has remained the same. We now have 1,549 parental responses to this question which indicates a high level of satisfaction, with 58% being very satisfied and further 36% being satisfied. Only 23 parents (1.48%) have ever registered dissatisfaction within this two year period.

In most part, parents agreed with positive statements about particular aspects of the service they received. Of particular interest was responses to the revised question about whether they perceived the advice EPs provided to be independent of Local Authority policy. Despite the legitimate concerns raised in the Lamb Inquiry (DCSF, 2009), 83% of parents in this survey perceived the advice to have been independent.

This positivity should not lead to complacency as several criticisms were raised. Sixty six percent of parents wished that they had been seen sooner and this point was also made in 31% of comments about what aspect could have been improved upon. In most cases the difficulty seemed to be in trying to convince the school to initiate a request for involvement. There may have been legitimate reasons for schools not referring but the issue also raise questions about whether EP services are sufficiently accessible to parents.

A further criticism was that parents wanted more input from the EP. They either wanted more time to be spent on the assessment, in the discussion or in follow-up meetings. Whether spending more time on the assessment would necessarily improve the quality of advice is debatable and providing more time is likely to be difficult for services working under the current economic restraints. The question of follow-up would seem to be a more significant challenge as EPs are under an obligation to ensure their advice has led to some improvement for the child. In addition, if the quality of EP advice is to improve, reviewing how successful it has been must present a key driver. Whilst there is often a professional understanding that the responsibility for monitoring developments will lie with the school, this argument is not always

made persuasively to parents, who can feel in a vacuum about what will happen if there is no improvement. It might be possible for EP services to routinely clarify such arrangements.

Despite the points above, the feedback generally indicated a high level of parental satisfaction with the service received. The request for improvement suggestions identified concerns but the ratings given to related questions were often high, suggesting these represent a minority view. On the positive side, parents indicated that they welcomed the opportunity to share their concerns with someone who was knowledgeable, well informed and had previous experience of their problems. Hence they respected the EPs opinion. Parents also mentioned that EPs were good listeners who were approachable, empathetic and respected their views. Above all parents suggested the involvement had led to them developing a better understanding of their child, in addition to well-considered strategies to support him or her.

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TABLE 1: Parental ratings of statements provided as percentages (to nearest whole number).

	Disagree	Neither A nor D	Agree	N/A
1. I knew why the Educational Psychologist was going to be involved.	3%	1%	96%	0%
2. The Educational Psychologist seemed to value my views and take them into account.	3%	2%	92%	3%
3. I was able to share my views and any concerns.	3%	1%	93%	3%
4. I consider the Educational Psychologist provided independent advice which was not compromised by Local Authority policy.	4%	10%	83%	3%
5. I was fully involved in the discussion about my child's needs and what was going to happen to address them.	6%	3%	89%	2%
6. Sufficient time was provided during this contact to discuss my child's needs.	6%	2%	90%	2%
7. The Educational Psychologist seemed knowledgeable and assisted in finding ways to help.	5%	4%	89%	2%
8. All of my questions and concerns were addressed.	7%	5%	85%	3%
9. The involvement provided a better insight into the situation.	6%	8%	84%	3%
10. Actions agreed were relevant, useful and able to be done.	5%	7%	85%	3%
11. At the end of the Educational Psychologist's involvement it was made clear who would be doing what.	9%	8%	79%	5%
12. The Educational Psychologist did everything they had agreed to do.	4%	9%	81%	7%
13. I would have liked the Educational Psychologist to have been involved sooner.	11%	14%	66%	8%
14. I am confident that my child's needs will be met more effectively as a result of this involvement.	8%	10%	79%	3%
15. The report (or related paperwork) arrived without undue delay.	9%	4%	83%	5%
16. The report (or related paperwork) was accurate, constructive and helpful.	6%	4%	86%	4%

TABLE 2: Parental ratings of statements provided as percentages (to nearest whole number) for the previous financial year (2012-13)

	Disagree	Neither A nor D	Agree	N/A
1. I knew why the Educational Psychologist was going to be involved.	2%	3%	94%	1%
2. The Educational Psychologist seemed to value my views and take them into account.	3%	4%	92%	1%
3. I was able to share my views and any concerns.	3%	3%	93%	1%
4. I consider the Educational Psychologist provided independent advice.	3%	6%	90%	1%
5. I was fully involved in the discussion about my child's needs and what was going to happen to address them.	5%	5%	88%	1%
6. Sufficient time was provided during this contact to discuss my child's needs.	6%	5%	87%	1%
7. The Educational Psychologist seemed knowledgeable and assisted in finding ways to help.	4%	6%	88%	1%
8. All of my questions and concerns were addressed.	6%	9%	83%	2%
9. The involvement provided a better insight into the situation.	5%	11%	82%	2%
10. Actions agreed were relevant, useful and able to be done.	5%	11%	81%	3%
11. At the end of the Educational Psychologist's involvement it was made clear who would be doing what.	8%	11%	75%	6%
12. Things improved as a result of the Educational Psychologist's involvement.	8%	24%	49%	19%
13. The Educational Psychologist did everything they had agreed to do.	3%	11%	77%	9%
14. I would have liked the Educational Psychologist to have been involved sooner.	11%	19%	62%	9%
15. I am confident that my child's needs will be met more effectively as a result of this involvement.	7%	14%	77%	2%