



The Role and Responsibilities of

Local Authority Educational Psychology Services in England

In these pages the National Association of Principal Educational Psychologists (NAPEP) sets out the role and responsibilities of local authority educational psychology services (EPSs) in England. NAPEP is an organisation that represents all regions in England and has representation from partners in the Scottish, Welsh, and Northern Irish educational psychology systems. NAPEP exists to support the leadership of EPSs and through this support ensure that all children have access to a quality local authority service with HCPC regulated educational psychologists (EPs).

The educational psychology profession is a public sector role that exists to provide psychological thinking in the education sector. It is distinctly different from other professions who support children, young people, parents, carers, and educators, such as specialist teachers and other applied psychologists, education mental health practitioners etc.

EPs are trained and have extensive practice resulting in a profession that:

1. Understands how educational settings work. EPs working within a locality service have a knowledge of local schools and early years settings, knowledge of schools as institutions and are trained in educational and pedagogical practices. We are therefore able to interpret and make sense of behaviours within the contexts in which they are observed.
2. Works within local services meaning EPs have the rich clinical experience of a peer group; a team of EPs who collaborate and robustly share and review practice that informs the work carried out in schools and settings.
3. Has knowledge and understanding of typical and atypical childhood development and use this knowledge to prevent pathologising children and importantly when adultification is happening.
4. Works across the age range (0-25) – the doctoral training programme fully focuses on this age range; (this is not true of other applied psychology doctorates).
5. Is skilled and knowledgeable in working with children and young people of different abilities; those considered to have learning disabilities and those who do not.
6. Conduct contextualised, and therefore ecologically valid assessments by working in environments where children and young people are familiar, i.e., nursery, school, and sometimes home. It is recognised that for some children, usually older, they might prefer a place outside of school or home to discuss their learning and wellbeing needs and local authority venues allow for this.
7. Conducts assessments through activities that are judiciously planned based on individual factors thereby providing individually meaningful assessment outcomes, i.e. EPs do not rely on standardised cognitive assessments as the means to understand a child, we have developed a breadth and depth of assessments that are bespoke to the presenting issue and the individual child. EPs are not diagnosis led and primarily aim to understand a child's needs that informs responsive, personalised and need-based support.
8. Engages critically and with awareness in a detailed and complex problem analysis process over time to generate hypotheses and seek evidence for these hypotheses, building a more robust understanding of need.

9. Can apply psychological theories to the interpretation of data using both evidence-based practice *and* practice-based evidence, the latter being a power tool that works in a complimentary way with research evidence and uses lived experience data (from the child, parent/carer, teacher etc.) in reviews.
10. Provides support in all the following psychologically informed ways: consultation, assessment, intervention, training, and research.

In this paper NAPEP provides a framework for how the local authority educational psychology profession applies psychology in practice. In the writing of this document NAPEP has been informed and influenced by discussions over time with our colleagues who also develop and support the educational psychology profession, the Joint Professional Liaison Group (JPLG)¹

Part 1 articulates the role of the local authority educational psychologist (EP) through three main responsibilities: 1) to provide psychological critical thinking skills to the education sector, 2) to provide implementation science to the education sector, and 3) to provide psychological safety to the education sector.

Part 2 is a schematic framework² of the levels (and type) of work that EPs, Senior EPs, and Principal EPs are engaged in (child and family, educational setting, local area, region and national) through five identified EP functions:

1. Consultation
2. Assessment
3. Intervention
4. Training
5. Research

Each section will be hyperlinked to case studies collected from all regions in England and will demonstrate the practice of EPs in local authority services.

Part 3 is a descriptive guide to the work carried out by the educational psychology profession in local authorities in England and provides:

- a) A clear and concise description of the expectation of work/tasks to be undertaken by local authority EPs; and,
- b) A description which, within the broad boundaries of how EPs *should* be working in LAs and LA educational settings, allows flexibility of implementation to best meet the needs of local communities.

¹ JPLG: Professional collaboration between NAPEP, the Association of Educational Psychologists (AEP), Programme Directors of University Doctoral Training Courses, and Division of Educational and Child Psychology (DECP) in the British Psychological Society (BPS).

² Currie Matrix as cited in Atfield et al (2023) [Educational psychology services: workforce insights and school perspectives on impact](#)

Part 1: The Educational Psychology Profession: A Public Sector Function

Educational Psychologists (EP) are doctoral level applied psychologists, a public sector workforce of the Department for Education (DfE) who provide the following functions in the 0-25 education landscape:

- A. **Psychological application of critical thinking skills** underpinned by ethical research ontology³, epistemology⁴, and methodology. EPs utilise evidence based psychological theories from the main paradigms in the field of psychology (cognitive, psychodynamic, ecological systems, behaviourism, sociocultural and developmental) to:
- facilitate reflection and reflexivity,
 - enable adults to connect their knowledge and skills to their practice, and
 - challenge the status quo leading to a change in practice.

Educational Psychologists value and bring into the education arena emerging developments and research, for example, by integrating findings from neuroscience, educators are better equipped to recognise the importance of psychological safety, responsive caregiving, and positive attachment in shaping brain development. This knowledge encourages practices that foster regulation, learning, and relationships, while also promoting wellbeing and support for those in caregiving roles. Neuroscience bridges the gap between biological understanding and educational practice, empowering a more holistic, empathetic, and responsive approach to teaching and child development.

Educational Psychologists use the therapeutic alliance⁵ as a basis for engaging in difficult problematic conversations employing and applying approaches such as personal construct psychology, systemic family therapy approach, solution focussed brief therapy, narrative therapy, motivational interviewing etc., to safely identify and explore biases in thinking that can create unconscious barriers to the implementation of actions. EPs provide critical friend approaches to identify symptoms of compassion fatigue and moral injury for those educators, parents, and carers who are teaching and caring for our children with the most complex needs over time. Moral injury is when professionals cannot act in line with their values due to external demands, e.g., inspection criteria, financial impact, rigid application of policies. Their values (about inclusion) are verbally expressed but their practice is at odds and can result in exclusionary based practices.

Educational Psychologists are adept at synthesising information gathered from multiple sources (parents/carers, children, teachers, specialist teachers, health professionals etc.) They provide a developmental psychology informed perspective on the foundations that must be built to enable progression in all areas of learning. This synthesis of multi-agency information ensures that children are being thought about and understood in a holistic manner.

- B. **Psychological application of implementation science:** bridging the gap between research and real-world practice in education settings. EPs apply rigorous research methods to the understanding of how interventions (and policies) are implemented, adopted and sustained in practice to increase the likelihood of achieving intended outcomes. EP research methods recognises all humans as scientist practitioners i.e., that educators, families, and children require

³ Ontology: the assumption of what entities and processes are real: [The importance of engaging with ontology and epistemology as an ECR | BPS](#)

⁴ Epistemology: how we can generate dependable knowledge: [The importance of engaging with ontology and epistemology as an ECR | BPS](#)

⁵ Therapeutic Alliance: the connection between patient and therapist characterized by mutual agreement to collaborate on tasks related to the patient's well-being, encompassing trust, hope, and a shared sense of mission: [Therapeutic Alliance - an overview | ScienceDirect Topics](#)

the rationale (why are we doing this?), the description (what is it we need to do?), the instruction (how do we do this?), and reflexivity (how does this relate to our own lived experiences, perspectives, and actions?). This approach is delivered through stakeholder (parent/carer, child, teacher, etc.) engagement (Participatory Action Research) ensuring that what is planned for is feasible, practical, and relevant to the individual/group/system and in this way increases meaningful stakeholder response. This approach to implementation science recognises that the lived experience of parents/carers, children, young people, and teachers, must be regularly captured as those living and working daily with complex needs are actively seeking solutions. EPs apply psychological approaches to access and amplify the voice of families and children. The EP approach is grounded in the triangulation and synthesis of all assessment/research/data. In doing so, the EP provides a psychological and ethically grounded formulation that is accessible, meaningful and free from jargon.

C. **Psychological safety:** EPs apply psychological theory and techniques to provide emotional containment and promote the good wellbeing of educators, parents/carers, children and young people. EPs, using a therapeutic alliance approach, support adults (in individual or group supervision/reflective practice) and children/young people (using direct therapeutic approaches) to:

- manage change, uncertainty and crisis situations.
- explore the roots of belief systems and the consequential behaviours that can follow.
- support reconciliation between thought and action (reducing cognitive dissonance).
- reduce the pathologising of normal behavioural responses to difficult situations and in this way remove reductionist and within child or within adult thinking.
- increase understanding of normal responses by the child (parent/carer, teachers) to their physical environment, the curriculum demands, the people in their environments, and cultural expectations.
- provide trauma understanding in the wake of compassion fatigue and moral injury.
- support the identification of protective factors that can chart a progressive way forward.
- Ensure there is professional curiosity about a child in their context; EPs are alert to what they observe, what is not spoken about (e.g., drawings, unanswered questions, behavioural responses, what adults do not say etc.), or the way things are said (e.g., adultification), and what others share. In addition to this EPs safeguard children through managing sensitively and robustly disclosures by children during direct work. This supports a safeguarding culture that is preventative, responsive, and accountable.

Developed by:

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