

# Educational psychology

# In an age

# of uncertainty

**M**Y work over the past three decades has left me in no doubt that educational psychologists have a unique and useful contribution to make for children, families, schools, LEAs and communities. However, I do think that the current zeitgeist is prone to significant change, uncertainty and anxiety, and these factors need to inform future educational psychology practice.

Predicting the future is always hazardous, and perhaps my words will return to haunt me. But in planning for the future, it is important that we aim to arrive at national plans based upon as much evidence as we can muster. This article will consider such evidence, along with what we can learn by looking to the past.

## Past and present

Sir Cyril Burt can be credited with being the first educational psychologist (EP), appointed in 1913 in London. By 1968 there were some 300 EPs, and the Summerfield Report recommended that there should be one educational psychologist for every population of 5000 school pupils; today there are some 2500 EPs.

While much has been written elsewhere about the role of EPs (e.g. Curran *et al.*, 2003; Maliphant, 1997), the latest Department of Education report on the role of EPs (DfEE, 2000a, 2000b) indicated that the role now is broad and complex and focused on problem solving. Indeed, from the early days when EPs spent a good deal of their time testing IQ, educational psychology has now developed into an integrated profession that aims to solve problems faced by children, parents, teachers, schools, LEAs and other professionals.

In addition to the growth of professional responsibility and creative work, it is fair to note that EPs deal with a very wide range of problems faced by children. These include learning difficulties, emotional and behavioural problems, poor concentration, slow academic progress, bullying, anxiety,



**IRVINE S. GERSCH**, winner of the Award for *Distinguished Contributions to Professional Psychology 2002*, on how to ensure that educational psychologists meet the needs of the country.

response to traumas, depression, criminal behaviour and all aspects of special educational needs. EPs work with children with visual impairment, physical, emotional and behavioural difficulties, and cognitive difficulties, including severe and specific learning difficulties. EPs work directly with families, parents, teachers, other school staff, LEA officers, and other professionals, recognising that to have the most impact one has to consult and work closely with those in everyday contact with the child and those who are influencing their issues, as well as intervening directly with individual children and groups of children.

In their wider role, EPs also carry out research, give training to teachers and other professionals, manage or share the management of services, form part of the LEA policy-making team and provide advice to government.

All this represents an incredible change since 1913, in breadth, depth, responsibility, scope and demand for services, skills and expertise. It is also worth noting that the educational context in which EPs work has become increasingly complex and litigious – EP professional work is increasingly monitored, held to account and evaluated.

## Some personal work themes

As an EP who trained and began work in the 1970s, I have had the good fortune to witness many role changes firsthand.

When I first started work in 1971 the requests were very much for a casework emergency system. I recall starting with a waiting list of 30, and working really hard to deal with the cases effectively. By the end of the first term my waiting list had

risen to 70, and my blood pressure had similarly increased!

Over the years that followed, a range of different responses were developed, moving away from the more simple casework referral model. The following work schemes and practical projects illustrate some of the work undertaken, with colleagues. These are selected to illustrate the diversity of work that I and others have used to apply psychology in a creative way to make a positive difference to children's lives.

## Systems and behaviour management in schools

Here work took place with the school as a whole in bringing about changes, rather than focusing upon the individual child. Policies and practices have been developed in schools to improve

pupil behaviour, systems for managing positive behaviour and reducing disaffection, as well as creating more effective ways of dealing with children with special needs. (See Gersch, 1996a; Gersch *et al.*, 2001; Gersch & Noble, 1991; Scherer *et al.*, 1990.)

**School leadership research** This research project examined the leadership factors related to effective schools. The results have been used for headteacher training and support, and headteacher mentorship. (See Gersch, 1992.)

**The Listening to Children Project** This project has run for some 18 years and has pioneered a variety of initiatives to encourage and empower children themselves to have a say, and being actively involved in their assessments and schooling. Some of the products have included a 'School Report' and a report completed by excluded students about their wishes. (See Gersch, 1996b; Gersch *et al.*, 1993; Gersch & Nolan, 1994.)

**Management of an educational psychology service and development of a special needs assistant scheme** During a period of change there were exciting developments for me when I was a principal educational psychologist running a service that became increasingly autonomous from the LEA, selling services (such as special needs assistance). Providing services in this way has enabled LEA and school funds to be used creatively

**TABLE 1 A framework for future-gazing**

Local, national and global developments	Major global trends
Children and families	Consumerism
Schools	Science and technology
Local education authorities	Communication
National government	Training
Global trends	Employment

for children. (See Gersch *et al.*, 2000; Nolan & Gersch, 1996.)

**Crisis and post-traumatic stress service** As a response to a child going missing and then tragically being murdered, systems were put in place across LEAs to support schools in the event of such critical incidents happening in the future. In my LEA, as in many others, this initiative was spearheaded by the educational psychology service. (See Cameron *et al.*, 1995.)

**Training of educational psychologists** It has long been recognised that the one-year training is inadequate for today's world. I was elected to the BPS Training Committee in Educational Psychology in 1997, and together with a resolute and courageous committee put forward proposals to the BPS for extended training, which is now being pursued by the DfES. A final agreement is pending subject to further detailed work. As a member of the DfES working party on the future role of educational psychology, and as part of the training subcommittee, I have aimed to ensure that much-needed reforms remain on the agenda, and that the future role of the EP profession is sufficiently broad, creative and dynamic. (See Gersch, 1997; Stoker *et al.*, 2001.)

**SEN conciliation and mediation** In the face of the growing number of legal disputes between parents and LEAs over children with special educational needs (SEN), this project developed an 'alternative way' – mediation. Outcomes have included the Waltham Forest Conciliation Service and in southern England, work with Global Mediation Ltd to develop a regional SEN mediation service to 19 LEAs. Over the years a significant number of cases have been resolved amicably and by consent of the parties, thus avoiding tribunal hearings. (See Gersch & Gersch, 2003.)

### The future of the EP profession

Discussion about the future shape of the profession continues among colleagues and with the DfES and other stakeholders. I regard my contribution to this debate as a key element of my work. (See Gersch, 2003; Kelly & Gersch, 2000.)

### A framework for future gazing

Over the past few years I have been developing a framework for organising factors that might help in making decisions about the future (see Table 1). It is a way of analysing 'the writing on the wall', including what is happening, key trends, what is likely to remain in place, and what are the main drivers for the profession. Like all predictions, however, those that emerge from the framework are open to debate, and indeed to human error. The framework itself simply aims to organise the data we have and to help assemble and analyse the evidence.

Within this framework, I have considered evidence from

- international forecasts of those working in science, medicine, communication, management, economics, politics and futurology (e.g. Fukuyama, 2002; Kaku, 1998);
- data on patterns and trends (e.g. Fishburn, 2001; Office for National Statistics, 2003);
- British psychologists (e.g. Haste *et al.*, 2001; MacKay, 2001);
- trainee educational psychologists
- American psychologists (e.g. Zimbardo, 2002); and
- children internationally (e.g. United Nations, n.d.).

Applying the framework and evidence to the role of educational psychology, it is possible to note some trends under each heading.

With regard to children and families there is no doubt that issues relating to choice, equal opportunities, children's rights, parental preference and shared

decision making are strengthening. EPs are taking the views of children and parents into account when evaluating the quality of their services and planning for the future. A major implication for educational psychologists will be both to develop and utilise highly sophisticated techniques for eliciting the child's views, balancing such information sensitively with the perspectives and experiences of parents, teachers and other significant adults.

Schools themselves can be characterised by increased devolvement of power, financial autonomy, responsibility, competition and accountability. Some forecasters have depicted schools of the future as community-focused, with flexible hours, offering virtual-reality teaching, computer assessments and lifelong programmes (perhaps with adults and children learning side by side), with the important caveat that children also need social experiences. Some of these developments have already begun.

LEAs have changed significantly in recent years, in that they are more accountable than ever for their performance, there is an emphasis on their role in raising standards, reducing misbehaviour in schools and crime outside school, and there is concern about drug abuse. LEAs have come under intense pressure to provide value for money. Some services have been handed over to private companies. All of this will affect EP practice, which will need to demonstrate its value and provide value for money.

National government has emphasised multi-professional working, the need to

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improve standards of literacy and numeracy in schools, inclusion of children with special needs, parental and child involvement in education and a focus upon the early years. There are statutory codes of practice for children with special educational needs and for those with disability.

So how do the trends shown in Table 1 spur these developments? Suffice to say that there are ongoing major changes in all of these areas, in each of which there is a considerable literature. Incredible advancements in science, medicine and biotechnology, neurological science, genetics and communication are leading to major changes in our lives. They also raise new ethical dilemmas, for example in respect of genetic engineering. There is growing evidence about the impact of diet upon behaviour and learning. Life expectancy is increasing dramatically. It may well be that the EPs will be required to work with grandparents and other adults, who are able to and wish to offer support to children. Indeed, the phenomenon of parenthood being appreciated as a much longer process than ever before may require new ideas and arrangements, about which educational psychologists may be able to offer new research and practical ideas for healthy relationships. I am currently engaged in research in this area – namely, the parenting of adult children.

In respect of training, there is an expectation that it should lead to relevant competencies, should be significantly longer than the one-year course required at present, and should be harmonised across psychological professions in the UK (and indeed internationally). Continuing professional development and regular professional supervision of educational psychologists is likely to become mandatory.

The world of employment is also going

through enormous change, with an emphasis on increased flexibility, mobility, independence, more self-employment and portfolio careers. It is likely that many professionals will be working for themselves and a number of agencies rather than for a single employer. Educational psychologists are very much affected by such changes.

All of these developments are taking place within an age of change, uncertainty and anxiety. Most generations tend to see their own era in terms of change and uncertainty, but there is no doubt that events since 11 September 2001 have led to major reviews of thinking by social and political scientists, economists and forecasters. Many children report anxiety about their safety and welfare, and the images reflected on television screens daily are such as to stimulate anxiety and uncertainty about the future. Educational psychologists simply cannot ignore such major events in the course of their work. There are implications for casework, training for teachers and others on the emotional implications for children, and for policy development.

### EPs of the future

What predictions might be made about the long-term prospects and shape of educational psychology? Taking a 30-year view, one might predict that the growing harmonisation between the subprofessions of psychology leads to a new division called something akin to 'applied specialist child psychology'. There may be a universal basic psychological training at doctoral level, with students specialising during this, but being co-trained with clinical, occupational and counselling psychologist colleagues.

Many are likely to be working on a self-employed basis, carrying out observations

## ESSENCES OF PSYCHOLOGICAL PRACTICE

- helping children
- highly effective interpersonal skills
- listening to children and adults
- being objective and dispassionate
- creative problem solving
- offering practical help
- assisting and facilitating when things get stuck
- applying research to real-life problems
- being empirically grounded
- evaluating interventions and actions, using an evidence-based framework
- working directly and through others
- adding value to people's lives

should be able to carry out brief, effective and well-evaluated interventions, offering highly accurate evidence-based advice, and in some cases having prescription rights. It is more than likely that there would be specialist child psychologists focusing on specific areas of childhood difficulties and schools.

My own view is that despite societal changes, educational psychologists will continue to need to display high-quality interpersonal skills, working with children, families and school staff, but concentrating upon the whole child as a person (see box opposite). My guess is that issues of emotional development and behaviour will continue to require the help of psychologists. Further, I hope that educational psychologists will continue to contribute to research and government policy making, working to promote the best interests of children.

### Conclusions

Despite all the technological advances and communication flowing through the information superhighway, I am sure that

human skills and qualities will always be needed. Other speculations made in this article may be debatable. However, you are invited to use the framework, and include other evidence together with your own predictions, to assess future options. The debate may well serve to refine conclusions, but the activity is important in ensuring that the profession is prepared for the future, and that it is responsive and sensitive to the needs and concerns of children, families, schools and government.

If the profession continues to be consumer-oriented, and in touch with the big picture and people's major concerns, I would argue that the future looks exciting for educational and child psychology. However, the real future lies in all our hands. As Hugh White (1773–1840), an American politician, once said: 'The past cannot be changed, the future is still in your power.'

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on the internet, and over long distances. Perhaps genetic engineering and technology will have overcome many disabilities, and drugs and special diets may be used to enhance learning. Psychologists could carry out assessments using wearable computers to collect data, they could offer treatment and interventions using virtual-reality environments, and there is likely to be a very detailed science and knowledge of both child rearing, parenting and learning. Psychologists

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