The Role of the Educational Psychologist in Children and Young People’s Mental Health: An Explorative Study in Wales

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ABSTRACT

There is a growing interest in children and young people’s (CYP) mental health. Prevalence rates of CYP with mental health difficulties are suggested to be increasing, whilst budget cuts to specialist services such as the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) are resulting in CYP with mental health difficulties receiving no specialist support (Frith, 2016). Educational Psychologists (EPs) are a group of professionals suggested to have the necessary skills to work at both an individual and consultative level to support CYP with a range of needs (DfE, 2011), with an increasing pressure on them to increase their work in the mental health field (Allen & Hardy, 2013). However, research considering the EP role in mental health is limited, and that which does exist suggests a number of barriers to their work in this area (Atkinson et al., 2014). This mixed methods research aimed to explore the role of the EP in CYP mental health in Wales, by considering the views of EPs and Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCos) in relation to: the current practice of EPs in CYP mental health; facilitators and barriers to this; and ways forward.

Questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were used, and findings were reported using descriptive statistics and thematic maps respectively. The findings indicated EPs engagement in a breadth of mental health intervention, however there are a number of existing barriers that can hinder this way of working. The findings are discussed in terms of implications for EP practice.

RATIONALE

Following concerns relating to a mental health ‘crisis’ for CYP in the UK (Frith, 2015); there has been suggestions that EPs must increase their work in the mental health field (Allen & Hardy, 2013). However, empirical research has suggested that there exists a number of barriers to EPs work in this area. Barriers include competing demands of the role (Atkinson et al., 2014); EP factors, including a lack of competence and resources (Atkinson et al., 2011) and school constructs of the role not implicating EPs in this kind of work (Rothi et al., 2008). However, recent research is limited to the exploration of EP views only, despite schools having an important role in prioritising part of the work EPs engage in. As such, it is important to address this gap in the literature, and further explore the role of the EP in this area, offering a comparison of constructions held by EPs, and schools.

METHODOLOGY

PARADIGM, ONTOLOGY & EPISTEMOLOGY

Constructivist research paradigm, relativist ontology, social constructionist epistemology

METHOD

Mixed methods approach, weighted towards qualitative phase, in line with the ontological and epistemological stance

Questionnaires (17 EPS, 11 SENCos) & Semi-Structured Interviews (6 of each)

ANALYSIS

Descriptive statistics and Braun & Clarke’s (2006) Thematic Analysis

RESEARCH AIMS

RA1: What is the current role/practice of EPs in CYP mental health?

RA2: What are the facilitators and barriers to EPs work in CYP mental health?

RA3: Is there a current pressure on EPs to work in CYP mental health?

RA4: How can CYP mental health intervention be improved through EPs/education?

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

There is a wide and varied role constructed for the EP in CYP mental health, and they engage in a breadth of work, ranging from the less common individual therapeutic intervention, to more common systemic practices, such as training of school staff on mental health needs, and engaging in consultation.

There was some variation in findings relating to the pressure felt by EPs, with an almost equal divide. Some EPs indicated feeling a pressure to increase their work in this area, which related to: the current context; other professionals seeing them as ‘gatekeepers’, and a moral pressure. Other EPs indicated that they felt no increased pressure.

There was some agreement in facilitators to the EP role in this area. These include the EP being seen as having expertise and knowledge of the field. Barriers were in line with previous research, highlighting that there are competing demands of the role, and school constructs not always implicating EPs in this kind of work.

There was some agreement from EPs and SENCos about how to improve mental health intervention. A need for further clarity of the EP role was expressed, and also both groups wanted more opportunities for CYP/training. Other improvements suggested were for more creative practices, such as supporting the mental health of the school as a whole system.

CONCLUSION

The constructions of EPs and SENCos have been explored in relation to the EP role in CYP mental health. Results highlighted that EPs are constructed to have a definite role in this area, and are able to engage in a range of interventions to support CYP mental health at different levels. However, mental health intervention is perhaps not the most common type of work that EPs engage in, and a number of barriers to EP mental health intervention were established.

With the growing concern for CYP mental health, it is paramount to consider the role and practice of different professionals, and this research has offered insight into the EP role, coupled with suggested ways forward.

The research concludes that the EP role can be widely implicated in the support of CYP mental health, however the extent to which widespread change to current practice can occur without commitment from all stakeholders is uncertain.

REFERENCES


