Educational Psychologist and Special Educational Need Co-ordinator Constructions of Effective Collaborative Working: An Exploratory Study

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Abstract

• The current educational reforms including the Special Educational Needs Code of Practice in England (DfE, 2014) and the draft indicative Additional Learning Needs Code in Wales (Welsh Government, 2015) have highlighted the importance of effective collaborative working between schools and educational psychologists (EPs).
• Research has illustrated incongruities in the perceptions of the role and practice of EPs between EPs themselves and school professionals e.g. teachers (e.g. Kelly & Gray, 2000; Farrell, et al 2005).

Fewer papers have focused on comparing Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators (SENCos) and EP perceptions of the role in particular (e.g. Ashton & Roberts, 2006).
• The current study aimed:
  • to compare and contrast EP and SENCo perceptions of the effectiveness of roles and/or functions of the EP, and;
  • to explore perceived facilitators and barriers to effective collaborative working between the two professional groups.

Research Questions

What are the key differences and/or similarities between EP and SENCo constructions of ‘effective’ (i.e. facilitating positive change within a school for a child or young person) EP practice?

What do EPs and SENCos construe as facilitators and/or barriers to effective collaborative working?

What do EPs and SENCos suggest could be implemented in future to increase effective collaboration?

Methodology

A mixed-methods approach was used to collect information.
• A questionnaire was used to gather data from local authority educational psychology services across Wales and from randomly selected LA maintained primary schools. 14/20 EPs in Wales took part.
• The questionnaire consisted of a series of core roles and/or functions of an EP taken from a literature review. 42 EPs and 72 SENCos returned questionnaires.
• Focus groups were then used to explore EP and SENCo perceptions of facilitators and barriers to effective collaborative working. 11 SENCSos and 7 EPs took part in one of 4 focus groups.

Findings

• Statistical analysis revealed that SENCo participants reported the following roles/functions as significantly more effective than EP participants:
  - Observation
  - Cognitive Assessment
  - Attainment testing

Roles/functions at an individual level

Roles/functions at a systemic/whole school level

Word Clouds exploring SENCo (left) and EP (right) perceptions of the EP role

Final Thematic Map

Implications

EP services:
• Increase contact, accessibility, transparency of EP work (e.g. theoretical approaches) and of local systems and processes.
• Enhance profile of the role e.g. documentation, online forum, shadowing opportunities, work with range of school professionals, training.
• Informal support on an ad-hoc basis e.g. ‘drop in’s, more regular contact, etc. 
• SENCo to part of senior management teams (as proposed in ALN reform)

Wider Level:
• EP and SENCo training programmes to include input from the other profession.
• Flexibility required for EP time e.g. traded services in Wales.
• Guidance provided by a professional body (e.g. British Psychological Society) to support with multi-agency awareness of the EP role.

Strengths

Low turn out for focus groups
Questionnaire validity (high proportion of missing data)
3 of 4 focus groups in same local authority

Limitations

Use of appreciative inquiry – constructive focus
Mixed methods
Generalisability: questionnaires obtained from more than one LA
Current topic insight (ALN reform)

Key References

