

Validated self-evaluation

Argyll and Bute Educational Psychology
Services

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1. What is validated self-evaluation in Educational Psychology Services?

Validated self-evaluation (VSE) is an evaluative activity which supports and challenges the work of Educational Psychology Services (EPS) by working collaboratively. It involves a partnership between the education authority, EPS and HM Inspectors, Education Scotland. In EPS the VSE focuses on two key themes.

- Learning and Teaching.
- Partnership Working.

The themes reflect the Scottish Government's national priorities and relate to the contributions made by EPS to raising attainment, addressing disadvantage and supporting and implementing, *Getting it Right For Every Child* (GIRFEC). Both themes also allow EPS to evidence the impact and outcomes of early intervention and prevention across the full range of their service delivery.

In addition to the core themes, services can choose an additional one to reflect their own context. An additional area may relate to the core themes or reflect other quality indicators which impact on the service's ability to improve outcomes for its stakeholders. For example, leadership, or the delivery of the five Currie (2002)¹ functions of consultation and advice, assessment, intervention, professional development and research and development.

2. What was validated self-evaluation in Argyll and Bute Educational Psychology Service?

Argyll and Bute Council Educational Psychology Service (A&BCEPS), worked closely with the wider educational authority and key partners. They used the VSE process to deepen their existing knowledge and understanding of their strengths and areas for development in a number of key areas of service delivery. The service has closely aligned its priorities to support the education authority's strategic objectives. Themes were selected from their self-evaluation evidence which they felt required further investigation. These were:

- the impact on learners of the EPS' role in the implementation of the *Reading Initiative*, in promoting community involvement in early literacy, assessing the fidelity and impact of specific assessments and interventions, and their practice in relation to the early identification of literacy difficulties; and
- the impact of the EPS' involvement in the roll out of the Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS) curriculum across early learning and childcare centres and primary establishments, with a particular focus on implementation, sustainability, parental engagement and partnership working. The focus was on early intervention to improve outcomes for children, young people and their families.

The service was keen to use the VSE as an opportunity to identify the areas of service delivery which made the greatest impact and which should be prioritised for further development and improvement. For the VSE process, A&BCEPS selected two areas of

¹ Currie (2002), Review of Provision of Educational Psychology Services in Scotland. Scottish Executive.

work at different stages in the self-evaluation cycle. Their work on the Reading Initiative had undergone rigorous self-evaluation which had engaged a wide range of stakeholders and partners. The partnership theme was at an earlier stage of development and focused on the PATHS evidence based approach and the impact of multi-agency working linked to GIRFEC. The service wanted to build on their partnership working within the Early Years Collaborative Group and commissioned providers, and extend to partners within health and children's services. They wanted to look more closely at the impact and outcomes which had been achieved as a result of their interventions. Across both themes, A&BCEPS was keen to explore different models of capacity building and sustainability to guide the development of future service initiatives and authority policy.

Each themed group comprised of relevant partners and agencies, for example, senior education officers, quality improvement officers, social work managers, early years development officers, principal officer for early years, primary and secondary headteachers and deputies, an advanced nurse practitioner for vulnerable groups and an adult literacy development officer. Each group was led by a member of the A&BCEPS.

The service put in place a well-considered programme of activities involving a range of stakeholders and partners to support the VSE process. Activities included focus groups, visits to schools, and individual interviews with professionals, parents and young people. Telephone interviews were also used to ensure that all stakeholders across Argyll and Bute were able to participate. The use of telephone interviews was an effective way of taking account of the geography of the council and the accessibility challenges which this presented. Towards the end of each day, the theme groups met to reflect on what they had learnt, and to begin to identify strengths and areas for improvement. The theme group leads also met at the end of the day to share their findings across both themes. In this way, themed group members were able to see emerging strengths and areas for further development across and within each theme and in relation to the overall self-evaluation processes. Through such joint evaluative activity, Education Scotland staff were able to assess the rigour of the EPS' self-evaluation processes and the robustness of the evidence used to evaluate performance and service delivery.

3. What did HM Inspectors learn about the quality of self-evaluation in Argyll and Bute Educational Psychology Service?

The service provided a very good self-evaluation report which effectively identified their strengths and areas for improvement using robust evidence to support their evaluative statements. The self-evaluation provided a clear focus for the themed areas in both Learning and Teaching and Partnership working. The principal educational psychologist (PEP) demonstrated high quality thinking and analysis in relation to the themed areas. During the VSE, it became clear that A&BCEPS were adding significant value to the education authority's work in literacy and partnership working. Throughout the VSE process the service engaged in honest and challenging dialogue with their partners and with the Education Scotland team. Service team members, in their themed groups, demonstrated rigorous and objective analysis of the evidence gathered during the VSE self-evaluation activities.

The high quality participation and engagement of the EPS and their ability to articulate their learning was a strength of this VSE process. The theme leads created a supportive ethos for partners who were empowered to open up and explore areas for improvement with confidence. The service benefited from the challenge provided by partners and the Education Scotland team and responded positively by reflecting deeply on their practice and the implications for future engagement. Theme leads and educational psychologists asked insightful questions, listened and responded respectfully to each other. They were flexible and resilient, coping well with challenges from stakeholders during the VSE, for example, by changing evaluation activities to take account of the cumulative evidence being gathered during the week. The VSE found strong evidence of the service's growing strategic contribution to authority initiatives. The PEP is part of the education services management team, and senior managers reported positively about her role. It was agreed that the education authority and A&BCEPS now need to build on these developments and focus on those key areas where the EPS could have maximum impact strategically and operationally. This may require them to withdraw from some initiatives and hand over to partners once fully embedded. The A&BCEPS recognised that more opportunity for sampling a wider range of stakeholder views would have strengthened and enhanced their self-evaluation further. In particular, it would have been helpful to include harder to reach parents, more children and young people, speech and language therapists and stakeholders from across different geographical areas from within the authority. It was acknowledged that the scope of the VSE was already ambitious and lack of time during the week hindered more extensive stakeholder engagement. The Reading Initiative theme was a systemic piece of work with robust self-evaluation evidence. It was underpinned by strong research principles and evidence-based practice. Partners valued highly the research skills and knowledge that the EPS brought to the roll out of the Reading Initiative. In addition, they valued the support from the EPS in building school staff capacity through training, policy development and guidelines. This has allowed the EPS to focus on other strands of service delivery and not just direct assessment with individual children. Teaching staff also noted that the EPS coverage of the core functions in relation to the Reading Initiative was of high quality i.e. assessment, intervention, consultation, research and training. The service will support schools and partners to develop more robust models of implementation or action research to enhance the impact of interventions. This will ensure that the thinking behind the processes, assessments used, data interpretation and tracking and monitoring of progress at school level is more consistent across establishments. The EPS and partners will explore how to utilise good practice within the authority as a way of taking this forward. The EPS have valuable insights into where the good practice is, therefore, they are considering which next steps they need to take in order to promote higher order thinking around the literacy teaching and learning.

The partnership theme was at an early stage in the self-evaluation process and it was acknowledged by the service that there was a need for further development to strengthen this area of work. For example, the service recognised that they needed to make the work and role of the educational psychologist more visible to partners beyond education to help clarify where they could have most impact. The range of evidence gathered in relation to the PATHS curriculum suggested that this had been a successful initiative. For example, parents reported that the PATHS programme had improved their children's ability to regulate their emotional responses so that they were less likely to respond inappropriately. Teachers trained in PATHS reported that they were

confident in using the approach and did not require further support from the EPS. The service now needs to extend the programme to build capacity in a larger number of early learning and childcare centres and primary establishments, and improve outcomes for children and young people.

A&BCEPS' high-quality reflective dialogue and recording of the outcomes from the VSE self-evaluation activities, was highly effective in improving the quality of their self-evaluation and capacity to triangulate evidence. As a result, the Education Scotland team were confident that the service had effective processes for self-evaluation in place to bring about continuous improvement.

4. What does the Educational Psychology Service plan to do next?

The service identified strengths and areas for development within each of the two themed areas. These can be found on the services website at www.argyll-bute.gov.uk/education-and-learning/educational-psychology

Education Scotland and A&BCEPS agreed on the following next steps to improve their self-evaluation processes further.

- Continue to utilise and develop an implementation science approach or other robust framework, to further embed initiatives and build capacity in others.
- Work with partners to consider how to use and share data more effectively to inform future developments and exit strategies.
- Utilise the psychological knowledge and expertise of the service to make a strong strategic contribution to national policy initiatives, including Scotland's Attainment Challenge, particularly in relation to health and wellbeing and closing the poverty-related attainment gap.
- Continue to work with partners to consider the most effective way to maximise the impact of the service across Argyll and Bute by consistently delivering on key strategic objectives, taking account of the unique geographical challenges.

5. What is Argyll and Bute Educational Psychology Service's capacity for improvement?

Education Scotland is confident that A&BCEPS has a strong capacity for continuous improvement. The strong leadership of the PEP and the evolving distributive leadership within the team has impacted positively on the quality of the service delivered to children, young people and their families. The service has made very good progress in moving away from individual casework, towards capacity building since their last HM Inspectorate of Education inspection. Evidence based expertise within the service is strong, and staff contribute with skill and confidence to improvement planning and evaluating service delivery. There is close synergy between the service's work and the educational priorities of the council, with a shared vision for improvement. The education authority now need to engage A&BCEPS more closely in strategic partnership working to ensure that they can continue to make a positive contribution to authority priorities.

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Further information about the EPS VSE reports and self-evaluation can be found on the service's website at www.argyll-bute.gov.uk/education-and-learning/educational-psychology

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