

Educational psychology services

Education Scotland introduced a new approach for inspecting educational psychology services (EPS) in April 2015 using a model of scrutiny which is strongly focused on validating the findings of self-evaluation activities undertaken by the services themselves. Over the period covered by this report we found that the quality of leadership of EPS improved. There is now a clearer vision for services based around national and local priorities. We also found that EPS were becoming better integrated into local authority planning. Inspectors noted that while services had better self-evaluation processes in place, they need to be more focused on measuring the impact and outcomes of interventions.

Inspectors identified that in the majority of EPS there were examples of very good practice in relation to learning and teaching and partnership working. The majority of services were developing an increasing role in the prevention and early intervention of mental health issues in children and young people.

How well do educational psychology services support children and young people to learn and achieve?

Inspectors found that EPS offered a wide range of services to parents, families and carers. They identified EPS involvement in multi-agency work with parents and carers to support children and young people as a particular strength. This included working with others to provide family learning programmes such as 'Triple P' and 'Mellow Parenting'. Almost all EPS inspected provided very effective advice and consultation services to parents with pre-school children who have additional support needs. They also engaged very well with parents of older children and young people to provide advice on supporting learning and socio-emotional development. As a result, almost all local authorities and the majority of other stakeholders such as parents/carers, social workers, and health professionals were found to value the contribution of EPS.

Our evidence shows that services provided a range of very good capacity-building activities for teachers and other professionals, including advice, consultation and career-long professional learning. These activities supported staff to help meet children's and young people's learning needs in areas such as the development of literacy skills, implementation of Getting it Right for Every Child and promotion of positive behaviour such as nurture and restorative approaches.

Inspectors judged that the work EPS were doing to support the development of early literacy skills was often a key strength. Many services produced high-quality materials for schools, engaged directly with staff, and developed policy and practice guidelines for local authorities to improve the quality of learning, teaching, and assessment of children's early literacy skills. We found that these approaches were helping to build capacity in schools to improve attainment in literacy for children, particularly at the early stages. More recently, EPS have supported local authorities to develop learning and teaching approaches to help address the poverty-related attainment gap. EPS now need to continue to build on these strengths to impact on higher-order comprehension skills and other areas of learning, including numeracy and the measurement of health and wellbeing.

We found that EPS have increased their involvement in supporting the mental health of children and young people significantly. Almost all of this work is preventative or early intervention with individuals, families and schools. Work on self-harm, suicide prevention, developing nurturing relationships and enhancing vulnerable children's and young people's self-efficacy is helping to reduce the number of referrals to other agencies such as Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services. Inspectors noted that the quality and depth of work in this area has also improved with a growing number of therapeutic interventions being offered such as cognitive behavioural therapy, video interactive guidance and solution focused approaches. More robust data is now required to illustrate the preventative impact of early intervention on reducing more serious mental health problems.

Previously, EPS worked with post-school providers to support young people up to the age of 24 years. This included providing assessment information and advice on appropriate intervention strategies for young people with additional support needs. Financial constraints have had an impact in this area of work. While the majority offer advice, inspectors identified only a few services that now provide a systematic and comprehensive service across the five core functions of consultation, assessment, intervention, training and research to those aged 18-24 years.

How well do educational psychology services improve the quality of their work?

Our inspections indicate that the leadership of EPS has improved. We found most services now have a clear vision which is aligned with national and local priorities. Services are also more integrated into local authority planning which is helping them to contribute more and have greater impact on the key improvement priorities identified by councils.

Our evidence also shows, however, that too many services measure the effectiveness of the self-evaluation processes rather than the impact and outcomes of their work. Services need to continue to develop their research role more comprehensively and link more closely with academic research literature so that they can continue to innovate and help translate new theories into educational practice.

The number of educational psychologists is declining and this is impacting on services' ability to continue to deliver their core functions across the three levels of engagement. We found that many services were carrying vacancies and finding it difficult to recruit replacement staff. In response to this, almost all services are looking at how they can reconfigure their models of service delivery to ensure equity for all stakeholders.

Developing higher-order literacy skills

West Dunbartonshire Educational Psychology Service (WDEPS) has been supporting the education authority in improving children's higher-order reading comprehension skills by using a reciprocal teaching (Palinscar and Brown 1984) approach. All primary and secondary schools receive training and resources from the EPS and follow up coaching sessions.

Data has been collected each year since 2012 to evaluate impact on children and teachers, and to measure improvements in attainment, with a focus on closing the attainment gap for the most disadvantaged.

WDEPS found that the approach (informed by improvement science):

- improved reading comprehension (16 month gain over a 6 month period) and decoding of print (12 month gain over a 6 month period) in those who participated;
- contributed to closing the attainment gap between the lowest performing 30% of primary school aged pupils and the highest performing 30% of primary aged pupils;
- improved pupils' use of metacognitive strategies;
- improved teacher knowledge and understanding of teaching reading comprehension;
- improved teacher confidence in teaching reading; and
- was most successful for those children who found reading comprehension difficult.

