

Exploring the training experiences of trainee educational psychologists in supporting children and young people with literacy difficulties

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Aims: *This research aims to build a national picture of the range of training that trainee educational psychologists (TEPs) in England receive in relation to literacy difficulties and/or dyslexia (LitD/D), and how this goes on to influence their professional practice.*

Method/Rationale: *The practice of educational psychologists (EPs) in working with children and young people with LitD/D has been described as inconsistent, as different EP services use different definitions, policies and diagnostic pathways. A lack of consensus in knowledge and practice may have negative implications for the principle of equality of access and the positioning of EPs as evidence-based practitioners. Focus groups were held across five universities, with 24 TEPs in their second or final year of the three-year professional doctorate training programme taking part. Transcripts were analysed thematically.*

Findings: *TEPs' training and professional experiences varied, with some perceiving that identifying and supporting children with LitD/D was not indicated as a priority concern in their practice placements.*

Limitations: *This was an exploratory study, which may limit the transferability of findings. However, the range of patterning of views and variation of opinions discussed by the participants suggest that a fair representation of TEPs' experiences and perceptions was captured through the focus groups.*

Conclusions: *Considering TEPs acknowledged a desire to feel more competent in supporting children with LitD/D, there are implications for the content and approach of training programmes, and a need for more a directive role for professional legislation.*

Keywords: *Literacy difficulties; Educational psychology practice; Dyslexia; School psychology; Training.*

Introduction

The evolving role of the educational psychologist

In the United Kingdom, educational psychologists (EPs) provide support for and identification of children and young people who have special educational needs (SEN) (Department for Education, 2015). EPs apply their knowledge of psychology to support this population from birth until age 25 across three levels (the individual, the group and the organisation) through five main strands of practice: consultation,

assessment, intervention, research and training (SEED, 2017). However, some authors have pointed to a sense of anxiety in the profession in relation to how EPs' practice should respond to the 'complex, challenging and ever-changing context in which they work' (Evans et al., 2012, p.374). For example, the contribution of EPs to statutory local authority (LA) assessment procedures has led some stakeholders such as teachers and parents to think of EPs as 'gatekeepers' to accessing support (Fallon et al., 2010). Consequently, the

construction of the EP role and profession continues to be defined by a state of ‘reconstruction,’ ‘reformulation,’ and ‘refocusing,’ with some EPs considered to be experiencing an identity crisis in terms of how their role is defined (Cameron, 2006; Fallon et al., 2010).

The initial professional training of EPs

The job title of ‘educational psychologist’ is protected by law in England, meaning that professionals must follow an approved training programme and be registered with the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC). The initial professional training (IPT) route to qualify as an EP in England changed in 2006, with the postgraduate requirement changing from a master’s level degree to a professional doctorate.

There are 13 universities in England which offer IPT (see Table 1, below); twelve are well established and one, the University of East Anglia, accepted its first cohort of students in 2018. Training places are funded through the Department for Education, and the total number of training places increased from 116 in 2012 to 160 in 2018, and increased further to 203 from September 2020 (Association of Educational Psychologists, 2020).

Table 1: Training providers and number of places available.

Training provider	Training places (2022/23 academic year)
Bristol University	10
Exeter University	10
Newcastle University	12
University of East Anglia	15
University of Nottingham	16
Institute of Education	16
Tavistock and Portman NHS Trust	16
University College, London	16
University of East London	16
University of Southampton	16
University of Birmingham	18
University of Sheffield	18
University of Manchester	24

The training curriculum

The intensive, full-time doctorate takes three years and requires the trainee educational psychologist (TEP) to fulfil 300 days on practice placement, attend teaching seminars, and produce a thesis containing empirical research (British Psychological Society, 2022). TEPs deliver the vast majority of their required placement time (approximately 260 days) during the second and third years of the doctorate, through a practice placement arrangement with an LA or other organisation (Department for Education, 2019). The majority of university-led tuition takes place in the first year of the degree, although TEPs do continue to receive some university-based training input in their second and third years.

The British Psychology Society (BPS) accredits educational psychology doctoral programmes in England, Wales and Northern Ireland through a process of monitoring and reviewing quality standards. However, the standards are more focused on the core competencies that TEPs need to achieve rather than prescribing the exact syllabus for programmes, allowing each university the flexibility to determine the specific course content and deliver the curriculum as it sees fit (BPS, 2022; Evans et al., 2012; O’Hare, 2015). Training providers also need to evidence how each TEP meets a range of ‘standards of proficiency’ to give them eligibility to join the register of the Health and Care Professions Council, which is the regulator of health and care professions in the UK.

Two years after the first cohort of professional doctorate TEPs graduated, the Department for Education (2011) published a review of the new training route and noted a significant issue of training inconsistency, and recommended that the quality of training should be less ‘patchy.’ However, a more recent research report (Department for Education, 2019) notes improved quality of training. As part of the report, a survey of 217 newly quali-

fied EPs was carried out. Participants were asked about how satisfied they were with their personal experience of training. 53 per cent reported that they were very satisfied and 40 per cent reported that they were quite satisfied with the quality of the training they received (Department for Education, 2019).

EP practice, dyslexia and literacy difficulties

In 1999, the BPS published a working definition of dyslexia to support EPs with assessment and conceptualisation of the area. This definition stated that dyslexia is a learning difficulty ‘evident when accurate and fluent reading and/or spelling develops very incompletely or with great difficulty’ (BPS, 1999, p.6). One decade later, the Rose report defined dyslexia as ‘a learning difficulty that primarily affects the skills involved in accurate and fluent word reading and spelling’ (Rose, 2009, p.9). Up to 10 per cent of the UK population may be considered dyslexic; 4 per cent severely so (British Dyslexia Association, 2022; Government Digital Service, 2017), and the impact of poor literacy in childhood can be significant on future outcomes, with unemployed adults being twice as likely to have poor literacy skills as those in full-time employment, and adults with poor literacy three times as likely to report poor health (OECD, 2013). Therefore, EPs have a critical role in early intervention and supporting children and young people (CYP), their families and schools in relation to improving literacy skills.

However, the educational psychology profession has witnessed sustained controversy regarding the utility of the term dyslexia, due to competing debates regarding its definition, assessment and comorbidity with other difficulties (Elliot & Gibbs, 2008; Elliott & Grigorenko, 2014; Lopes et al., 2020; Stothard et al., 2018). Research has highlighted that the approaches and practices of EPs with regard to supporting learners with literacy

difficulties and dyslexia are inconsistent across England (Stothard et al., 2018; Wilde, 2018). Additionally, the widely differing conceptualisations of literacy difficulties and dyslexia have added to the layers of apparent confusion, as one informally reported study found that EPs provided over 30 qualitatively different responses to the question of how they defined a reading disability and dyslexia (Wilde, 2018). Furthermore, EP services in local authorities may have different pathways and policies and take inconsistent approaches to diagnosis (Stothard et al., 2018; Wilde, 2018). Such a lack of consensus in practitioner knowledge and practice is concerning for a profession which is built upon a scientist-practitioner model of utilising evidence-based practice to promote best outcomes for CYP (Miller & Frederickson, 2005).

Implications for the initial professional training of EPs

The IPT of EPs should equip them with the confidence and skills needed to assess and support children and young people who present with literacy difficulties, however a recent small-scale study indicated that some EPs may have ‘uneven confidence’ to assess and recommend interventions for literacy (Stothard et al., 2018). Stothard et al.’s (2018) findings additionally showed that some EPs struggled to identify what is ‘psychological’ about dyslexia and how they could apply psychological models in such cases. One reason for this was suggested to be a lack of knowledge about literacy due to limited training in the area, and some EPs recognised that they should, or could, know and do more in this regard but did not know how to equip themselves with this knowledge (Stothard et al., 2018). Interestingly, the 48-page BPS accreditation standards document (2022) references literacy learning only once:

By the end of their programme, trainee educational psychologists will: Understand individual differences in developmental progres-

sion by demonstrating knowledge of theories of psychology relevant to cognitive development and learning (e.g. language and literacy) (BPS, 2022, p.18)

The introduction of doctoral training in 2006 meant that TEPs were no longer required to be qualified school teachers before retraining as EPs (Stothard et al., 2018). Consequently, the employment background of current TEPs is diverse, including roles working within social care, research, psychological wellbeing, or relevant voluntary organisations, charities and specialist support services. This change may have affected newly qualified EPs' confidence in their understanding of typical development in reading and spelling, which may in turn result in an ambivalence or reluctance in working with literacy difficulties (Stothard et al., 2018).

The input TEPs receive as part of their educational psychology IPT forms and crafts the ongoing knowledge and practice base of the profession (Woods, 2014). Good quality training that is rooted in evidence-based practice, and able to be consolidated through relevant learning opportunities on placement, is arguably more effective at developing key skills and confidence at the start of an EP's career, rather than trying to 'top up' this knowledge with sporadic CPD sessions once qualified.

Summary and aim

There is no existing research that explores the experiences and perceptions of TEPs in relation to their training experiences regarding literacy difficulties and/or dyslexia and whether they consider this to be sufficient and useful in helping them to establish a sense of competence and confidence as practitioners. It therefore seems apposite to explore the experiences and perceptions of TEPs in terms of the training they receive from university and on practice placement, with regard to identifying and supporting learners who have literacy difficulties and/or dyslexia (LitD/D). In doing so, a national picture will be built of the academic input

and 'messages' TEPs receive about literacy difficulties, and how this may influence their practice while on placement and going forward as qualified EPs.

The research questions which aim to be addressed by this study are:

1. How do TEPs perceive the direct instruction they receive in relation to the assessment, intervention and psychological formulation of children and young people (CYP) with LitD/D?
2. What are TEPs' experiences on practice placement in relation to working with CYP with LitD/D?
3. What are TEPs' opinions on the ongoing role of EPs in supporting CYP with LitD/D?

A note on terminology

This paper acknowledges the inconsistencies in the way in which dyslexia is understood and interpreted by different authors, researchers and practitioners (Gibbs & Elliott; 2015; Lopes et al., 2020; Pollock, 2019), and so, in line with a recent systematic literature review which investigated the self-perceptions of children with literacy difficulties (Gibby-Leversuch et al., 2019), the term 'literacy difficulties and/or dyslexia' ('LitD/D') will be used throughout the rest of this article for consistency. However, direct quotations from participants which include either of these terms will be presented verbatim, in order to represent their views authentically.

Methodology

Epistemological and ontological position

This research was conducted from the perspective of a critical realist ontology and social constructionist epistemology (Bhaskar, 2008; Maxwell, 2012; Wiltshire, 2018). This position allowed the researcher to undertake a process of retroductive reasoning throughout the data analysis process, in order to explore the interrelationships between people and their environments, and to reveal how causal mechanisms enable

Table 2: Participant details.

University	Number of participants	Year of training
A	4	All Year 2
B	5	All Year 2
C	4	All Year 2
D	5	All Year 2
E	6	Five Year 2; one Year 3

certain events to come to be within complex systems (Bonnington & Rose, 2014; Wiltshire, 2018).

Design

The project was exploratory in nature and employed a qualitative design in order to understand more about the training and placement experiences of TEPs through the use of a focus group method of data collection.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was granted from the University of Manchester, and relevant codes of human research ethics were adhered to throughout (British Psychological Society, 2018; HCPC, 2018).

The researcher was mindful of the comfort levels of the participants throughout the focus groups, given that the questions asked them to critically reflect upon the training and placement experiences that they had received as TEPs. However, given their stage of training, the participants were considered to have developed skills that enabled them to sustain a professional approach and maintain boundaries while navigating between their professional and personal experiences.

All data generated from the focus groups were anonymised and stored securely.

Sampling and participant details

All Year 2 and Year 3 TEPs attending IPT programmes in universities in England were invited to take part. IPT programme directors at each university were contacted via email by the second author and asked to distribute information about the research. Participation was voluntary and informed consent was obtained from all participants

before the focus groups commenced. TEPs from six universities responded to the invitation; however scheduling conflicts meant that it was not possible within the research timescale to hold a focus group at one of the universities. Therefore, data were generated from focus groups held with trainee psychologists at five of the 12 IPT universities that had Year 2 and Year 3 students in the 2018/19 academic year. (The University of East Anglia, being a new programme, had only Year 1 trainees at the time of data collection.) The five universities were located in different regions of England, meaning that a geographical and cultural ‘spread’ of experiences was captured. A total of 24 students participated in the focus groups. 23 were in Year 2 and one was in Year 3; 21 were female and three were male.

Data collection method

Each focus group took place in a private room at each participating university. The question schedule was semi-structured and the prompts were informed by previous literature (Reason & Stothard, 2013; Regan & Woods, 2000; Stothard et al., 2018), and through reflective discussion between the first and second authors. The focus groups lasted between 54 and 70 minutes, with an average of 63 minutes.

Data analysis

The focus groups were audio recorded and then transcribed. Braun and Clarke’s (2006; 2013; 2019) six step model of reflexive thematic analysis was used to analyse the data; chosen as the most appropriate method of analysis as it can be used with data with little or no existing theoretical background. Furthermore, the approach is not aligned with

Figure 1: Thematic map.



a particular epistemological or ontological position and so may be used alongside a social constructionist epistemology and a critical realist ontological perspective. In this way, thematic analysis allowed the researcher to acknowledge the meanings that participants gave to their realities, whilst acknowledging that such meaning is fallible (Bonnington & Rose, 2014).

Themes were analysed inductively, meaning that the data themselves were used to derive the structure of analysis and the themes identified were strongly linked to these data (Braun & Clarke, 2006), rather than preconceived coding frames being used. Following extensive data familiarisation through listening to the recordings and reading of the transcripts, codes were generated across each individual transcript and then rich patterns of meaning were identified across the dataset as a whole. The data were analysed first at a semantic level and then at a latent level. This decision was made so that possible meanings beyond the semantic level and 'the underlying ideas, assumptions, and conceptualisations - and ideologies - that are theorised as shaping or

informing the semantic content of the data' (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.13) could be considered.

As coding is a reflexive process that positions researcher subjectivity as central in identifying and interpreting meaning, and in line with Braun and Clarke's (2013; 2019) explicit stance on the role of 'inter-rater reliability' in the process of thematic analysis, numeric 'inter-rater reliability' scores were not calculated. Instead, identified codes and themes were discussed between the authors in order to generate reflection on the process of data analysis. This process prompted further consideration regarding the possible interpretations of the participants' experiences and the meanings that they ascribed to these.

Findings

Four organising themes and 12 related sub-themes were identified. These are represented in Figure 1 below. Within the following synthesis, sub-themes are italicised and described with relation to illustrative, pseudonymised data extracts.

Making sense of the EP role

The participants considered psychology as being intrinsic to the topic of LitD/D, to the extent that *'I don't think that you can be a psychologist and not think it's part of your role'* (3e). In discussion, TEPs were easily able to **find the psychology** and identified a range of learning and affective factors relevant to LitD/D, including *'resilience and wellbeing'* (2e), *'motivation'* (3a), *'the cognitive side of dyslexia'* (3b), *'processing'* (2b), *'working memory'* (1b), and *'the personal construct of the child and how they view themselves as a learner'* (2b). However, one TEP perceived an overlap in the knowledge that a teacher and an EP may have, and would have appreciated receiving some *'explicit messages... about where psychology ends and teaching begins'* (5d).

Many TEPs considered that the way in which the bulk of instruction comes in Year 1 was the key challenge of **university learning**, as it meant that during Years 2 and 3, TEPs found it hard to recall salient aspects of the learning, as it now *'feels quite woolly to me if I'm being honest'* (4b), while one TEP apologetically explained, *'we had some sessions, but I can't really remember [them]. Is that terrible?'* (1e). Additionally, some participants considered that the quantity of teaching input was lacking: *'it's a massive area and two lectures isn't quite enough to cover that'* (4c). TEPs recognised the importance of being able to consolidate their learning in a timely manner. Participants from one university explained that they were required to complete a mandatory literacy assessment in their first-year placement and write it up in an assignment, which increased their sense of confidence: *'it did help when you had to read around everything that you talked about... it forces you to have to be like, oh okay, I get it now'* (4d).

Some participants felt as though they continued to have gaps in their knowledge, with a lack of understanding of typical literacy skill acquisition a recurring theme: *'it would have been nice to have a bit more of a basic understanding of typical development. What you would expect, how you would normally*

teach a child' (2e). This was considered important *'in order to be able to know where to put your intervention in or what blocks are missing'* (2e). Some TEPs identified a possible reason for these perceived gaps in the training content:

4c: *'I'm not sure it's adapted enough since the change from having to be a teacher.'*

1c: *'No, they need to take that into account more.'*

Participants were able to identify the ways in which EPs might offer a **unique contribution** to supporting CYP with LitD/D. Many TEPs widely considered the value of the EP role as bringing together different strands of information and synthesising them into a well-rounded formulation: *'EPs have a lot of problem-solving skills and look at the holistic picture and that's a bit different'* (3c). Another TEP contrasted their professional contribution with that of other professionals such as specialist teachers: *'you bring something to help make sense, to draw together and move it forward that maybe is a unique thing that other people wouldn't necessarily have the expertise to do that'* (3d).

Although easily able to identify how they could support CYP with LitD/D, many TEPs felt that they have not had many **opportunities** to put these skills into practice, due to a sense that such cases were not a priority for EP involvement in the schools in which they worked. One TEP explained, *'there's always got to be another layer on it as well as the literacy difficulties. Otherwise, I'm just not asked to be involved'* (5e). Some participants identified that *'some local authorities seem to have a kind of hierarchy of a problem'* (3c), with LitD/D assessments often channelled towards specialist teacher or learning support teams instead, who are often *'a cheaper and probably more accessible service'* (6e). One participant explained how although her service had a cognition specialist meaning LitD/D cases *'tend to go her way'* (4c), her service had introduced continuing professional development (CPD) for the rest of the team to stop *'one person holding on to the knowledge and everyone else [being] kind of deskilled'* (4c).

Professional integrity

The participants expressed a growing confidence in their ability to develop as **autonomous practitioners**: *'I think we're given lots of things and laid them out on the table and it's up to you about what you decide is gonna be the way that you're gonna be... ploughing your own furrow'* (2e). For many, it was important to them that they were *'allowed to talk in places where you are allowed to express where you sit'* (3b), for example, in relation to the dyslexia diagnosis debate. However, while TEPs valued being encouraged to develop as independent practitioners and thinkers, some noted that this freedom *'depends on the authority that you're in'* (3a). Some TEPs identified times where they felt that as a representative of the LA, they needed to adjust their practice and values accordingly, and experienced tension with this: *'even if I don't believe it, the local authority trainee needs to follow that kind of... enforce that local authority view... it's a good question of are you an autonomous practitioner?'* (3b)

A minority of participants had experienced a power imbalance in which they felt they were not able to discuss their thoughts with their placement supervisor, with one TEP explaining: *'my supervisor is very much like there is no such thing as dyslexia. I don't believe in it.'* Therefore, if I try and talk to her about a case it's like, *'I'm not interested'* (3b).

Accountability and responsibility were core values for the participants, who displayed a robust **commitment to ethical practice**. TEPs reflected on how they managed having *'competing ethical considerations'* (2a), and there was a keen sense that *'as long as you work in the best interests of the child, with that viewpoint, then yeah, it'll be fine'* (2d). One TEP explained how she finds a justification in providing a diagnosis by considering the long-term trajectory and feelings of the child: *'I know that if they want to go to university there is a big benefit in me writing down this child has dyslexia because they don't have to get another assessment when they go to university, where they have to go through that kind of pain'* (3b).

Reconciling different messages

Some participants described instances where expectations between their university and placement practice did not match, which led to **tensions** as they were positioned in the middle of the two settings. For one TEP, LA policy meant that she could not complete a piece of casework as directed by her university: *'I was in a placement that didn't use standardised assessment but we had to do the literacy tasks... so that didn't match what we were taught'* (2d). Another TEP illustrated how placement and university supervisors had differing expectations of the training she would receive in each setting: *'One of my target areas was to increase my understanding of literacy difficulties and how to help... My personal tutor from uni said, 'well, we kind of expect you to learn that on placement.' And my supervisor on placement said, 'well, she should have really come with some basic understanding so that we can...' And I was like, 'ooh, this is awkward'* (1c).

Despite being placed in such 'awkward' situations, participants were mostly confident that their training and placement experiences had given them the skills required to negotiate such situations. One TEP explained, *'that's why we get caught in the middle because we can kind of navigate that'* (1a). Others acknowledged that there was more to balancing competing influences and stances than perhaps meets the eye: *'It's not just managing a child with literacy, it's managing the system where literacy is viewed in a certain way or dyslexia is viewed in a certain way and managing your own ethics, but also the local authority's standpoint'* (3b).

Many TEPs were able to draw on the professional skills they had developed through training as a means of enabling them to have difficult conversations and negotiate significantly contrasting views between stakeholders: *'I always go back to your ethical approach and your consultation skills and how you can negotiate and be a conduit between these different layers of narrative? That's hard to do I think in practice but I think that's where I'd like to see myself'* (2a).

Another area where participants shared having to navigate competing narratives was in relation to the **debate around dyslexia**. Some TEPs shared that for their services, dyslexia

was 'a real contentious issue' (6a), something that 'they are not convinced that it really is a thing' (2b), or a topic that 'we don't touch' (4d). One TEP explained how this approach fuelled an emotional response: 'I don't like an extreme position and I find it really uncomfortable because I guess the position of this [university] is do not sit on either extreme. Don't be all or nothing. Be both' (3b).

While this participant added that such extreme views were 'quite difficult to digest' (3b), others considered that 'you're always going to have rolling concepts within a profession, aren't you?' (3a), thus positioning healthy debate and reflective practice as not just good for the integrity of the educational psychology profession, but also as a professional responsibility for practitioners: 'Debate, I think, is really important. I think we need to be, as a profession, which I think we have been in this instance, really clear that we have that responsibility to continue to debate things like this, and that actually that is part of our role' (4c).

The fact that trainees practise under the supervision of a qualified EP offered some participants a sense of security and safety as they are **not yet expected to 'have the answers'** to difficult questions, as it meant it was understandable if they were not yet able to reconcile conflicting messages. One TEP explained, 'I'm a trainee, it's not my job to tell people how to formulate dyslexia and I'm just kinda doing my best' (3e). However, other participants felt more conflicted in relation to their ability and competence as a trainee: 'Although we're not meant to be experts and no-one expects us to know everything about everything, you still like to feel when you're sitting in the room and people have paid however much money for you to be there, that you can be helpful in some way' (1c).

One TEP looked forward to graduating as an EP as this would represent the point at which they will have a greater understanding of how to resolve challenging situations: 'I don't know... ask me when I'm qualified!' (6e)

In search of consensus?

A recurring theme was how participants managed their practice in the light of **inconsistent policies, pathways** and placement

guidelines. Some services had explicit procedures for EP involvement in cases to do with LitD/D, whereas in other authorities this guidance was 'lacking' (1c). In some services, involvement from specialist teachers or learning support services meant that participants rarely were involved with LitD/D cases, which led to fears that this may deskil the TEP: 'It's very, very separate... I think I'm in a bubble because of my authority and how we work. Then I hear something from you [fellow TEP] and I think, I'm really missing out on this. If I then go to another authority, I'm not going to know any of this' (4c).

One university encouraged its TEPs to reflect on these differences: 'we went off to our services, we were looking at the documents they had, each one has different views' (1d). Another university's tutors explained to their TEPs that they may need to use different definitions of dyslexia depending on their placement: 'the Rose report and the BPS, the two of those were sort of said as, dependent on your service you can use them' (1b). Some participants recognised that their experiences and opportunities for involvement in LitD/D cases would therefore vary significantly depending on their host LA: 'you don't know where we're going to be, what services we're going to go to, so they kind of have to teach dyslexia, knowing that we might not ever use it again' (3b).

Consequently, these practical inconsistencies were perceived to affect some participants' sense of competence quite profoundly: 'what we've identified is that if we move to another service that doesn't have that [guidance], we're not going to have a clue what to say about literacy' (4c).

Most participants shared a sense that inconsistencies between authorities have resulted in **inequality of access** for children and families who need support, with one explaining, 'it's not fair that depending on what local authority you live in that sometimes you can get a diagnosis and sometimes you can't' (1b). Some participants perceived that a diagnosis of dyslexia may be more readily given by private EPs, meaning that those who could not afford a private EP report might be missing out on

support: 'if you can't, you end up with a child who might not get the support they need because you can't afford to do it privately because you live in an area where they refuse to do it' (5b).

However, participants were able to identify how the challenges arising from this 'two-tiered system' (6b) could be addressed; by focusing on the presenting needs of the CYP: 'my reports are based on the presenting needs rather than the label. So yeah, I think that's how I deal with it' (2c). Other participants had experienced similar resolutions: 'my supervisor also says you don't even need to say dyslexia; you can just talk on a needs basis. So to say specifically what the needs are' 4b.

Participants offered wide-ranging suggestions for future **next steps for a united profession**. Some considered that doctoral training is a marker of knowledge and capability and as such 'sometimes we miss a trick a bit' (2a) by not promoting the unique psychological skills gained while training: 'if we think about other diagnoses that children get, they come from people that have had doctorate level training. And I think we should sort of own that a bit. But actually we just sort of wash our hands of it a bit, but actually I think it's quite a big responsibility' (6e).

Some TEPs considered that achieving a nationwide consensus of practice might be difficult and unrealistic, but in fact, perhaps not necessary: 'inconsistency is going to happen in psychology because it's the study of humans... there has to be inconsistencies, and that's not to make it any less... if anything it makes it more psychological that there are so many inconsistencies' (3b).

However, many participants hoped that the profession could instead achieve consensus of theory, definition, and underlying principles on matters relating to LitD/D. One key suggestion for how this may be reached was that the BPS guidance, now 24 years old, 'needs to be reviewed because a lot of things have changed' (2d). Participants additionally considered that EPs and TEPs need 'the professional bodies to step up and give some direction' (3e); and that more research that focused on 'gathering views [and] experiences' of the profession (2c) should be carried out.

Discussion

Summary

How do TEPs perceive the direct instruction they receive in relation to the assessment, intervention and psychological formulation of children and young people (CYP) with LitD/D?

The findings from the study indicated that the university input TEPs receive had given them a good understanding of relevant psychological theories relating to LitD/D and enabled them to explore hypotheses relating to cognitive and affective factors. University seminars took place in the first year of the programme and this meant that many second or third year TEPs struggled to retain salient aspects of the tuition, especially if they had not had the opportunity to apply the knowledge in their practice in a timely manner. A number of TEPs felt that they had basic knowledge gaps which could be addressed by further instruction relating to the typical features of literacy development and a further review of the training syllabus which re-considers that not all TEPs have had teaching experience before starting the degree. Some TEPs considered that they did not receive enough instruction and would like a greater focus on LitD/D in their training curriculum.

What are TEPs' experiences on practice placement in relation to working with CYP with LitD/D?

The data gathered from the study indicated that some TEPs have had opportunities to put their university learning into practice, especially if this has been done in good time following related seminars. These opportunities were valued by TEPs as they allowed them to reinforce their knowledge and competence following university instruction. However, some participants had little experience of applying their training, with possible reasons for this including a perception

of LitD/D cases being low priority for their services or schools, or that such cases are taken to other professionals such as specialist teachers. The participants appreciated being encouraged to develop their practice in line with their ethical values, although some experienced tension when their views or those of their university did not align with those of their supervisor or host practice placement.

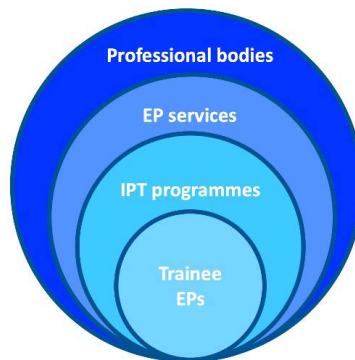
What are TEPs' opinions on the ongoing role of EPs in supporting CYP with LitD/D?

The findings suggest that TEPs generally consider EPs to have a valuable ongoing role in supporting CYP in relation to LitD/D, specifically by utilising a holistic approach, applying relevant psychological theories and taking an interactionist perspective that synthesises a range of contextual factors. The participants reflected that they have learned useful knowledge and skills to help them navigate challenging conversations and reconcile multiple layers of narrative, for example, in relation to the ongoing discourse about dyslexia diagnoses. However, the findings suggest that TEPs and EPs may need updated guidance from their professional bodies to help resolve inconsistencies across local areas and to encourage EPs to be clear about their role.

Implications for educational psychology training in relation to LitD/D

As previously discussed in the introduction, the IPT of TEPs is where the knowledge and practice base of the EP profession is formed (Woods, 2014). As can be seen from Figure 2, below, the training content that is delivered to TEPs will eventually go on to inform their practice as qualified EPs and contribute towards the policies and pathways that are created by EP services. Therefore, the implications for TEPs, IPT programmes, psychology services and professional bodies will now be discussed in relation to the findings.

Figure 2: Spheres of influence.



By exploring relationships between people and structural entities through a critical realist lens, one can begin to make tentative links between possible cause-and-effect relationships. As a result of this process, researchers 'are in a better position to make recommendations about policies and practices that have problematic consequences for the lives of people and social groups' (Wiltshire, 2018, p.13). IPT tutors are in a position of being able to effect significant change (O'Hare, 2015) and so they may wish to consider the following practical recommendations for the ongoing training of TEPs, as suggested by the participants of this study:

- Universities should consider introducing a spiral curriculum in which first year training topics are revisited in second and/or third years.
- Following the lead of one university in this study, one piece of casework related to LitD/D could be made mandatory for all first year TEPs on placement, in order to ensure timely application of their learning, and to support the integration of links between theory and practice.
- Universities could consider introducing a LitD/D assignment to enable TEPs to consolidate their theoretical and philosophical knowledge in this area.
- Tutors could ensure that as well as teaching when and how to assess for and support atypical literacy development, reference to typical literacy development

stages are also included in training materials, to enable TEPs to better understand where intervention should be targeted.

- Universities and host placements may wish to reserve some placement days for shadowing of English lessons in different year groups in primary schools, to offer TEPs practical experience of how CYP are taught to read.
- Universities and host practice placements should work together to be clear about the relative contribution and specific responsibilities of each organisation.

While the researchers acknowledge that some of these recommendations may be more feasible in practice than others, it is hoped that these suggestions can provide a framework for discussion and reflection for IPT providers in relation to how the training and dissemination of psychological theory to TEPs can be further improved in relation to LitD/D.

This study utilised a critical realist perspective to acknowledge that lived experiences can be explained through reference to causal mechanisms such as policies, structures and contextual conditions (Bhaskar, 2008). There are multiple ways of conceptualising and interpreting any given phenomenon according to its context. For example, although all universities offering IPT must adhere to the same accreditation standards (BPS, 2022), exactly how these programme standards are interpreted and operationalised by different providers may differ according to their institutional culture and philosophy, meaning that the different training experiences TEPs receive may be accounted for by this structural mechanism. Many participants were able to identify a range of causal mechanisms in the context of their environments (Bhaskar, 2008), which had generated a range of inconsistencies in their practice and experience. For example, some TEPs noted that different EP services used different definitions of dyslexia and had varying policies and pathways for EP involvement. Further contex-

tual discrepancies related to the personal values and norms of practice of qualified EPs with whom they worked. Some TEPs acknowledged concerns that such inconsistencies may lead to inequality of access and/or support if some children are not able to access EP involvement. Therefore, there are a number of implications for policy and practice in relation to the ongoing practice of TEPs and EPs in this area.

The findings from this study suggest that TEPs and EPs need to use reflection, research and discussion with their EP service colleagues, different local authorities and allied education professionals in order to understand their unique role and distinctive contribution to supporting CYP with LitD/D. Critically, the findings from this research suggest that having identified the ways in which their considerable skills and psychological training can best be utilised, TEPs and EPs should share and promote this information to schools and other professionals in order to develop a 'joined-up' approach of services. However, it is acknowledged that such national conversations may highlight that the extent of EPs' involvement and practice is limited in scope by factors including, but not limited to the following (Stothard et al., 2018)

- lack of opportunity for casework involvement;
- perception of LitD/D as not a priority for EP involvement;
- some barriers in accessing relevant continuing professional development and training post-qualification; and
- local variations in policies and practice, and fluctuations in interest and confidence amongst individual EPs relating to the topic of LitD/D.

The emerging role of cognition and learning specialists within the EP profession, as mentioned by one participant, may offer EP services a way to develop a consistency of approach in how children with LitD/D are supported. Fallon et al. (2010, p.15) note that teachers and clinical psychologists

‘invariably adopt’ recognised specialisms at relatively early points in their career and so qualified EPs would have professional justification for following a similar route. Having a cognition and learning specialist as part of an EP service could bring a range of benefits, including developing and advocating for a distinctive role for how EPs can support CYP as part of a multi-agency team, and supporting TEPs and qualified colleagues in increasing their own knowledge through LitD/D-related CPD.

Finally, the findings of this study, in line with others (Reason & Woods, 2002; Stothard et al., 2018) call for the BPS to offer the profession updated LitD/D guidance and ‘direction,’ as part of a large-scale review of updated scientific findings and working practices, and against a backdrop of recent national headlines relating to changes in some EPS dyslexia pathways (Bodkin, 2019; Hansard, 2018; Henshaw, 2018). The authors understand that updated guidance is currently being prepared and will be published later in 2023. It is hoped that it will offer the profession some clarity regarding current inconsistencies of practice and propose some suggestions for where consensus and clarity of theory and approach can be reached.

Implications for future research

Having explored detailed accounts of TEPs’ experiences in working with CYP with LitD/D, a number of future research avenues are possible. The consideration of potential routes for further research is an important aspect of a critical realist-informed study, as the approach implores researchers to ‘open up new possibilities to legitimately seek out causal explanations about the phenomena that we study’ (Wiltshire, 2018, p.12). Future research which explores the perspectives of service users such as school Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators, parents, CYP and allied education professionals may offer greater understanding of how others perceive the distinctive EP role and the type of contribution they require in order to meet

the needs of CYP with LitD/D. Secondly, it may be useful to explore the views of IPT programme and curriculum directors to understand in greater detail the choices they make in selecting and delivering the content and volume of training on LitD/D. Finally, further research may explore the practice and experiences of literacy specialist EPs in order to develop a national picture of how these roles are utilised within EP services, and how the training of TEPs can be improved further in this regard.

Limitations

This was an exploratory study, including 24 participants out of a potential pool of approximately 300 TEPs, which may limit the transferability of findings. Furthermore, the participants in this study were self-selecting, and so they may have decided to take part in a focus group about LitD/D due to an existing interest in the topic or a clear belief that TEPs and EPs have a distinctive role to play in this area. Additionally, the use of a focus group as a data collection tool may have meant that some participants could have felt pressured to agree to others’ viewpoints. However, the range of patterning of views and variation of opinions discussed by the participants suggest that a fair representation of TEPs’ experiences and perceptions was captured through the focus groups.

Conclusion

This is the first study that has explored the views and perceptions of TEPs in relation to their experiences of training and on placement in supporting CYP with LitD/D. As such, it adds an alternative and complementary aspect to the existing small body of literature that discusses the practice of EPs in this area. Given the long-term outcomes for young people who have LitD/D, it may be timely for IPT universities, EP services and professional EP bodies to come together for national discussion and reflection about the ongoing role and practice of EPs in this area.

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- include the developing role of educational psychologists and student assessment needs.
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