



The Role of Educational Psychologists in Fuelling the Narrative of the “Velcro TA”

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OPEN ACCESS

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Specialty section:

This article was submitted to
Special Educational Needs,
a section of the journal
Frontiers in Education

Received: 27 February 2019

Accepted: 26 June 2019

Published: 10 July 2019

Citation:

Vivash J and Morgan G (2019) The
Role of Educational Psychologists in
Fuelling the Narrative of the “Velcro
TA”. *Front. Educ.* 4:66.
doi: 10.3389/feduc.2019.00066

The notion of “Statementing” borne out of the recommendations of the Warnock Report (Warnock, 1978) set in motion unprecedented reforms in the use and allocation of resources, including the use of Teaching Assistants (TAs), in supporting children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). There has been a move however to question the efficacy of TAs, which has led to a number of studies into their effectiveness. Concern remains around the idea of what has colloquially become known as the “Velcro TA,” and how support can provide scaffolded and independent learning. Central to the assessment process of Statements of Special Educational Needs, and current Education Health and Care Plans (EHCP), educational psychologists (EPs) have a prominent role to play in providing advice around provision and the effective use of resources. Consideration therefore needs to be made as to how EPs may contribute to the construct of the “Velcro TA.” This paper explores the role of EPs in contributing to this through a consideration of how EPs discuss support through written psychological advice for Statements of SEN/EHCPs and by exploring the perspectives of school staff of how support is delivered in practice. The historical Psychological Advice of 10 pupils were analyzed using Thematic Analysis. Of these 10 pupils, interviews with members of current school staff for five of the pupils were transcribed and the data analyzed using Thematic Analysis. These interviews included five SENCOs, five Teachers, and five TAs. The results from the Thematic Analysis of the psychological advice identified that EP advice does not seem to have contributed to a notion of a Velcro TA and the theme of Independence was prominent throughout. However, analysis from both the psychological advice and the school staff interviews identified an overarching theme of Ambiguity which underpinned many of the themes, including themes of Classroom Practice, and Role of Others. The analysis from the psychological advice identified that there was often a sense of “what to do” but not necessarily “how to do it” and it appears that this Ambiguity is reflected into school staff practice.

Keywords: educational psychologist, special educational needs, EHCP, teaching assistants, psychological advice, ambiguity

INTRODUCTION

The 1981 Education Act (Department of Education and Science, 1981), spearheaded by the Warnock Inquiry into Special Educational Needs (SEN), directly led to the statutory assessment system, and the legal requirement for Local Authorities (LAs) to have responsibility in identifying and meeting the SEN and Disabilities of children. This also resulted in a systemic and seismic change in the practice of educational psychologists (EP) as they were required to provide legally binding psychological advice as part of the LA Statutory Assessment process. For those children and young people with complex needs, the outcome of which was a legal document referred to as a Statement of SEN, and more recently as an Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCP), following the implementation of the Children and Families Act (2014). The psychological advice, written by the EP, along with other advice from educational and health professionals, contributes to the overall EHCP. The EHCP is produced by the LA where the child lives, and the advice is implemented by the school, and subject to an annual review.

Resulting from these changes each school was mandated to appoint a SEN co-ordinator, with the acronym SENCO being universally used in schools. SENCOs are qualified teachers with additional responsibilities for co-ordinating support for children identified with SEND, and act as point of contact for specialist professionals such as EPs.

The role of EPs in supporting the statutory assessment process has historically identified a number of tensions and professional dilemmas, ranging from concerns as to the redefining of the EP role as a gate-keeper to resources (Farrell et al., 2006), to the suggestion that writing statutory advice reduces the time available to EPs to work in a way which EPs perceive may be more meaningful (Lyons, 1999). For example, it is suggested that many EPs espouse to work in a consultation model (Wagner, 2000) whereby the emphasis is on joint problem solving and working collaboratively with schools at an individual, group and system level. However, Crane (2016) details how despite the avowed aims of the recent Children and Families Act, there is an increasing demand for EHCP assessments, and by association an increased demand for the role of the EP in producing psychology advice. This is occurring at a time where there is a shortage of EPs in the profession (NAPEP, 2015 Educational Psychology Workforce Survey, 2015). Additionally, due to current constrained financial conditions of many LAs the practice of many EPs is currently to focus more on statutory work, rather than preventative consultative work (Lee and Woods, 2017). This too, encourages schools to view the EP as a “gate-keeper” whereby involvement of the EP can lead to a school accessing additional funding and resources, rather than making use of EP skills to develop action plans and interventions for children.

Whilst there are tensions arising in EPs related to their role in providing psychological advice, it remains a pivotal role of an EP. Arguably, given their training and expertise in assessing the SEN of children and young people, it is an effective use of their skillset that they should have a prominent role in describing to others, both what special education needs a child or young person may have, and the provision needed to overcome those

needs. However, it is suggested that a creative and innovative approach is needed to make psychological advice meaningful and purposeful for others (Cameron and Mosen, 2005). In an attempt to support EPs with writing psychological advice, recent guidelines from the British Psychological Society set out six components required within psychological advice including the need to describe strengths and areas of need; provide the child's views; synthesize a range of information and express it clearly; provide a psychological formulation; contribute to outcomes; and provide advice on provision (British Psychological Society Division of Educational Child Psychologists, 2015).

In recent decades, the number of children identified with SEND attending mainstream schools has increased (Thomas and Vaughan, 2004). As a consequence of greater numbers of children with SEN attending mainstream schools, there has been a significant increase in the number of non-teaching support staff, or teaching assistants (TAs) employed by schools. The Plowden Report (1967), argued for an increase in adult/child ratio in schools; prior to this support staff were in less than a quarter of schools.

Thomas (1992) shows how initial increases of support staff into the 1980s stemmed from informal recruitment, which was often parents who wanted to help in the classroom. However, TAs soon became part of the school staff, taking on additional and significant responsibilities including providing support for children with SEN. Following the election of the Labor government in 1997, and the inclusion of children with SEN has been a key factor in raising the number of TAs.

Since 2000, the number of TAs employed in England has increased significantly. School workforce figures from 2015 detail that there are over 255,000 TAs currently employed in English schools, accounting for around 27% of school staff, which rises in primary schools (Department for Education, 2015). The associated costs of TAs is now over of £3 billion, around a third of what is spent on qualified teachers (Department for Education, 2015). Giangreco and Doyle (2007) show how the increasing use of TAs is common in many other education systems across the world, but the UK has gone further than any other country in the deployment of TAs (Webster and Blatchford, 2014).

Howes et al. (2003) led an analysis of large-scale statistical studies into the impact of TAs in supporting the learning and participation of children with SEN; finding little or no evidence that the TAs had positive impact on raising pupil attainment. Blatchford et al. (2012) report a reliance from headteachers for the implementation of inclusive practice in classrooms, though there is much ambiguity around the role of TAs in pedagogy. The work of Balshaw and Farrell (2002) into small-scale, qualitative studies found positive anecdotal evidence around learning and participation which suggest that relationships between types of support was of vital importance.

Within this study the term pedagogy is understood to move beyond the definitions of primary associations with teaching, but to include the thinking and practice of those involved in education. Fundamentally concerning changing ourselves and the world we live in Brühlmeier (2010).

Blatchford et al. (2012) suggested that there was a lack of studies into the use of TAs under regular classroom conditions.

This led to a 5-years UK government funded study, the Deployment and Impact of Support Staff (DISS) (Blatchford et al., 2009). The findings of this study were perhaps initially counter-intuitive as it showed that pupils receiving the most support, actually made less progress.

The DISS project argues that there are systemic factors in which TAs work that contribute to this. The project details how the work of TAs is mainly focused upon lower attaining pupils with SEN, with TAs often effectively acting as the primary educators for pupils with SEN. This supports the argument put forward by Giangreco et al. (2005) that the least able pupils receive less support from qualified teaching staff. Blatchford et al. (2009) argue that the pupils with the greatest learning needs in our schools receive alternative support from TAs. TAs may lack the opportunities to communicate and plan the tasks that are given to them by teachers. The DISS Project showed that the practice of TAs was less academically demanding of pupils and overtly task focused; rather than focusing on learning, and the interactions between them often closed down discussions about the learning content (Blatchford et al., 2012).

This is of great importance to the practice of EPs, particularly with respect to the nature of interaction between TA and pupil. There is a key role for educational psychologists in the development of interventions based upon Social Development Theory of Vygotsky (1978), and the zone of proximal development (ZPD). Vygotsky demonstrated that the ZPD is the point at which a pupil can perform a task under supervision, and the ability for them to be able to work independently. This, Vygotsky shows, is where learning takes place. EPs often refer to “scaffolding” when describing this in practice. Here a teacher provides support, but decreases this as competence increases. Blatchford et al. (2012) research would suggest that a decrease in the amount of support provided is not always happening with regards the practice of TAs.

Given the history of inclusive practice in UK education over recent decades, there is a contention of the role of the EP and the extent to which the practice of producing statutory psychological advice may have contributed to a potentially defined construct of the “Velcro-model,” whereby TAs are attached to provide support to one particular pupil, which may, as outlined above prove to be ineffective as an approach to developing learning and independent thinking. The terminology developed following the definition of the fabric fastener of the same name. If practice perpetuates dependence on a TA for pupils with SEND by continually supporting their learning, and by TAs not operating under a scaffolded approach then practice is not enabling or allowing successful pedagogic practice to develop.

The role that the EP has in this is fundamentally unclear. There is a need to identify the extent to which EPs identify and specify adult support when writing psychological advice. It may be that EPs are unclear in specifying the teaching skills, training, or experience needed by teaching and ancillary staff in meeting the learning and developmental needs of children. It is also unclear to what extent EPs are clear in their own advice if they specify differences in teaching and support approach that is needed from different levels of school staff, and the extent

to which EPs differentiate between the role of the teacher and the TA.

As Lewis and Norwich (2001) state, teachers try, and differentiate their approaches to teaching according to their own perceptions of broad pupil ability. Lewis and Norwich (2001) suggest that such strategies cannot be assumed to be representing a common or specific SEN strategy, and indeed the diagnostic label that may be assigned to a pupil clearly may not actually reflect the full range of difficulties and needs that a pupil may have, or require support with; there are questions therefore around the extent to which the actual advice that EPs produce is actually then reflected into school teaching and pedagogy.

There are, therefore, many questions around the role of the EP and their psychological advice particularly in terms of how specific approaches to meeting SEND that are recommended in advice, and whether this is actually replicated in practice. This leads to following research questions, which will be addressed in the present study -

- In what ways do EPs discuss adult support in psychological advice and how is this reflected in school pedagogy?
- In what ways do EPs identify specific training or skills which adults should have to support the pupil and how is this reflected in school pedagogy?
- In what ways do EPs differentiate between support from teachers and support from other adults and how is this reflected in school pedagogy?

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative approach taking data from the written psychological advice of 10 Years 9 pupils, and semi-structured interviews with school staff responsible for five of those pupils. The study was undertaken in a large Shire county in the East of England, United Kingdom (UK). The pupils attended schools within two different LAs. The study is exploratory in nature and the results reflect the context in which the study was undertaken, and interpreting the experiences of those involved.

Pupils

Ten pupils were selected from a larger UK based research project, the SEN in Secondary Education (SENSE) study (Webster and Blatchford, 2017). The SENSE study was a longitudinal study exploring the experiences of children and young people with Statements of SEN during Year 9 of their schooling. Participants had all previously taken part in the Making A Statement (MAST) project (Webster, 2013) when they were in Year 5. Written informed consent to take part in the study was obtained from all parents and pupils where applicable.

Participants had a Statement of (SEN) when they were in Year 5, and were in the process of converting to an Education, Health, and Care Plan (EHCP). A Statement/EHCP in the UK is a legal document outlining the additional educational support and resources that a child or young person may require in relation to their SEND. There was a range of Special Educational Need represented in the sample including Moderate Learning Difficulty (MLD), Speech, Language and Communication Needs

(SLCN), Profound and Multiple Learning Difficulty (PMLD), Social, Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH), and Autism Spectrum Condition (ASC). The profiles of these pupils are illustrated in **Table 1**.

Interview Participants

For each of the 10 pupil participants, interviews with members of their current school staff workforce were conducted as part of the SENSE research. The interview participants included the SEN Coordinator (SENCO) ($N = 5$), a core subject (for example, English, Maths, or Science) Teacher ($N = 5$), and a Teaching Assistant ($N = 5$), for each pupil participant. This study only considered interviews with the aforementioned personnel and did not consider interviews with the pupils themselves. For the purposes of data analysis, only interviews relating to the key members of staff for five of the pupils were analyzed, which were selected at random. The pupils selected were those with IDs 1, 3, 4, 8, and 10, and who all attended Mainstream Secondary Schools. Whilst analysis of all of the interviews would have given greater insights, this was not possible due to research constraints at the time this study took place.

Data Collection–Historical Psychological Advice

The historical statutory psychological advice of the 10 pupils were obtained from the Local Authority responsible for maintaining the EHCP / Statement. Psychological advice written as part of a child's statutory assessment broadly covers a number of sections including Developmental History, Assessment and Identification of SEN, Outcomes and Provision. For the purposes of this research, analysis was carried out on the Provision section only of the Psychological Advice. This focused on the recommendations made by the EP as to the provision an educational setting would need to provide to allow the child or young person to achieve

the identified educational outcomes. All advices were written by experienced Educational Psychologists employed within the same Local Authority.

Data Collection–Semi-structured Interviews

The interviews with the key members of staff were conducted and recorded in the adult's school following a semi-structured interview schedule. This schedule was pre-specified by the SENSE study (Webster and Blatchford, 2017) and were based on the interview schedule from the MAST project (Webster, 2013), with additional questions related to the SEND reforms. The questions were related to the needs of pupils with Statements/EHCPs and the provision in place for them. The same questions were put to all interviewees in all settings and role specific questions were asked in line with the teachers, TAs and SENCOs, respective positions and responsibilities. The interview schedule was organized into six sections broadly covering the areas of Locations, The Role of Adults, Curriculum and Provision, Transferring from a Statement to an EHCP, Transitions and Impact. The interview schedule included 17 questions, and is reproduced in **Appendix 1: Interview Schedules**. The interviews lasted ~15–30 min and following the interviews, the recordings were transcribed.

Data Analysis

The Provision section of all 10 psychological advices and the 15 interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis. A rigorous approach to the thematic analysis was followed, as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006), whereby five distinct steps were completed (familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, the search for themes, review of themes, then finally the defining and naming of themes).

The integrity and rigor of these elements of the research were aided by a number of appropriate measures, including all the interviews being carried out by the researchers, the interview schedules being used in all interviews to ensure the same areas were broadly covered by each participant and that the recordings were all transcribed by the researchers. Further, the integrity of the research was aided by the triangulation of participant responses whereby the same information was sought from different sources. Additionally, a peer reviewer was asked to verify both coding processes to determine the accuracy of the coding systems, and regular collaboration ensured scrutiny of codes and themes.

RESULTS

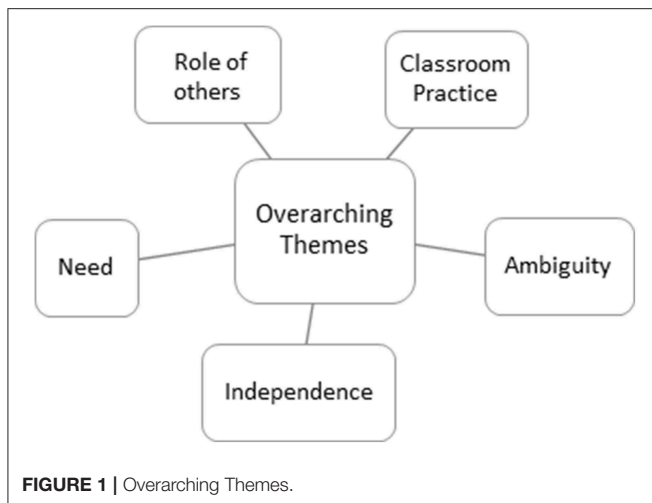
From the thematic analysis of both the psychological advice and school staff interviews, there were five overarching themes identified what are illustrated in **Figure 1**.

Each of these themes were composed of a number of subthemes, identified via the thematic analysis. The full thematic map can be viewed in **Appendix 2: Thematic Map**. An overview of the overarching themes is given below.

TABLE 1 | Profiles of the pupil participants.

ID	Gender	Area of need*	Year 9 provision	Date of psychological advice
1	M	MLD	Mainstream Secondary	2010
2	M	MLD	Local Area Special School	2007
3	F	MLD	Mainstream Secondary	2008
4	M	MLD	Mainstream Secondary	2006
5	M	SLCN & MLD	Mainstream Secondary	2009
6	F	PMLD	Local Area Special School	2013
7	M	SLCN	SLCN / ASC specialist provision	2006
8	F	PMLD	Mainstream Secondary	2006
9	M	SEMH	Mainstream Secondary	2010
10	M	ASC	Mainstream Secondary	2011

*Primary area of need as indicated on the Statement / Education, Health and Care Plan.



Role of Others

The overarching theme of “Role of Others” included subthemes of “TA Support,” “Teacher Responsibility,” and “Wider Support Network,” and considered the role others play in supporting children and young people with SEND. In particular the role of other adults within the classroom was a prominent subtheme giving consideration to the wide range of additional support, both academic and emotional, which an additional adult may provide.

Classroom Practice

A wide range of subthemes encompassed the “Classroom Practice” overarching theme and included the range of strategies and approaches that may be found within the classroom and used by teachers or other adults. For example, subthemes such as “Differentiation,” “Overlearning,” “Intervention,” and “Scaffolding” were included alongside more specific-themed approaches such as “Feedback and Monitoring,” “Equipment,” and “Questioning.”

Need

Within the overarching theme of “Need,” subthemes related to the nature of the child’s SEND and how this was reflected, for example in advice or within learning, were included. Subthemes including “Identification of Need,” “Evolving Need,” and “Personalized to Need” considered the fluidity of need and the response to this.

Independence

The overarching theme of “Independence” reflected the subthemes related to promoting and supporting independence in children and young people with SEND. It included the subthemes “Reducing Support,” “Promoting Independence,” and “Preparedness” which considered ways in which others supported independence in children and young people with SEND, and also included subthemes related to how children and young people may develop independence such as the subthemes of “Self-monitoring” and “Self-regulation.”

Ambiguity

The overarching theme of “Ambiguity” considered the aspects of support which could have resulted in difficulties with interpreting meaning and cause uncertainty, and where content appeared vague and lacked clarity. This included subthemes of “What but not how,” “Ambiguous Terms,” and “Presumed Knowledge” which was concerned with elements of practice where an implicit understanding of SEND and approaches to supporting SEND was implied. The subthemes of “Unspecified Activities” and “Role of Unspecified Adult” considered information where it was not clear who, for example teacher or TA, should be providing support, or what specifically they should be undertaking.

In What Ways Do EPs Discuss Adult Support in Psychological Advice and How Is This Reflected in School Pedagogy?

Three overarching themes and several subthemes were identified as contributing to the EP construct of adult support and how this is reflected in school pedagogy. This included the overarching themes of “Independence,” “Need,” and “Classroom Practice.”

Figure 2 illustrates the overarching themes and subthemes.

Within the psychological advice, there was an emphasis on the overarching theme of Independence and particularly the subthemes of “Promoting Independence” and “Reducing Support.” EPs would describe the necessity of children and young people having opportunities to work independently of adult support, and suggest ways of developing skills to reduce reliance on support. For example, psychological advice indicated cases where pupils should be required to complete work on their own (for example, within the Advice for Pupil 8); further, the Advice for Pupil 5 illustrated:

“[Pupil] should be encouraged to do tasks where he has the prerequisite skills independently to avoid him becoming dependent on support” (Advice for Pupil 5)

Whilst independence was seen as important, it also appeared that there was recognition that there needed to be a balance between ensuring that children and young people had the support available when required, alongside opportunities to work independently of adult support as described within the Advice for Pupil 1:

“[Pupil] will need support for many activities but needs to do some of work, other than craft activities, independently” (Advice for Pupil 1)

Alongside the overarching theme of “Independence,” the overarching theme of “Classroom Practice” and subtheme of “Differentiation” appeared to contribute to the construct of adult support, and the role of independence continued to be prominent. In particular, there appeared to be an emphasis on differentiation within the classroom and the role this would play in supporting independence. For example, within the Advice for Pupil 3, it was discussed how:



FIGURE 2 | Themes related to adult support.

“...enable her to work with differentiated materials / tasks in lessons without the need for adult support” (Advice for Pupil 3)

Alongside the role that differentiation could play in supporting independence, it was also identified how differentiation may allow for children to access their learning in alternative ways, for example within the Advice for Pupil 6:

“adults should provide opportunities to express her ideas in a variety of ways other than spoken responses e.g., drawing, story boards, photographs” (Advice for Pupil 6)

Throughout the psychological advice, it appeared that the EP construct of adult support was in the context of promoting independence and utilizing adults to support children and young people with this. However, it was noteworthy that whilst the overarching theme of “Independence” was a prominent theme throughout the psychological advice, this theme appeared to have less prevalence within the school staff interviews. Within the school staff interviews, when considering adult support, the overarching theme of “Classroom Practice” appeared to be of most relevance, with several subthemes contributing to how adult support appeared to be viewed. In particular, within school staff interviews, there appeared to be an emphasis on identified strategies and approaches that adults may use as a means of supporting pupils to access learning tasks. This included approaches which were described within the subthemes “Questioning” and “Feedback and Monitoring” and included

techniques such as highlighting key information and checking understandings. Further, the SENCO for Pupil 4 described how:

“I think a lot of it is around reiterating instructions or re-explaining things, sometimes she will, for a large piece of work, act as a scribe” (SENCO; Pupil 4)

Similarly, the subtheme of “Differentiation” appeared frequently within the school staff interviews however, there appeared a sense of adults being the *means* of differentiation, rather than having access to differentiated tasks. For example, the Science Teacher for Pupil 3, when discussing differentiation, suggested:

“Mainly breaking things down into smaller chunks for her to process each activity. I try and keep things fairly short anyway” (Science Teacher; Pupil 3)

This appeared to be a view shared by others, for example:

“to be able to take the teacher instructions and break them down if they haven’t been broken down sufficiently already, break them down further, tailoring it to the child, and also sort of prompting the thinking” (Teaching Assistant; Pupil 4)

Further, whilst the subtheme of “Differentiation” appeared frequently in the psychological advice with reference to differentiated tasks and activities, there appeared to be a view within the school staff interviews that this was not something that children and young people with SEND necessarily needed. For

example, within the school staff interviews, the SENCO for Pupil 10 described how:

“The streaming of the groups allows it that he accesses the same lesson material as the rest of the group. He doesn’t require drastic differentiation” (SENCO; Pupil 10)

Similarly, the English Teacher for Pupil 1 identified the perspective that the groups children and young people learnt in, provided opportunity to access learning without additional differentiation such as:

“I don’t necessarily have to differentiate completely for [Pupil] but I think he makes use of the differentiation that I’ve put in place for several students in there” (English Teacher; Pupil 1)

This was also identified by the Science Teacher for Pupil 3, who considered that:

“I think just based with her peers in that particular class; they are weak anyway” (Science Teacher; Pupil 3)

With the above in mind, it is perhaps noteworthy that the overarching theme of “Ambiguity” and the subtheme “What but not how” encapsulated the lack of clarity that appeared to be present within psychological advice, particularly in relation to the implementation of the advice. For example, the Advice for Pupil 6 identifies the need to:

“consider opportunities for [Pupil] to learn and apply knowledge, skills and abilities in a way which leads to healthy independence” (Advice for Pupil 6)

The advice also makes the suggestion to “make explicit the thinking skills she needs to become more independent,” where the advice presumes knowledge within practitioners that may not be present.

Overall, it appeared that within EP psychological advice, adult support was presented as support that allowed children and young people with SEND to access learning independently, and that this was achieved through both the adult availability and through the differentiation of activities and materials. However, within school pedagogy, the school staff interviews appeared to emphasize adult support as being the means of differentiation which allowed children and young people with SEND to access the learning alongside others.

In What Ways Do EPs Identify Specific Training or Skills Which Adults Should Have to Support Pupils and How Is This Reflected in School Pedagogy?

Two overarching themes appeared to contribute to the discussion of specific training or skills which adults may need including the overarching themes of “Ambiguity” and “Role of Others.” **Figure 3** illustrates this.

Within the psychological advices there was little narrative or themes identified related to the specific training or skills

which adults should have and it is noteworthy that the most prominent theme was that of Ambiguity. The subthemes of “Presumed Knowledge” and “What but not how” provided further insight into how confusion may arise when considering how psychological advice should be implemented. For example, the subtheme “What but not how” was prevalent within the psychological advice and there were frequent references to approaches and strategies which may be suitable to supporting children and young people with SEND, however it was unclear as to how these approaches may be implemented by a school or setting. For example, within the Advice for Pupil 7:

“A programme of work at school should include activities to develop x’s phonological skills as well as his weak vocabulary and his weak auditory memory” (Advice for Pupil 7)

A similar example can be found within the Advice for Pupil 6, which suggests practitioners should:

“focus on instructional/curriculum/educational language to develop her second language abilities” (Advice for Pupil 6)

Furthermore, the subtheme “Presumed Knowledge” considered how within psychological advice there often appeared a sense that schools or settings would already have the knowledge and understanding necessary to implement the support, as illustrated in the Advice for Pupil 9:

“to develop [Pupil]’s word attack skills... this would be best achieved with an intensive structured approach with frequent (at least daily) opportunities and consolidation” (Advice for Pupil 9)

Within the same Advice, it was suggested that “[Pupil] would benefit from an approach based on the principles of distributed practice, interleaved learning...” Arguably these may be approaches that not all school staff would be familiar with, however as this knowledge was presumed to exist there was little guidance given as to implementation steps.

Similarly, within the school staff interviews, the overarching theme of “Ambiguity” and the subtheme of “Presumed Knowledge” contributed to how training did not always appear to be focused or well defined, and appeared to be applied in differing ways. For example, within the school staff interviews, there appeared to be a view that training was offered, however not consistently to those who would be supporting children and young people with SEND, and where it was, it was not necessarily for specific pupils or categories of SEND. The SENCO for Pupil 4 illustrated this and described how:

“none for him [pupil] specifically... [training dates] are mainly around teaching and learning and we’ve not had SEN specific modules within them” (SENCO; Pupil 4)

This view appeared to be shared by teachers at other schools where there was a sense that whilst training was available it was not necessarily around SEND:

“We’ve had training around the use of TAs in the classroom, I wouldn’t say I’ve had specific training” (Science Teacher; Pupil 3)



FIGURE 3 | Themes related to specific training or skills.

It was noteworthy that there appeared a sense throughout the interviews that SEND training did appear to be offered however it was on a more informal basis, as reflected in the subtheme “Guidance.” For example, participants described instances of sharing ideas amongst themselves and providing guidance to others. It was noted within the TA interview for Pupil 1 that there were often “corridor conversations” and the maths teacher for Pupil 10 described how, “no training, but guidance yes.” There was also a sense that when training was offered, TAs were more likely to access it than the teachers as illustrated by the SENCO for Pupil 3 who described how:

“I’ve taken them through the new SEND Code of Practice. I produced booklets and gave them links...they’ve had autism workshops, dyslexia workshops, behavior workshops, but it was voluntary...it was all the TAs but only some teachers wanted to do it” (SENCO; Pupil 3)

It would appear that despite the role of psychological advice in providing specific information on how to support children and young people with SEND, there is a gap in how knowledge is transmitted to school staff to support them with implementing this.

In What Ways Do EPs Differentiate Between Support From Teachers and Support From Other Adults and How Is This Reflected in School Pedagogy?

The overarching theme of “Role of others” contributed to how adult support was differentiated by EPs and school pedagogy, which was composed of the subthemes “TA Support,” “Social and Emotional Support,” and “Teacher Responsibility.” In addition to this, the overarching theme “Ambiguity” was also identified, along with its subtheme “Unspecified adult support.” These are illustrated in **Figure 4**.

Throughout the psychological advice the overarching theme of “Role of Others” and subtheme of “Teacher Responsibility” was prominent. It appeared that EPs emphasized the role of teachers and the need for teachers to be providing support to children and young people with SEND. There were frequent references to approaches which should be carried out specifically by the teacher, this included teachers using specific materials and techniques and being explicit about the teachers’ role, as advice

for Pupil 2 suggest that the pupil should “begin tasks immediately with physical support from the teacher.”

Similarly, within the school staff interviews, the subtheme of “Teacher responsibility” appeared to have prevalence with an emphasis on the teacher being responsible for the teaching and progress of children with SEND. Indeed, throughout the interviews, teachers, SENCOs and TAs explicitly described the responsibility of the teacher. For example,

“The teacher and head of faculty is directly responsible for the SEN student’s progress, whether or not the TA is there” (Maths Teacher; Pupil 10)

And similarly, it was discussed how it was the teacher, rather than the TA, who would take responsibility, as illustrated by the English Teacher for Pupil 4:

“They [teachers] are not necessarily going to see a TA...they come in prepared to take ownership of the child” (English Teacher; Pupil 4)

However, whilst there was a differentiation made between the responsibility of the teacher and that of the TA, there appeared less explicit emphasis on the differences between who was providing support. For example, the overarching theme of “Ambiguity” and the sub-theme of “Unspecified Adult Support” contributed to how within psychological advice, the role of who it was to provide support was often referred to as “adult support” implying any additional adult. There were frequent references made to additional adult support being needed, and how adults may need to support with the delivery of programmes however throughout the psychological advices, less explicit emphasis appeared to be placed on support specifically from a TA. This view appeared to be shared somewhat within the school staff interviews and the TA for Pupil 5 described how:

“The teacher and I are fairly interchangeable in terms of support so if she’s working with [Pupil] I’ll go and support another student in the class” (TA; Pupil 5)

Moreover, whilst within the psychological advice a number of approaches and strategies for supporting learning were identified, the subtheme of “Social and Emotional Support” appeared to be particularly prominent within the school staff interviews.

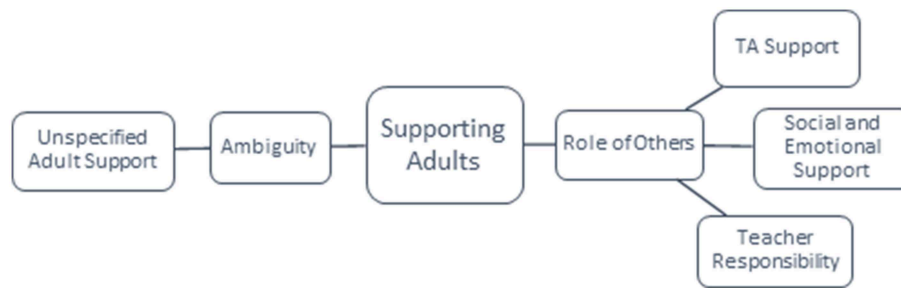


FIGURE 4 | Themes related to adult support.

For example, it was described how support, and specifically TA support, promoted the development of a child and young person's social and emotional skills. This is illustrated by the SENCO for Pupil 2, who described how:

“Confidence in having an adult with him has had a significant impact on his feelings of security to take risks” (SENCO; Pupil 2)

Overall, it therefore appears that reflected in both the psychological advice and school staff interviews there is an emphasis on teacher responsibility, however there appears differences in the themes of who is providing support, with the school staff interviews providing an insight into a more identifiable role for TAs, in contrast to the psychological advice whereby the role of an additional adult appears somewhat nebulous.

DISCUSSION

The current study has identified a number of insights into the role of EP psychological advice in contributing to constructs of adult support within schools. There was an emphasis within the advice on either a Teacher or additional adult providing support, and despite the psychological advices being written at a time when the Statements included a number of “TA hours,” EPs did not presume nor suggest that this support should be delivered by a TA. Further, it is promising that overall the analysis of the psychological advice focuses on developing independent learners.

There was a prominent theme throughout the advice that support should primarily be focused for those times when a child or young person is not able to independently access the learning or task. It was generally suggested that this could be achieved through the role of differentiation which was applied at a number of levels, including differentiation by task and resources. Indeed, there was noticeable, but in some ways not unexpected, inclusion of a range of modifications, strategies, interventions and approaches to teaching and learning that aimed to help children and young people overcome barriers to learning. Indeed, overcoming the barriers to learning is a key objective of an EP, particularly when viewed within the context of inclusive education. Since the adoption of the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) there has been an international drive toward inclusion [for example, within South

Africa (Engelbrecht, 2004), New Zealand (Selvaraj, 2015) and the UK (Farrell, 2004)]. Within England, EPs have long contributed to the Inclusion agenda through their involvement with policy guidance and strategy advice at a national and county level, and through the role EPs have held in developing school policies on inclusion (Farrell, 2006). In addition to that, EPs have also had a role in the development of an Inclusion Index (Booth et al., 2002) which aimed to develop more inclusive practices. However, debates continue as to the definition of inclusion and notably the achievability of inclusion in school. For example, it been argued that inclusion is “idealistic” (Evans and Lunt, 2002) and that there are a number of barriers associated with inclusion including understanding which factors that lead to inclusive processes, along with a lack of empirical evidence related to this (Göransson and Nilholm, 2014); there is also a lack of understanding as to the actual effectiveness of inclusion on academic outcomes (Lindsay, 2007). Indeed Glazzard (2014) offers a cautionary note to inclusion arguing that doing so can bring risks to children when they are faced with inappropriate curriculums.

Whilst there are a number of positive findings from an EP perspective, the findings raise a number of questions in relation to how support is reflected in school teaching practice and wider pedagogy. In particular, the analysis from the school staff interviews identified that within the schools, adult support was described more so in terms of TA support, with the primary form of differentiation being one of differentiation by TA. Approaches such as this appear to be common practice within UK schools, yet one could argue as to the effectiveness of this in ensuring children and young people with SEND make progress (Webster et al., 2010). It was noticeable that the theme “Ambiguity” appeared to underpin many of the ideas arising. For example, when considering both the role of adult support, training and the differentiation between different teacher and TA roles, it was somewhat surprising that there appeared a lack of clarity and specificity about how to achieve some of the suggested provision, and very little consideration appeared to be given within psychological advice as to the skill set or training that might be needed for adults to effectively carry out these roles. It is unclear as to whether there is a gap between what EPs suggest as part of their psychological advice and how this is implemented by schools, and also whether Ambiguity may be contributing to this potential gap.

A Case for Ambiguity?

One could argue that Ambiguity contained within psychological advice may be an inevitable result of the positioning of EPs in relation to the process of writing psychological advice for statutory assessment purposes. In particular, as EPs are employed or commissioned by the LA to produce advice; it is suggested that this can cause tensions in the recommendations made to support provision. For example, historically, government guidelines have encouraged EPs to focus their advice on identifying children and young people's SEN, rather than on how to meet those needs (Department of Education and Science, 1983, 1989). However, LAs with their statutory responsibility to meet the provision identified within a Statement/EHCP seek the advice of their EP colleagues as to the provision needed. Crucially, this often has to be achieved within a context of finite financial resources and can arguably result in a professional conflict between an EP and their LA employers leading to what some suggest as a "hidden agenda" within psychologist advice and the recommendations for provision made (Galloway et al., 2013). It could be suggested that the theme of ambiguity reflects an unintentional constraint that EPs may feel when contributing advice about provision.

A further suggestion could be that EPs do not clearly, sufficiently and accurately describe teaching practices and approaches necessary for effective SEND provision due to a lack of evidence-based approaches for meeting the needs of children and young people with SEND (Rix et al., 2009). For example, it is challenging to specify an approach if there is little evidence to justify specific pedagogies for different categories of SEND (Lewis and Norwich, 2001). Similarly, challenges arise in specifying the most effective ways of transmitting knowledge from EPs to school staff. For example, whilst there is evidence of school staff identifying the need for more training in a range of SEND [(Avramidis et al., 2000; Symes and Humphrey, 2011); for example, (Dockrell et al., 2017)], and a call for more training related to SEND to be included within Initial Teacher Training (Carter, 2015), empirical evidence as to the most effective way of ensuring that training impacts on improved outcomes for children and young people with SEND is still emerging, with evidence into effective professional development for teachers incorporating a more multi-faceted and on-going approach to professional development (Cordingley et al., 2015).

Whilst it may be that ambiguity is an inherent part of EP psychological advice, the reality of a recession and government funding cuts have resulted in an imperative to ensure that schools are equipped with specific and well-founded evidenced based approaches in order to meet the needs of the growing population of children and young people with SEND (Department for Education, 2018). It is therefore imperative that EPs utilize their unique positioning, and within psychological advice, highlight the resources and practices necessary in order to support schools to ensure children with SEN can be met, and that guidance in the advice is understandable and implementable by school staff to meet the diverse needs of children. EPs arguably need to do more within psychological advice in order to make this substantial part of their work more meaningful and specific for others. The

following four statements are proposed as a means to assist in achieving this:

The Role of How EPs Contribute to the Statutory Assessment Process Needs Reframing or Rethinking

Firstly, it is important to identify and emphasize that EPs work within a complex system which is heavily influenced by the socio-political context (Lee and Woods, 2017) and the 2014 SEND reforms had a number of implications for EPs. Most notably, an increase in statutory assessments at a time when there is a shortage in EPs across England (Lyonette et al., 2019). It is argued that one of the drivers of the shortage was an increase in statutory assessment-work which could be perceived as repetitive and stressful (Lyonette et al., 2019) resonating with previous concerns related to the value EPs place on writing psychological advice for statutory purposes (Cameron and Mosen, 2005; Buck, 2015). However, in order to retain staff and support motivation, it is suggested that Educational Psychology Services (EPSs) often try to provide EPs with a varied "diet" of work including preventative work, inclusion in local initiatives, individual assessment and consultation, and group work, alongside statutory assessment. In order for this to be achieved, often a short-term solution is needed to meet the demand of statutory assessments in an equitable way (Marsh and Higgins, 2018). It is suggested that EPSs are faced with a dilemma of relying on EPs within the service to focus on statutory assessments, at the expense of other work, or employing costly locums or agency staff to complete the statutory assessments. This arguably creates a dilemma that statutory assessment is seen as undesirable work if taken by the EP, or is seen as less valuable if it can be taken on as a discrete piece of locum work. Further, findings from the Local Area inspections (Care Quality Commission and Ofsted, 2017) identified that the statutory assessment process was not working in well-enough in over two thirds of LAs inspected on their SEND processes. It is therefore argued that radical rethink is needed to ensure that EPs continue to value this core function of educational psychology practice.

Within Psychological Advice There Is a Necessity to Embed Provision Within the Identification of Strengths and Areas of Need

Educational Psychologists are applied psychologists with the core function of applying their extensive knowledge and expertise of child development and psychological frameworks. It is this which provides a unique contribution to the statutory assessment process and, as previous government guidelines have suggested, arguably where an EP's focus should be. Whilst there are no statutory defined structures to psychological advice, a number of sections to be included are suggested (Cameron and Mosen, 2005; for example, Department for Education (Ofsted), 2014; Care Quality Commission and Ofsted, 2017) which has inadvertently contributed to a compartmentalized approach to the advice. Such an approach may be useful when taking a broad perspective, for example when analyzing a range

of reports in research or when professionals within a system are focusing on broad areas to support with decision making. However, when considering a report for an individual child or young person, solely focusing on an individual section can mean that a more holistic view of the child or young person and the assessment informing the recommendations within the report may be overlooked. Indeed, Buck (2015) suggests that a section-led EP report can result in a “recommendations” section that is narrow in scope and lacking psychological content. Additionally, Cameron and Monsen (2005) found higher quality psychological advices were those where the recommendations were closely connected to the assessment results. Arguably, in order to ensure that recommendations are pertinent to the needs of the individual child or young person, they should be explicitly related to and embedded within an individual’s strengths and areas of need, as identified through the assessment process; these recommendations should be seen as an extension to identifying approaches to learning, and should draw on the individual’s strengths. This would shift the EP focus from one of a gate-keeper of resources, to one which allows the EP to evidence and apply their psychological thinking, overcoming criticisms that psychological advice contains little psychology (Norwich, 2000; Imich, 2013). It is important to highlight that psychological advice is one piece of advice sought and other professional reports should contribute to the final EHCP and provision identified; it should not be assumed, nor expected, that EPs provide an exhaustive and exclusive list of recommendations.

EPs Need to Consider Recommendations Through a More Critical Lens

Work practice guidelines for UK-based EPs are not prescriptive in terms of a particular psychological theoretical perspective. It is the EP themselves that decides upon which theories and interventions could be used to support the recommendations within their advice. Therefore, there is a need for EPs to engage in constant critical thinking around their practice and to challenge this thinking with constant engagement in ongoing professional development. For example, one argument within current thinking of inclusion suggest a shift from identifying teaching practices and resources which are additional and different from others, to an approach whereby the emphasis is on extending what is generally available to everyone (Florian and Black-Hawkins, 2011). Whilst, within this, there continues to be a role for approaches that can be modified to overcome SEND it raises the question as to how specific recommendations need to be made and whether there should be a standard core set of practices and pedagogy which could be assumed. Arguably, such questions and suggestions can only be explored through critical reflection on practice and engagement with theoretical frameworks.

There are challenges in transferring evidence based practices into real world contexts (Kelly, 2012), and the often “gold standard” of evidence, randomized controlled tests (RCT), are not particularly suited to less controlled conditions such as education (Norwich, 2014). However, it is imperative that EPs aim to overcome these challenges and make explicit the evidence

they are drawing upon which informs their recommendations. For example, a range of evidence exists which EPs can utilize including practice evaluation systems (Dunsmuir et al., 2009), single subject research (Horner et al., 2005), an individual’s response to interventions (Fuchs, 2003), databases of effective interventions indexed on a needs basis (Law et al., 2015), and EPs skills in synthesizing and evaluating research (Fallon et al., 2010). In particular, there continues to be a growing evidence base related to the role of adult support in schools and there are specific recommendations EPs could make within their psychological advice as to ways of structuring support (Webster et al., 2016). When using research to inform advice, it is important that EPs make this clear, and present the evidence on which their recommendation is based. Fox (2003) emphasizes this, but also warns that EPs may choose to solely present the evidence that supports their recommendation. Whilst it is possible that this could occur, it is suggested that were EPs to engage in critical reflection they could become aware of this occurring, and of how their prior experience may be influencing their recommendations.

A Systems Wide Approach Is Required to Reduce the Gap Between Interpretation and Implementation of Psychological Advice

Consultation in EP practice has developed significantly since the 1990s. Nolan and Moreland (2014) describe utilizing a systemic approach of exploration in order to develop a shared understanding of open dialogue, and collaborative working, which could shape EP practice. Ecological theories reflect an approach included in current UK legislative frameworks regarding SEN. The SEND Code of Practice (Department for Education and Department of Health, 2015) encourages such an approach to take account of the many complex factors and differing contexts that may influence children’s development. EPs should be encouraged to adopt an interactionist perspective when producing psychological advice, viewing SEN needs as a result of situational factors, and the cultural or socio-political context (Cunningham, 2016).

Moreover, such an approach considers the EP input within the context of co-constructing solutions to problems and moves away from a model of the psychologist as “expert” (Wagner, 2000). This arguably conflicts, however, to the role of psychologist as having to provide “expert” advice as part of the statutory assessment process. However, it is suggested that the two can co-exist if a system wide approach is adopted where EPs work more fluidly with schools over time. For example, many EPs have seen changes to the way they deliver services to schools and settings, particularly within the context of traded models. Within such models, assessment continues to be a core function of EP practice; indeed, Lee and Woods (2017) argue that assessing children’s needs is not directly linked to the statutory assessment process. Working within this model also allows for EPs to draw upon their expertise in psychology to empower and support schools to meet the needs of children and young people with SEND. For example, through developing relationships with families and schools over

time, EPs can become well placed to suggest recommendations with the child's context in mind. By fulfilling this role, EPs could gain greater visibility to families, reducing the perception to parents that a statutory assessment is the only means of gaining an EP's involvement (Webster, 2014). EPs are also in the unique position of being able to support schools with implementing psychological advice at a range of system levels such as through consultation or through providing whole school training and on-going support in practices and approaches which the school may not be familiar with. This results in a relationship where the EP provides the "why" behind their recommendations, and supports the school with the "what" and the "how," reducing the gap between interpretation of advice and implementation.

Whilst EPs may at times find themselves in uncomfortable positions, having to balance the needs of individual children and young people, families, schools, LAs and their own professional role, it is evident that there is a need for those with the most complex needs to have psychological advice that is clear, unambiguous and have the support available within schools to fully implement it so that as we reflect in 40 years' time, the vision of inclusion at the heart of the Warnock Report may finally be realized.

Limitations and Future Research

There are a number of limitations within the study which should be acknowledged. Firstly, the research was carried out on psychological advice written within one LA. It is recognized that there are often large variabilities between LAs, both in terms of the provision offered, and the systemic approaches utilized. Therefore, it may be that psychological advice carried out within a different LA may have provided additional themes and sub-themes. The data analysis of the psychological advice focused on the provision section of the advice and additional themes may have become evident had other sections of the psychological advice been considered. It is important to note that the psychological advice was written during the previous Statements of SEN and the introduction of the new EHCPs, and the greater emphasis on outcomes, may have resulted in different approaches to writing psychological advice. In the future, it would be useful to compare current psychological advice and the themes and subthemes emerging from current approaches. It is a limitation of the study that it was not possible to deviate from the interview schedule prescribed by the SENSE study. Therefore, future research should consider different stakeholders'

perceptions and experiences of EP psychological advice and how the advice is used to implement provision for children with SEND in schools. Finally, it is recognized that the interviews selected to explore how advice reflects school pedagogy was a limited and small sample and did not include all the interviews and psychological advice collected. The advices did not represent all categories of SEND. Therefore, it is possible that there are additional themes and subthemes within the interviews, and these could either show greater or less similarity to the themes identified in the advices. Despite the limitations noted above, this exploratory study has provided pertinent insights into the relationship between educational psychology advice and school practice.

DATA AVAILABILITY

The datasets generated for this study are available on request to the corresponding author.

ETHICS STATEMENT

This study was carried out in accordance with the recommendations of UCL Institute of Education, Research Ethics Committee, with written informed consent from all subjects. All subjects gave written informed consent in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki. The protocol was approved by the UCL Institute of Education, Research Ethics Committee.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

JV and GM contributed conception and design of the study. JV and Assistant Psychologists undertook interviews and transcription. JV and GM carried out the thematic analysis and reviewed codes. GM wrote the first draft of the introduction. JV wrote the remaining first draft of the manuscript. JV and GM contributed to manuscript revision, read, and approved the submitted version.

FUNDING

The data was collected as part of the Nuffield-funded Special Educational Needs in Secondary Education (SENSE) Study, grant number: EDU/41658.

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Conflict of Interest Statement: The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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APPENDIX 1

Interview Schedules

The following schedule was followed for the SENCO Teacher TA interviews.

Locations

- Over the week I have seen X spent time away from the main classroom. How typical is this of his/her general experience?
- What are the reasons for withdrawing X from the classroom?

SENCO only: the role of adults

- What is the teachers' role in X's support?
- What is the TAs' role in X's support?
- If there are any other adults with a significant role in providing support, what are their roles?
- What forms of training and guidance are provided for teachers and TAs to support X's needs?
- What provision is made for teachers and TAs to meet to plan, prepare and feedback in relation to meeting X's needs?

Teachers and TAs only: the role of adults

- What is your role in X's support? How long have you worked with X?
- What is the teachers' role in X's support?
- What forms of training and guidance are provided for you to support X's needs?
- What provision is made for you to meet with teachers to plan, prepare, and feedback in relation to meeting X's needs?

Curriculum and provision

- Does X require a differentiated curriculum or differentiated tasks to support his/her learning?
- How is differentiation handled for X? Who does it? What forms does it take?
- SENCO only: what intervention programmes, if any, are in place for X? Who selects, plans, delivers and assesses these interventions?

Transferring from a Statement to an Education, Health, and Care Plan

- Explain what has been done/is planned in terms of transferring X's Statement to an EHCP.
- What benefits and challenges have there been/do you predict there will be from making this transfer?
- What effect has the transfer had/do you predict it will have on stakeholders' involvement in and understanding of processes such as annual reviews?

Transitions

- Thinking back to 2013/14, what you recall about X's transition from primary school to this school? Were there any issues or particular achievements?
- What are your predictions or concerns regarding X's progression to Key Stage 4 in the next school year?

Impact

- How has the support X has received helped his/her progress and development?
- To what extent has having a Statement/EHCP contributed to X's progress and development?

APPENDIX 2 Thematic Map

