# Perceptions of the role of the EP in supporting care experienced young people

This study uses qualitative methods to explore the perceived role of the educational psychologist (EP) in supporting care experienced secondary school-aged young people within the authority. This is from an education perspective across the three systemic levels of the individual, school and local authority.

## Abstract

The recent Independent care review highlighted education as a key factor supporting care experienced children's overall health and wellbeing. Several of the recommendations focused on increasing understanding of the needs and experiences of care experienced young people (Independent Care Review, 2020). As EPs are well placed to support meeting the needs of care experienced young people in education (McParlin, 1996), it is of vital importance to gain a deep understanding of the perceived EP role in supporting these young people to provide context for effective future policy and guidance. The study contributes to the little research on the topic of the EP role in supporting care experienced young people in the secondary context by gathering the views of educational professionals in one Scottish local authority. Three focus groups were conducted, and the data analysed using thematic analysis. Activity theory was also utilised as an analytical tool to draw out tensions in the data and between data sets. Key findings included a need for a shared holistic working practice to support essential partnership working when planning for CECYP needs. Activity theory was also argued to be a useful tool in framing inter-agency working in education. These findings have implications for both individual EP practice and systemic local authority processes.

## Research Questions

1. What do EPs perceive their role to be in the support of secondary school aged care experienced young people in the local authority?

2. Is there a consistent view between other education practitioners and EPs of the EP role?

3. What are the perceived barriers to EPs supporting care experienced young people from an educational local authority perspective?

## Aims

* To gain a greater understanding of the perceived role of the EP in supporting care experienced secondary age young people within one local authority.
* To highlight the perceived barriers of EPs supporting care experienced secondary aged young people.
* To inform future local authority policy regarding the support of care experienced young people in local authority secondary schools

## Context

In July 2019 there were over 14, 000 CECYP in Scotland with Glasgow City having responsibility for a large number (Scottish Government, 2020). Evidence consistently reports that CECYP have lower educational attainment outcomes that their peers (O’Higgins et al., 2017). These include lower attainment, leaving school earlier and less likelihood of moving on to positive destinations post school (Scottish Government, 2019a). Even CECYP enrolled at university or college have statically lower rates of completing their courses than other students (Scottish Funding Council, 2019). The EP is a relevant support for CECYP given that are overrepresented in the additional support needs population (O’Higgins et al., 2017), are much more likely to be excluded from education (Scottish Government, 2018), and less likely to achieve the curriculum level relevant to their age (Scottish Government, 2019a).

Despite the recognition of this gap in attainment in the 1990s, and the introduction of numerous funding, policy and legislation to support CECYP achieving in education, this disparity in attainment still remains (Who Cares Scotland, 2020). There is therefore a rationale for the current study to explore the EP role in relation to supporting and improving educational outcomes for CECYP.

## Literature Review

There is little published research exploring EPs’ work with, or related to children in care, and none conducted in the Scottish secondary context. McParlin’s 1996 paper argued that EPs are well situated through their expertise to intervene and support CECYP. Similarly, Bradbury (2006) found that EPs saw themselves as using their skills and expertise to make a contribution to supporting CECYP but there was little consensus among EPs surrounding the exact nature of their distinctive contribution. A study by Norwich et al conducted in 2010 is the most recent large scale empirical study involving EPs that examines the role in supporting CECYP. Over 100 EPs from five diverse local authorities in England answered a survey regarding the nature of their work with CECYP (Norwich, 2010). Similar to this study, senior EPs and EPs with a specialist knowledge in supporting CECYP are included. However, those with a specialism made up only 34% of the participants (Norwich, 2010).

There is also limited research regarding teachers’ perceptions of the role of the EP in supporting CECYP. Research has also shown that mutual understanding of roles between teachers and educational psychologists has a significant positive impact on the nature of any work carried out (Farrell et al., 2005, 2006).

Recommendations from the literature suggest recognising the benefits and expertise of those with specialist knowledge of CECYP within psychological services and implied a need for further research with this group. A similar study of this scale has also not been conducted in Scotland further emphasising the need for research in this area.

## Theoretical Perspective

Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) (Engestrom, 2005) provides an increasingly popular analytical tool that is useful for examining the experiences of professionals who are part of complex social systems (Edwards, 2010; Lemonie et al., 2021). These included the educational psychologists and other educational professionals involved in this project. The theory originated from Vygotsky’s work (1978), placing mediation at the centre theories surrounding learning acquisition, and draws form a range of disciplines, including psychology, sociology and communication studies (Leadbetter, 2017). The development of Activity Theory has been conceptualised into three generations with the recent emergence of a fourth generation

## Methodology

This is an exploratory study to gain insight into the EP role in supporting care experienced secondary-aged young people within the local authority. This will allow a deeper understanding of the barriers facing EPs in providing this kind of support and inform the generation of hypotheses for further research into this area. This research is informed by an interpretive paradigm which looks for culturally derived and historically situated interpretations of the social phenomena. The relativist ontological stance of this project acknowledges the presence of multiple socially constructed realities and the researcher will employ a constructivist epistemological approach to the methods and data gathering process.

**Methods:**

* Focus group with EPs from the psychological service
* Focus group with EPs with recent knowledge and experience of supporting CECYP
* Focus group with other educational professionals with knowledge and experience in supporting CECYP

## Results: thematic analysis

### Current EP role

The primary theme of ‘current Ep role’ developed from three subthemes which all communicated the current EP role in supporting secondary aged care experienced young people through the data.

### Needs led/non-distinct

It emerged from the data from all three focus groups that the current role of the EP in supporting care experienced young people is needs led, and that the EP “doesn't have or hasn't demonstrated a specific role for care experienced young people” and “would be the same as […] involvement with any other young person. But there might be more of a focus on nurture, attachment and trauma” Other educational professionals referred to EPs supporting them to plan for CECYPs needs as they look at “how we remove certain barriers for a young person” generally, whether or not they are care experienced. Educational professionals indicated that EPs would support through consultation at establishment level on a needs led basis through the usual support pathway in local authority X, a multi-agency support meeting:

“If we happened to bring a care experienced young person to the [multi-agency meeting] then they [the EP] would obviously contribute as part of the discussion”

### Reassurance

This subtheme developed from discussion surrounding EPs providing a reassuring role to others in relation to supports provided by schools and other provisions for CECYP.

“when I went to the meeting, the support around this boy was really, really good, and I think it was just a bit of reassurance for them that what you're doing is enough”

### Advocacy

The role of being an advocate for CECYP emerged from the data gathered from all three focus groups.

Highlighting young peoples’ care experienced status was deemed part of the EP role **“**It’s about keeping the profile high as well, so you know at multi-agency meetings, making sure they know whether a young person’s care experienced or not”. It emerged that “a lot of the role of the EP is keeping a care experienced young person sort of on the agenda and making sure schools know who they are”.

At a local authority level ‘educational psychologists were involved in carrying out a two major pieces of research’ highlighting care experienced young people’s “views of what works” and sharing good practice for care experienced young people among schools. This highlights another important area of advocacy in the role of the EP in supporting secondary aged CECYP through researching their voices and sharing good practice.

Participants from the two EP focus groups made mention of advocating for CECYP in meetings to help other education staff “understand that what they're seeing from young people, you know, is often as a result of things they've previously experienced”.

“So a lot of it is bringing it back to that advocacy and the fact that you know, let's keep remembering everything that's happened to this young man and the fact that you've not done everything that you could potentially have done for this for this wee one just yet”

It also emerged from the data that a role of the EP was in advocating for CYPs voices in the processes and ensuring they were included in adult environments, such as meetings.

“’I suppose it part of that role is the subtlety of actually making the meetings more child friendly, not just within social work, but with any meeting and I think that's maybe what as Ed Psychs, we maybe bring which is unusual to what other people are doing.”

### Barriers

Another primary theme of ‘barriers’ to EPs supporting CECYP emerged from the data and includes discussion of the subthemes of ‘stakeholder perceptions, knowledge and understanding’ and ‘local authority structures and processes’.

### Stakeholder perceptions, knowledge and understanding

The subtheme of ‘perceptions, knowledge and understanding of stakeholders’ as a barrier to supporting CECYP developed from EP participants discussion surrounding the ‘’medicalising’’ of the YP’s behaviours. When a CECYP is having difficulties in the environment, stakeholders, “rather than thinking about ways to get around this […], [or that] these responses might be related to trauma, it’s more like, right has this person got or ADHD or ASD.”

This subtheme also developed from the discussions in the EP focus group regarding a lack of understanding among stakeholders of some of the common challenges and impacts of being care experienced. Subsequently leading to difficulties in forming a holistic view of the young person and their needs.

“Sometimes schools might just think, oh well, you know so and so lives with granny and it's going fine, but they don’t know what has led to that in terms of adversity or trauma or disrupted care placement moves as well.”

Linked to this, were comments made regarding the perceptions of the EP role in supporting CECYP. EPs commented that:

“The expectation for our role is, I think the word psychology. People misinterpret a lot and are thinking we're going to come in and do a psychological assessment and fix them and when we don't offer that it's like well, what's the point.”

This both indicates that other stakeholders hold different perceptions regarding the role of the EP in the process of supporting a young person and see less value in a holistic approach to assessing their needs and next steps.

It also emerged from the data that stakeholders in the process sometimes had a lack of confidence in supporting CECYP due to their perceptions of the care experienced status. This was linked with stakeholders in other agencies such a social work or CAMHS not holding the presumption of mainstream view that that CECYP should be included in mainstream provision until an appropriate assessment indicates otherwise. It emerged that stakeholders sometimes assumed that specialist provision staff would lead to “better outcomes” and staff would be “be better skilled’ to support CECYP than those in mainstream provision.

“I think there’s a lack of confidence and a bit of fear as well around that they’re not going to be able to manage, the young person is going to cause a lot of issues”

 “by the time I came into that there had been discussions between the school and a member of staff in the Children's House that this boy had to be somewhere like [a specialist provision] like how he could possibly be in a mainstream school”

### Local authority structures and processes

Another sub-theme that emerged in the data and developed the primary theme of ‘barriers’ was the sub-theme of “local authority structures and processes”.

Both EP focus groups made mention of the secondary school environment being difficult to navigate for a care experience young person for a number of reasons, including the multiple relationships involved, inflexibility, and language used in meetings involving the child that are “[…] very heavy in terms of terminology and are quite exclusionary”.

“they're quite arcane complex organisations and systems and they don't always, they're not always, the most yielding I suppose to change.”

“I find as well that young people that are care experienced, that have had a really challenging experience, the secondary set up just does not work for them. It’s an adult focussed organisation that doesn’t work for a lot of young people with that type of need […] I think just generally that a lot of young people find the transitions and different relationships difficult”

The discussion surrounding the process of transition for CECYP also developed the subtheme of ‘local authority structures and processes’. Linking the two subthemes under the primary theme of ‘barriers’, is the lack of knowledge among stakeholders of the care experienced status of secondary aged pupils in the local authority. Discussion indicated that this was due largely to “the information that's held on [ local authority online system] is inaccurate and has always been inaccurate”. This suggests that this system is a significant barrier in stakeholders gaining an understanding of a young person’s care experienced background.

Participants in the EP focus groups also highlighted the “battle” to get CECYP, returning to the local authority, back into a school, This emphasises local authority processes as a barrier to including and supporting secondary aged, CECYP effectively.

“there just seems to be an awful lot of red tape, bureaucracy and anxiety about [Local Authority X] schools accepting these young people back in, particularly if there are issues around non-attendance, [they are] worried about the stats, worried about how that’s going to look for positive destinations.”

The other professionals focus group also explored the transition process as a barrier to supporting CECYP, highlighting difficulties with multiple moves as information is not kept up to date or passed on.

“But when you have really vulnerable families, especially if they move about, and particularly if they move about within authorities or even you know between Scotland and England and so on, then obviously these gaps are or were problematic, or can have more dire consequences I guess.”

The development of the subtheme of ‘local authority structures and processes’ was also drawn from discussion surrounding the role of the EP in local authority service delivery structures, often not holding power in decisions schools make regarding CYP. The negative impact these had on the adoption of training delivered in schools also emerged, in relation to schools providing supports for CECYP.

“it's a real tricky bit for us 'cause we don't have any of the power in that relationship. You know, a school will decide what they're going to do.”

“certainly in terms of secondaries, I think it’s […] sort of getting really in there and under the surface, which we’re not really in a position to do”

“We take much of the attachment and knowledge of that, so much for granted, and I know that a lot of work has been done in schools around that, but I still find myself having conversations d'know, with some members of staff, and I think how can you not know this, do  you know?”

### Supports

A primary theme of ‘supports’ was emergent through the discussion and developed through several subthemes, one of which, ‘specialist advice’ emerged in all three focus groups regarding the advice and support that had been given through a local authority specialist team for CECYP.

“having that level of expertise there in the authority, of a team people who have trained and dedicated to just that is really useful”

### Future needs

A primary theme of ‘future needs’ was highlighted in the data. All three focus groups highlighted needs for the future in supporting CECYP through three sub-themes.

### Clear direction

A component of the primary theme of ‘future needs’ was ‘clear direction’. All three focus group participants made mention of a clear future focus in terms of improving outcomes for CECYP. This was in relation the local authority’s response to ‘The Promise’, the results of the independent care review, and the EP role in supporting schools.

Discussion a need for a clear focus from educational managers in the local authority to shape the EP role moving forward in terms supporting the embedding of guidance to support CECYP. The no exclusions policy was highlighted as requiring authority and direction from “much higher up” to enable it’s action in practice and for it to be practically supported by EPs.

“I don’t think it’s our role changing, as much as how we support education […] at headquarters level as well […] how education services are responding to the promise.”

It was also highlighted by the EP participants that part of the EP role in meeting the future needs of schools in supporting CECYP, was to provide clarity and reinforcement regarding the training approaches outlined as being effective in best meeting their needs.

“We've got a major role in continuing to roll that out, even if it's just a continuous delivery of the same training and building on it, because there is staff turnover,  new stuff coming in.”

This emphasises the EP role in meeting the schools future needs by providing and supporting a clear direction for the school in the approaches they are employing.

The other educational professionals group also stated the role of the local authority, in the form of the specialist care experienced team, moving forward in a clear direction to support their establishments

“that's where the authority have such a powerful role to play  in you know, in the [specialist team in care experienced young people] really set in the lead in the direction for the rest of us to be able to follow, so that we can have confidence in the direction that were taken”

### Children and young person’s voice

A further sub-theme of ‘children’s voice’ also emerged from the data and developed the primary theme of a ‘future need’ in supporting CECYP effectively in line with new guidance.

“The Promise says quite clearly that you know, that voice must be taken into account in making decisions, and I think professional are going to struggle with that one […] if it’s a different voice from what they’re wanting.”

Other professional participants also highlighted desire to include young people in the decision making process and to have their voice taken into account.

“obviously having young people as part of the meetings are really important, where that’s possible […] sometimes there are reasons why they are not there.”

## Activity theory Analysis

### Collaboration vs stakeholder shared understanding

Collaborative working is viewed an essential resource but there is a lack shared understanding of need among stakeholders

### Policy vs practice

Policy is viewed as a resource and also a rule by stakeholders but is not always being implemented in practice to support care experienced young people

### Relationships vs Systems

Relationships are viewed as central to supporting care experienced young people but cannot be fostered in local authority structures.

### Staff needs vs Pupil needs

The needs of staff, such as agency, time access to resources, knowledge is impacting on the needs of the children and young people, such as being included in meetings and their voice being heard.

### What do EPs perceive their role to be in the support of secondary-aged CECYP in the local authority?

* This study generated three core themes central to the current EP role; **reassurance, advocacy and needs led.** These support previous research focusing on the EP role in supporting CECYP (Brewin & Statham, 2011; Greig et al., 2014; McClung & Gayle, 2010).
* Both providing reassurance and support to schools, and advocating for CECYP voices, were highlighted as key to supporting the embodying of the ‘The Promise’ policy document in education and emphasised as a continuing key role for EPs. Advocacy in particular was highlighted as particularly important due to CECYP’s voices being marginalised in the process of supporting them, this also reflects recent policy findings (Independent Care Review, 2020).
* There was a strong consensus that care experienced young people were not viewed as a single homogenous group by professionals supporting them, and subsequently that the EP role in supporting them was similar to other young people and was led primarily by need. This approach has been shown to be important in the literature (McClung & Gayle, 2010), and also to be preferred by CECYP as it improved their wellbeing by fostering a sense of belonging and fitting in.
* This study also highlighted that EPs have a role in supporting schools to make links between theory and practice, such as attachment theory, nurture and trauma-informed practice.

### Is there a consistent view between other education practitioners and EPs of the EP role?

“The expectation for our role is, I think the word psychology. People misinterpret a lot and are thinking we're going to come in and do a psychological assessment and fix them and when we don't offer that it's like well, what's the point.”

This study highlighted that there was a consistent view of the EP among the participants. However, the wider discussion indicated that other stakeholders hold different perceptions regarding the role of the EP in the process of supporting a young person.

### What are the perceived barriers to EPs supporting CECYP?

* Stakeholder knowledge and perceptions
* (Individual CYP factors)
* Local Authority Structures and Processes

## Next steps for EPs in supporting secondary-aged care experienced, young people within the local authority.

This study emphasises the importance of the continuation of advocating for CECYP, offering support to schools to better understand the needs and common challenges of CECYP, and also supporting the implementation of ‘The Promise’ in education through providing a clear vision for schools.

The continuation of the development of a more flexible and attuned secondary environment through relevant systemic approaches supporting development of caring, holistic practice towards CECYP. It Is worth noting that this study highlighted systemic barriers to the implementation of these approaches, and which may limit the scope of the EP role in supporting these.

A tension emerged through analysis between the awareness of policy among stakeholders and its practical application. This could be attributed in part to the lack of stakeholder understanding of CECEYP need that has been previously explored, or to a lack of confidence among school staff which also emerged through the data. Some participants also suggested that training delivery and its subsequent impact is dependent on EP time and flexibility in the service delivery model to provide intense support.

This tension supports recent findings regarding practitioner confidence in applying trauma informed practice as part of ‘The Promise’ (The Independent Care Review, 2020). This approach has been highlighted as key to the future of supporting care experienced young people (The Independent Care Review, 2020), and has implications for the role of the EP in the dissemination of knowledge on this topic.

In line with previous literature (Farrell et al., 2005, 2006; Thomson 2007; Walker, 2012), this study highlighted the importance of effective collaboration in supporting CECYP and also indicated that further collaboration with other agencies, such as social work may be necessary to fulfil ‘The Promise’ effectively. The Independent Care Review (2020) was also shown to have emphasised partnership working as key to the future of supporting CECYP. This suggests that these findings should inform future EP practice moving forward.

### Activity theory as a framework to support inter-agency collaboration in education

The concept of relational agency in CHAT provides a useful tool to examine key elements of partnership working in more depth. These include the ‘object-motive’ of individual practitioners, that is how the object of the activity is interpreted and responded to, determines participants’ values and purposes of the dominant practice used in their activities (Edwards, 2010; Leont’ev, 1978;). For successful collaborative working, it is essential to recognise the object-motive of other agencies, and why they are engaging in the activity to enhance interpretation and enrich responses (Edwards, 2010; Nardi, 2005). Relational agency provides a framework for creating a joint understanding between agencies and a rationale for practitioners working to align the object of activity, or case, with the object motive among different agencies looking to improve outcomes for CECYP.

The building of a common knowledge between collaborating partners is crucial to relational agency working effectively to support CECYP without the need for lengthy translation of knowledge or resources for the other practitioners involved (Edwards, 2010). ‘The Promise’ has also identified that shared understanding is core to effectively for inter-agency working to support CECYP (The Independent Care Review, 2020). Common knowledge, in this case, the needs of care experienced young people, acts as a meditational tool to the interpretations of and responses to the case that have been contributed by stakeholders to support joint conclusions (Edwards, 2010). The child’s trajectory is itself mediated and interpreted by the different professionals (Edwards, 2010), for instance the social worker may have a safety focus, and the clinical psychologist mental health. Activity theory highlights that stakeholders work in parallel to view a whole child in a complex world (Edwards, 2010). Relational agency, therefore, acts as a shared strength between professionals as they draw on their own specialisms to work on complex cases, or common objects of activity (Edwards, 2010). The building of a common knowledge, such as an understanding of CECYP needs, is key to this process.

The importance not only of relational agency in professionalism, but also professional agency, in the current inter-agency context is highlighted by Edwards (2010). It is argued that professionals are required to exhibit increasing personal responsibility when engaging in partnership work (Friedland & Boden, 1994). EPs, as part of their partnership work, frequently practice on the perimeters of several establishments and are part of multi-agency teams that cross organisational boundaries. As such, strong professional agency is essential for working collaboratively and flexibly (Edwards 2010). Activity Theory provides a useful lens through which to support and examine the development of both professional and relational agency in future research and EP Practice.