

## **Rethinking the role of the School Psychological Service in schools in disadvantaged areas.**

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### **Introduction**

Teacher: *"What do I do when he kicks me?"*

*The Guardian*, June 17th 1968:

"Too many referrals, too many problems,  
too few psychologists,  
psychiatrists, social workers."

This Guardian extract, if true, emphasises the need to rethink our role as educational psychologists in terms of prevention. How ironic to be *compelled* to think in terms of prevention! Yet on school visits, especially to secondary schools in difficult areas, I am frequently put on the spot by teachers: "What do I do if he kicks, thumps, spits at me?" To reply, "you should plan to avoid it happening", while true, is hardly helpful.

Too many problems and referrals, yes. Too few psychologists, psychiatrists and social workers? Perhaps. Or, is it something to do with the way in which the agencies work?

Teachers are looking for answers to the daily problems they confront in school and they regard the visiting educational psychologist (Ep) as the 'expert'. Meanwhile the Ep clings to the security of psychometric tests, rarely professing expertise beyond this. This is 'criminally' short-sighted. As part of our educational psychologists training we ourselves have taught in classrooms. Our training has also taught us to be child centred and this is the basis of any educational programme or advice we might offer. Therefore we have a special role to play in an advisory capacity to schools.

As psychologists, we may talk of a therapeutic or learning environment, but do we devote sufficient time and importance to helping teachers implement this ethos in schools? Under the pressures of the 'waiting list' few of us are able to offer a child even an hour a week for counselling or 'treatment', yet we neglect opportunities to involve ourselves in the development of one potential 'treatment agency', or community which is available

not simply for an hour each week, in a 'clinic' but for five hours a day, five days a week – the school.

I suspect our dependence on testing has biased our outlook in the direction of identifying E.S.N. children and 'retarded readers' - groups of children who are 'readily identified' on the basis of a test and about whom specific 'remedial recommendations' can more readily be made. This has taken us away from the mainstream of education in ordinary schools. Whereas I regard myself as an 'Ep', not an 'ESNp.' Therefore, not only in terms of the realities mentioned above, but also for strong theoretical reasons, I see my role as being school based and also concerned with the problems that the teachers themselves regard as serious and relevant. The teacher is more concerned about the pupil who is disruptive and aggressive rather than the cross-lateral whose Bender - Gestalt results suggest perceptual problems. And I am with the teacher!

There is a further reason for my position. As an Ep, I might identify a problem within the school which I regard as serious, whereas the teacher wants to discuss the behaviour problems in the classroom. Unless I can relate my concern as being linked to the teacher's worries, I would be unwise to raise it until I have discussed with the teacher ways of dealing with, or avoiding the classroom behaviour problem. Then we can move on to talk about the problem I want to address.

Let us start by recognising that schools *do* have their own problems, and that the Child Guidance Clinic or School Psychological Service Ep is often unhelpful, detached and unrealistic in respect of them. Let us also recognise that schools suffer environmental and staffing problems and that these interact perniciously on each other, till their cumulative effect bring about the 'crisis' of a clinical referral. Too often psychology and psychiatry have been the language of despair, woefully describing and quantifying the unfortunate victim of invidious circumstances, a casualty whose wounds, having been psychometrically measured, are past curing.

Cannot psychology offer a language of hope? A structure, a theoretical framework to which school organisation and practices can be geared? I believe so. I believe we have an expanding role to play in pre-crisis guidance of teachers so that we can avoid the crisis, avoid the stress, and avoid the alienation of pupil from teacher. Instead, we can help personalise the curriculum, make it relevant and meaningful and bring the ideas of developmental psychology, of the child centred approach into the classroom, the staff room and the school systems.

I have come to this position from the realisation that Child Guidance Clinics and School Psychological Services are not able to cope *on an individual basis* with the large numbers of children referred. Yet when I study the implications of this, and analyse it in terms of some of some of the work I have unquestionably accepted as correct, much of my training and work habits need a searching reappraisal.

In brief, this is a position, a role, that I did not conceptualise by myself, but one into which I have been jostled by my contact with teachers in Kirkby, a Newtown over-spill

area in an 'educational priority area' on the outskirts of Liverpool. Yet when I examine this role I realise it has merits and a validity that I had not previously suspected.

The rest of this talk will be devoted to a discussion of some concepts and notions relevant to the work of an Ep in a comprehensive school of, say, 2,000 pupils in such an area.

At the risk of boring some of you, I shall also suggest in some detail two schemes of school organisation and structure which might offer some guidelines, be something of a blueprint, for discussing with headteachers and staff in the two most likely areas for school organisation where an Ep's advice is likely to be sought. I apologise in advance for spelling them out in some detail but the time has come (post Crowther, Robbins, Newsom, Plowden) to concentrate on how to implement the aims and arguments of the great reports and of developing our psychological and theoretical understanding, rather on the arguments themselves.

If educational psychology, as a profession, have been tardy in applying ourselves to these problems, then I submit that it is, in part, due to lack of and time opportunity to contribute to the re-structuring of school organisation and practice in terms of our psychological knowledge.

Reviewing my own LEA school based work over the last 3 years, in disadvantaged estate, a number of things come to mind which impinge on child development and the task of the school. These include the child's family, social and community background, and the school and its tasks. Many parents are struggling to provide their children with sufficient adult time and contact, boundaries (where "yes means YES and "no" means NO!) and appropriate stimulation. Driving and walking round the estate in the day and evening times, it is obvious that, for many 'children,' their home territory is the street – a relatively adult free zone.

The kids appear free of responsibilities to others and their accountability is largely to the street gang or peer group they encounter there. At home, they fight for time and personal space with brothers and sisters, and often assume that nobody will intervene on their behalf.

Among the teenagers raised for discussion by schools, many came from families whose own experiences of education were negative, hostile and unrewarding. Educational aspirations were limited and pragmatic. Attitudes to many teachers, or agencies, were cloaked in caution, suspicion and often hostility.

Driving through the estate one day en route to a home visit, I was confronted by a small group of five or six young children, the oldest would not have been more than seven or eight years old, walking down the centre of the road, waving sticks, forcing the car to stop and crawl along, while they beat on the bonnet with the sticks. On another occasion, jogging round the estate with a couple of colleagues, three teenage girls 'minding' a couple of toddlers, attempted to push them under our feet as we ran past.

In the comprehensive schools, during consultations with Heads of House, and subject teachers, I was consistently asked “So, what do I do when s/he hits, spits at, kicks me?” Or, relating concerns brought to their attention since my last visit. A teacher, distressed on finding her scarf wrapped round a dead cat on her desk. Or a mother living on the ground floor of a 12-story block of flats, returning from holiday to find that the plumbing system had blocked and two weeks of faeces from the 11 stories above had overflowed throughout the flat. Or, a not very able 11-year-old girl who knocking on the window of parked cars and asking the driver if he wanted ‘business’. For five shillings. And her mother telling me, ‘Well, it’s not so bad, she’s not started her periods yet.’ Or 12 girls from a single year group had attempted suicide with overdoses during one traumatic weekend. Or being asked to comment on a piece of writing from a 14 year old boy:

“Violence is great, violence is Ace.  
Violence is necessary for the rocker race.”

These events do impinge on the lives of the children and on the culture of the school. Some of our inner-city and disadvantaged schools have extra-ordinary problems to face. And they are largely social and behaviour problems. And require fresh ways of thinking.

Yet the routine, standard, inflexible response of educational psychologists in most school psychological services is to carry out psychological testing of pupil’s ‘intelligence’ and attainments, and make decisions about whether to recommend the pupil for transfer to an ESN school, or refer to the Child Guidance Service. The latter resulting in further assessments by a psychiatrist, psychiatric social worker and the educational psychologist

There are two major problems with this approach: it takes a long time and it doesn’t work.

School Psychological Service and Child Guidance Clinics are insufficiently *school* centred. As educational psychologists we claim to be *child* focused. *Child* advocates. Yet we misunderstand our *focus* and do not *advocate* on behalf of the child. We need to move beyond the confines of our isolated clinics and clinical thinking, and support the *children* in the *schools* they attend.

What do the teachers think of services and the Child Guidance Clinics? That we are unhelpful, detached, idealistic. Not aware of the school environment for pupils nor the problems for staff. And that while these influences, home, school, environmental, are cumulative and interactive, impinge on the lives and development of the child, they have no impact on the practice of the educational psychologist.

Yet there continues to be a referral avalanche to the SPS and CGC. They are asking for something from us. And no surprise either that the end result of an avalanche is to engulf all those in its wake and create unpredictable and unnecessary casualties.

We talk sometimes about ‘bad schools’ and ‘poor teachers’. But seldom acknowledge ‘bad services’ or ‘mis-directed’ educational psychologists. We may also comment that

certain aspects of school life are irrelevant or inappropriate for pupils. Is it not just possible that much of CGC and SPS practice is even more obviously irrelevant and inappropriate?

What are we to do? The recent Plowden Report advocated 'positive discrimination' while other speak of 'more of the same.' Surely there is no justification for the latter view. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds have different difficulties to face, pose different educational challenges and require different responses. This is what being 'child centred' is really about.

What can we, as educational psychologists, bring to these problem situations? Well, unlike other educational professionals, we are consulted over a broad field of pupil problems and needs, and those of their teachers. But while the CGC and SPS cannot cope with the 'referral avalanche' schools cannot 'cope' with the problem of agency 'waiting lists.' The waiting list is the agency protective wall. But, of course, the wall is the problem and not the solution. And it is the problem in the sense that it provides the barrier between the skills and knowledge of the educational psychologist and the teacher. Perhaps if we demolished the wall, schools and psychologists together could create a powerful force?

### **School Case Study**

The following section describes a case study of a current project, working with one large, (2,000 pupils) comprehensive school for girls on a disadvantaged council estate. The suffers major problems of graffiti, vandalism and teenage violence. Pupils' educational attainments are poor.

Table One provides an analysis of the reasons given by the school for the previous twenty referrals in the period leading up to the review.

**Table one.**  
Reasons for referral to School Psychological Service

Reason for referral	Number of pupils
Attention seeking	2
Aggressive/anti social behaviour	10
'Withdrawn'	1
'Over emotional behaviour'	1
'Unstable'	2
Inability to adjust to the school	4

Total	20
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The first step was to meet with the headteacher and senior staff to agree that the nature and scale of the problems could not be met by individual case work. Over a series of meetings we started focus on what steps could be taken in school, and how the educational psychologist could work with staff to help plan changes.

We agreed the following steps to analyse the school's problems and to plan for different way of working in the following September. This gave us two terms to prepare.

### **Outline of steps.**

#### Spring Term: Planning

Ep meets with HT and senior staff

Ep prepares a document for distribution among all staff, outlining past role and proposing alternative ways of working.

'After school' study group set up, to meet every three weeks. Open to all staff. Ep to attend.

Small teacher 'subgroups' set up to examine and report back on team teaching, mixed ability grouping.

#### Summer Term: Preparation

Study group becomes a Planning Group, with HT, senior staff Ep and heads of departments. Other teaching staff invited.

In-service Training Day for whole staff: presentations by teachers and ep plus working groups to prepare for new arrangements in September.

#### Autumn Term: Carrying it out

The following is a summary of the changes we introduced.

#### **School Organisation**

The school is a 12 form entry. Specialist teaching resulted in pupils being taught by as many as 15 different teachers in a given week. This was a stark contrast with the junior school pattern of one teacher per week. It resulted in teachers finding it difficult to get to know pupils, and introduced disruption when as many as In years 1 and 2, in order to introduce stability and prepare the pupils for specialist teaching higher up the school, we agreed to introduce a 'Home Base,' in which each class would spend 50% of lessons, with one 'home' teacher.

Year 3 would be a transitional year, in which pupils and parents would discuss exam and vocational options in the autumn, and years 4 and 5 would provide a range of options to

meet those needs. Years 4 and 5 would be largely subject teaching, with additional pastoral and vocational options available. While pupils could legally leave school at 15, provision was made for staying on to take exams, or for other reasons. This also was to anticipate the raising of the school leaving age to 16 years.

### **Home-base Classrooms**

For year one, the classes were time-tabled and placed in groups of three. In each 'trio' there would be a teacher with a speciality such as English and Maths, plus another subject. As the classes were close to each other, it would permit team teaching, and teachers would be able to provide 'specialist' and personal support to each other.

Pupils would leave the 'Homebase' for particular subjects such as music, games and PE, and practical subjects requiring specialist rooms/ workshops.

The aim was to build up friendship groups within the Homebase, and to establish a stronger link between teacher and taught.

### **Home-base teachers**

Home-base teachers were 'volunteers'. In the event, we had some 'Heads of Department' (which was a surprise) who volunteered, but they were mostly subject teachers. The teachers committed 50% of their time to the home-base class, the remainder on teaching their specialist subject higher up the school. Being timetabled in parallel with other home-base classes, and based together, staff would be able to share expertise in pastoral areas as well as teaching skills. Team teaching would also assist this. Teachers saw this as a positive move, both in terms of enjoyment of their teaching and in developing their professional skills.

### **Pupils and class grouping.**

The staff opted for mixed ability teaching (to my surprise) with the exception of the music department (also to my surprise!). It was agreed the emphasis was to build up pupil self esteem and promote co-operation above competition.

The re-organisation would provide greater opportunities to establish a classroom community and greater pupil involvement in their learning and working together. Whenever possible, home-base sessions were time-tabled for the whole morning or afternoon

Previously the 35-minute lessons had created an unsettled atmosphere in the classrooms, with much of the time spent in giving out and collecting in books and materials. It also led to a chaotic, intimidating climate in the corridors - imagine up to 48 classes changing classrooms at the same time. Fights, disputes and vandalism were common, and one teacher described it as 'The Land of Broken Statues'. (Incidentally, a decision was taken to erase graffiti and repair damage and breakages as soon as possible, to demonstrate the staff's commitment to looking after the premises and displays was stronger than the desire of small group to spoil it.).

If we keep in mind the twin problems of poorly developed or inappropriate social skills allied to low academic achievement then the following programme for combating them begins to emerge. Many of the children we educate in our schools have particular difficulties in forming positive relationships, particular with adults and teachers. Against this, the secondary system of specialist teaching often offers too few opportunities for a pupil to develop a close relationship with any one teacher. The school may, to the pupil, comprise few people he or she can know well and learn to trust. This is heightened by the transfer from primary school - where one teacher works largely with one class - to a comprehensive school staffed by teachers unable, because of timetabling constraints, to get to know any one pupil as well as they would like.

This transition, from a junior class at the 'top end' of the school, with a well-known teacher, to a class at the 'lower age level' of a school containing hundreds of older, apparently more important, must be highly unsettling and potentially stressful for many pupils. It is in circumstances where the pupil feels unvalued by others, inadequate and lacking in self-esteem that we find the roots of many of the subsequent behaviour problems. Hemmings (dates?) warned that where we generate isolation and alienation we are likely to encounter behaviour problems, delinquency and higher levels of self harm and suicide. He stressed the importance of establishing the 'community of the classroom', as opposed to a rift between teacher and taught. However, where teacher and pupils function collectively, as a group, then an environment conducive to learning exists.

Rogers (date), an ILEA inspector of schools expressed it thus:

"The role of the teacher as instructor in a formal environment separated by his dais from the occupants of the serried rows of desks facing him is fast disappearing."

This renewed acknowledgement of the special skills of the teacher in developing a learning community is of particular relevance in respect of the pupils we are currently considering.

I believe that if we revert to a 'community class' mode of teaching in the early years of the comprehensive school, this will ease pupil transition from junior to secondary. It will provide the pupil with one teacher for the majority of the curriculum, a teacher who will be able to address the individual needs of each child to an extent not currently possible. This would cover the basic subjects of the secondary curriculum. Academically the pupil will benefit from a greater sense of security and recognition?/ validation? from the school. While the 'class teacher', through consultation with curriculum Heads of Department, will be able to ensure subject continuity and specialisation. This will allow an emphasis on the professional skills of the teacher as both an educator and expert in human relations within the classroom.

Under such a system, approximately half the teacher's time would be spent with his or her own class community. For the remainder of the timetable the pupils would be taught by specialist teachers, while the teacher would be able to teach his or her own 'specialist' subject within the school. This might be for pupils within the lower age range of the school, or to those older pupils who would benefit by greater subject complexity and specialisation.

In summary, pupils in the first and possibly second year of the comprehensive would be taught by a single class 'tutor', as classes move up the age range in the school they would gradually be weaned away from that degree of dependence as they become able to cope with more subject specialisation and a wider variety and number of different teachers.

Apart from focusing on pupil needs, such a system also offers the possibility of making more effective use of teacher resources and skills. Coupled with a realistic re-appraisal of the courses to be followed, particular from the third year (Yr 9) onwards it could enable teachers who favour their pastoral role to have the opportunity to do so, without relinquishing their specialist subject skills. The subject re-appraisal would also spare teacher and pupil from the unrewarding process of the former teaching the latter a subject whose relevance is not immediately obvious to either party. This also provides time and opportunity to introduce topics of study – or projects – of greater relevance and purpose.

One of the key aims is for the 'transition years' to lay the foundation for the pupil's attitudes to teachers, peers and academic work for the rest of the secondary school years. Block timetabling these core subjects can also permit teachers themselves to function as a team, providing mutual support, opportunities for team teaching and the opportunity to benefit from each other's specialist skills. If 'home base' classrooms were grouped together, this would enhance such opportunities for teachers and pupils to share learning and pastoral experiences and support.

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**Bruner: 'Schooling is man's long growing period' (for Plan B**

NB intro for Plan B: 'school dev change model (non-crisis) is Bruner, 'if you want to teach X in Y grade, you start by teaching the basics in the early stages'.

Another long-term aim is to prepare the children for education in a comprehensive school and help them to develop sufficient trust and self-confidence to take advantage of the

variety of courses available in such a school without feeling that they are isolated, impersonal units. In social, personal and vocational terms this initial security and sense of concern will prepare the children for the rather different approach to be followed higher up the school when curriculum and structure will reflect the impending transition to work, further or higher education.

Bruner argues that 'if you wish to teach calculus in the 8th grade, then begin it in the first grade by teaching the kind of skills necessary for its mastery later.' On a wider front, where we are concerned with the pupil's acquisition of psychological and sociological skills, then we must prepare in the first year of the comprehensive school by encouraging co-operation and trust: the curriculum and structure must reflect the pupil's needs at that time in their development.

Again, these needs cannot be seen in a vacuum, but rather against the social background. Pupils' curricula needs *and the educational system itself* must adapt to changes in our time. Education is an evolving, dynamic process, in Bruner's terms 'a constant process of invention.'

How can this preparation best be accomplished? Without doubt we must 'personalise' the curriculum, making it relevant and appropriate to the child, in Hemming's phrase, 'bring the task closer to the doer'. We must identify and minimise those factors, which create stress in schooling, and seek to promote those which promote self-esteem and accentuate the positives.

<b>St Greg's script</b>
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This, then, is the background. What specific measures can we suggest in our work with secondary schools? And how can we best present them? The following are not prescriptive, but summarise the strategies that I have used in my own work with comprehensive schools serving socially disadvantaged areas.

Creating a school based 'study group'. This occurred spontaneously in one school during my programme of visits. This took the form of a voluntary group of teachers (and Ep!) staying on together after school for 90 minutes or so. We reviewed teacher concerns, and my own initial role was to review and highlight (the shortcomings of) my own role in the school, both for teachers and the EPS. Which led to a review of pupil learning and behaviour. We developed an informal 'rule' that individual pupils were discussed only as examples of the nature of problems in general presented to teachers and the school organisation. And the discussion and search for solutions was always related to school structure. Staff and school development was thus available 'on the spot' and stemmed from teachers' actual and vivid experiences ('what do I do if he kicks me?'). It was also context based. Subsequent planning became a collaboration between Ep and teachers.

What seemed important was the need to address the 'crisis' confrontation, and how to manage it, before looking at the contributory factors as part of the steps to reduce the

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What seemed important was the need to address the 'crisis' confrontation, and how to manage it, before looking at the contributory factors as part of the steps to reduce the

likelihood of a recurrence. Quite often the 'next step' was to seek further information, via inputs from the Ep, teachers or visits to other schools facing similar difficulties.

*'Crisis management plan' for pupils in the 4<sup>th</sup> year (now Yr 10)  
at the comprehensive.*

*'Making education relevant'*

- Following the Plan for years 1-3 (Y7 to Y9).
- Third year 'careers' and FE drive
- Outside speakers to pupils
- Concentration on curriculum choice and options for years 4 and 5.
- Careers night – involving agencies, EPS as well as careers and representatives from work/employment and FE.
- Student work and study related visits
- Individual career teacher guidance and counselling: Each pupil has been part of the process of building up personal records, comments on personal qualities and aspirations.
- Parental involvement

During the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> years, pupils followed courses and options they had negotiated during the previous three terms. The in school planning and structure drew on examples from FE by introducing a more 'adult' model of education, motivation and choice. During year three, class and small group based workshops had covered bargaining and choice, and this continued to be a key part of the curriculum and pupil decision making in the subsequent years. Courses and options were at different levels of difficulty, or required different skill bases for entry, hence the importance of negotiating choice, and balance curriculum challenge versus pupil preference. However, there remained a 'core' curriculum which included some 'traditional' subjects.

The courses included vocational and 'academic' choices, although I felt the distinction arbitrary as the practical subjects invariably allowed for validation via external exams such as RSA and City and Guilds if not GCE.

In terms of my own (three year) work with the schools, this aspect of school curriculum and organisation is still in its infancy. And to certain extent it could be argued that the 'details' of the strategy is less important than the process of working differently with staff and senior managers. However I think it imperative that Eps apply our psychology and experience to school curriculum and organisation, and ensure that our 'child focus' feeds into the educational arrangements for pupils, and the strategies followed by the teachers. We can make a greater contribution to helping the individual child by working through the school organisation and curriculum than by traditional 'treatment' through individual or Child Guidance systems. (NB example of where it is appropriate to retain former nomenclature).

I have devoted so much time to a detailed description of what should go in schools (from an Ep point of view) because I regard this as crucially important. We must focus first of all on the problems teachers encounter and the concepts they use to make sense of them. Unless we fully understand what they intend, mean and imply we shall never communicate effectively. And if we cannot communicate effectively with teachers then we have little prospect of helping the child in the school community.

I began the section on schools with a quotation from Bruner, and I will let him lead the way to the ending. 'Psychologists', he writes, 'must re-enter the field of education in order to contribute man's further evolution, evolution that now proceeds through social intervention. For it is psychology more than any other discipline that has the tools for exploring the limits of man's perfectibility.'

Psychologists sometimes talk of 'bad schools' and 'poor teachers'. Teachers bemoan 'poor psychologists' and 'bad services'. Perhaps we need to swap – or listen closely to – each other's jargon if we are to improve ourselves. The criteria of 'relevance, appropriateness and effectiveness' that are being applied to schools are extremely apposite to the work of the educational psychologist. We stress the need for schools to be more '*child* centred'. That is of course paramount. But are we sufficiently *school* centred? And shouldn't this be the next stage of our work?

**Comments:**

Language: ESN children. Was the current terminology for 'Children with moderate learning difficulties'.

Child Guidance Clinics and School Psychological Services were the bases for Ep work. I've 'lumped' them together as 'services' or 'service bases' except where it is important to describe a particular way of working.

Further comment: surprisingly few changes of wording!