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Practice Placement Experiences and Needs of Trainee Educational Psychologists in England — [Source link](#)

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Abstract

As part of initial professional training, educational psychologists in England undertake substantial periods of practice placement, within which the role of supervision is instrumental to their professional learning and effectiveness. The research reported here provides up-to-date and comprehensive information on the experiences and needs of trainee educational psychologists within practice placement. Focus group meetings were held with trainee educational psychologists from each year group at four English training universities. Through a rigorous process of thematic analysis, data from the 12 focus group meetings identified the valued processes and learning outcomes of practice placement in the context of a facilitative supervisory relationship and service context. The need to understand more fully the patterns and dynamics of trainee educational psychologists' practice placement experience is highlighted.

Introduction – practice placement standards for training in educational psychology

In England, the statutorily approved initial training programmes for educational psychologists¹ require students to undertake supervised practice placements as a condition of approval (Woods, 2014; Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC), 2012a). A set of specific standards issued by the government regulator direct the management and resources for practice placements, in addition to which trainee educational psychologists' placement guidance is issued by the national quality assurance body, the British Psychological Society (BPS) (HCPC, 2012a; BPS, 2010). For example, trainees are entitled to a minimum of 30 minutes' protected supervision time for each day of placement, (BPS, 2010, criterion 10.11) and practice placement supervisors 'must undertake appropriate practice placement...training' (HCPC, 2012a, Standard 5.8). In order to ensure supervisors have the required skills to undertake their roles and raise the status of supervision, mandatory competency based supervisor training has been introduced in some areas of applied psychology and in other countries (Gonsalves & Milne, 2010).

In addition, the organisation and context for educational psychologists' work are likely to influence the way in which practice placement standards, including aspects of supervision, can be most effectively operationalised. Woods (2014) identifies several factors which may currently affect the practice placement experience for trainee educational psychologists. These include the observation that educational psychologists work most often alone rather than in teams, which reduces considerably opportunities for learning from direct observation of the supervisor's practice, as well as rendering the majority of supervision indirect and retrospective, rather than 'in vivo'. In addition, professional practice opportunities for the trainee psychologist are most

¹ In the UK the title 'educational psychologist' refers to the practitioner role known in most other countries as 'school psychologist'. The title 'trainee educational psychologist' is known in the US as 'school psychology intern'.

commonly linked to services being delivered by the qualified psychologist and so the supervisor has ultimate ethical and professional accountability to the client within the process and outcomes of the trainee's practice work. Therefore, supervision in this context serves the purpose not only of developing the trainee's competence but also of ensuring that the supervisor her/himself is not likely to be called to account for substandard service delivery by the trainee. Furthermore, many qualified educational psychologists trained under a Masters level training route prior to the 2009 introduction of statutory regulation by the HCPC. For this reason, supervision of trainee psychologists at doctoral level, referencing the professional standards of the HCPC and including knowledge about models of supervision itself, may pose additional challenges.

More recently, significant reductions in public spending have led to changes to the mode of delivery of public sector services. This in turn has affected service delivery demands within practice placements and reduced the availability of experienced psychologists who may be potential supervisors. Furthermore, the cost to placement settings of paying a bursary to the trainee educational psychologist compounds the financial demands of resources invested in supervision (Woods 2014). Within the current practical constraints there is therefore a clear rationale for evaluating the adequacy and scope of new practice placement standards and guidance for meeting the learning needs of trainee educational psychologists,.

Supervision within practice placement

The approach to supervision is regarded as central to the experience and effectiveness of practice placements during professional training (Woods, 2014; HCPC, 2012a, 2012b; Dunsmuir & Leadbetter, 2010; Scaife, 2009; Atkinson & Woods, 2007). A variety of definitions of supervision is available, some of which relate specifically to educational (or school) psychology

(e.g. Bernard & Goodyear, 2004; Dunsmuir & Leadbetter, 2010; Falender & Shafranske, 2004; Newman, 2013; Smith Harvey & Struzziero, 2008; Scaife, 2001). Within the context of the current research, the following definition, drawing on several of the available definitions, is proposed for the supervision of trainee educational psychologists:

A formal, but collaborative, relationship in which the supervisee offers an honest account of their work, and in which the supervisor offers guidance and consultation with the primary aim of facilitating the supervisee's professional competences; the supervisor ensures that the supervisee's practice conforms to current ethical and professional standards.

In recognition of the complexity of the supervisory role in addressing needs relating to the supervisee, host organisation and service users, varying approaches to supervision have been developed (e.g. Hawkins & Shohet, 2007; Newman, 2013; Orlans & Edwards, 2001; Scaife, 2009; Smith Harvey & Struzziero, 2008; Speedy, 2001), any or all of which may be commended to placement supervisors during university-based training and support events (HCPC, 2012a). Notwithstanding an overdue full systematic review of the international literature on approaches to supervision for school psychologists and trainees (interns), it appears that although there are notable differences in the context of recommended approaches according to national context (e.g. UK, USA), similar elements for consideration and guidance appear: typically these include interpersonal relationship, contracting, ethical and legal issues, roles and responsibilities, differentiating clinical/ professional supervision from administrative supervision/ management (Dunsmuir & Leadbetter, 2010; Newman, 2013; Smith Harvey & Struzziero, 2008). A common issue in supervision literature relates to an assumed functional inter-relationship between professional supervision for qualified staff and supervision for trainee psychologists on placement

(interns) (e.g. Smith Harvey & Struzziero, 2008; Woods, 2014). Yet surveys of qualified educational psychologists in England have revealed that only a minority receives regular, and even then infrequent, clinical supervision (e.g. Pomerantz & Lunt, 1993; Lunt & Sayeed, 1995; Nolan, 1999), calling into question the evidence to support the instrumental value of supervision to professional practice for trainee psychologists (Goldacre, 2013).

Studies within clinical psychology training (e.g. Palomo et al., 2010) sought to identify supervisees' perspectives on which features of the supervisory relationship contribute most and least to clinical effectiveness, noting that the supervisor's capacity to establish a 'safe base' appeared paramount. This resonates with other findings from supervisee surveys indicating the majority of respondents admitted to various kinds of 'non-disclosure', including, personal issues raised by work, perceived clinical errors, and negative reactions to service users (Ladany, 2004; Ladany et al., 1999). The findings also identified supervisor behaviours which make defensiveness on the supervisee's part more probable. These include being perceived to be unaffirming, unsupportive or lacking interpersonal sensitivity, or bringing a lack of structure to supervision sessions.

However, evidence suggests that particular supervisor dispositions and behaviours correlate not only with supervisee engagement, learning and satisfaction, but also with client outcomes. For example, within clinical psychology practice, Shanfield et al. (1993) and Shanfield et al. (2001) analysed experienced supervisors' ratings of taped supervision sessions alongside supervisor actions. They found that more effective supervisors consistently allowed the supervisee to develop their narrative, tracked their most immediate concerns or queries, and directed their questions and comments to the material presented. This supervisee-focused orientation contrasted with the supervisory behaviour of less effective supervisors, who were less disciplined in

maintaining a focus on the supervisee's narrative, questions and concerns, and whose sessions lacked a clear structure. Similar findings were reported by Henry et al. (1993), who found a clear association between client outcomes and the type of supervision received.

Atkinson and Woods (2007) used focus group and questionnaire methods to survey placement supervisors' perspectives on the functions, facilitators and barriers of effective practice placement supervision for trainee educational psychologists. The researchers found 'guidance' (direct advice), 'problem solving' and 'support' to be core elements, supported by facilitators such as variety, pacing, and enabling trainees to feel that they are making a contribution. Potential barriers to an effective practice placement experience included time pressures, logistic issues, and ability to boundary personal issues. It should be noted that this research was conducted prior to the implementation of three-year, doctoral level training programmes in England, and in a service delivery context pre-dating financially driven organisational changes (cf. Woods, 2014). Notably, more recent research on educational psychologists' supervision has attributed importance to arguably similar 'reflective', 'emotional support' and 'workload management' functions (Bayley, 2010).

The extent to which supervision of trainee educational psychologists aspires to more ambitious outcomes, such as supporting trainees to build incremental excellence as an applied practitioner scientist should also be considered. Lunt and Sayeed (1995) and Scaife (2009) suggest that supervisory goals can be modest, focusing on safe practice and conformity to clinical governance criteria, such that when trainees are judged 'competent' lower levels of supervision are needed. There is a question therefore about how supervisory experience may focus on fostering increasing levels of competence and aspirations to promote transformational learning

outlined by Carroll (2006), rather than simply establishing and maintaining an acceptable standard of competence congruent with current service delivery norms.

Trainee educational psychologists' views on practice placement

There is surprisingly little research which shows the perspectives of trainee educational psychologists themselves on effective practice placement and supervisory experiences. Notably, Heaney (2010) explored the experiences and views of trainee educational psychologists using focus group and questionnaire methodology, and found contextual/ systemic factors (e.g. service structure/ management), shared expectations, and relationship factors to be central to a positive and effective supervision experience. In Heaney's (2010) research, however, only 16 participants completed the focus group element and the national distribution of this small group is not indicated. It is probable that participants were drawn from only one training university and so perceptions of supervision experience would likely have been influenced by previous group discussions. Furthermore, both qualitative data coders were themselves trainee educational psychologists with limited relevant professional or supervisory experience. Heaney's (2010) questionnaire items were not derived from focus group analysis and so questionnaire data were then essentially a survey of the researcher's a priori hypotheses and conclusions, rather than an extension of the investigative focus group phase. In addition, Heaney's (2010) research was carried out in 2009, since which the impact of significant public service reorganisation has undoubtedly affected the conditions for trainee educational psychologists' practice placement (Woods, 2014). With the aim to address these limitations, the present study provides an extended and strengthened replication of Heaney's (2010) study.

Methodology

Aims of the research

The reported research forms part of a long-term collaborative project between the English government-funded educational psychology training programmes at four English universities. The overall project aim is to provide a comprehensive and contextualised evidence base on the elements and setting conditions for effective professional learning in England and generate findings of potential cross-disciplinary significance with central relevance to educational psychology professional practice supervision internationally. The multi-phase project runs from 2013 to 2016, utilising a range of data gathering methods with trainee and supervising educational psychologists, and managers within educational psychology practice placement settings. The first-phase research reported here explores the following research questions:

1. What are trainee educational psychologists' current supervisory experiences and needs?
2. What are the facilitators and barriers to trainees accessing effective supervision?

Data from this research will be used to inform a second-phase survey of all trainee educational psychologists in England to identify patterns and trends in the fieldwork supervision experiences.

Design

This first-phase research was designed as an in-depth, exploratory survey of the needs and experiences of trainee educational psychologists within fieldwork supervision from the perspective of the trainee educational psychologist (Smith, 2008; Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007). Data were generated from focus groups held with trainee psychologists at four of the 12 universities which provide initial professional training for educational psychologists in England in 2012. For representativeness, the four universities were located in different regions of the UK.

Participant selection and recruitment

At each university, all trainee psychologists were invited to participate in a single focus group concerning their fieldwork supervision experiences. Separate focus groups were held for each training year group (Year 1, Year 2, and Year 3) in each of the four participating universities. In total, 12 focus groups were convened across the four universities. Focus group membership size varied from 6 to 15, with a median of 8, and total participant sample of 111 trainee psychologists. The total number of focus group participants represented approximately 30% of the total number of trainee psychologists in England in 2012.

Prior to contact with potential participants, University Research Ethics Committee approval was granted following inspection of the research plan and data collection tools. While focus group moderators were trainers of educational psychologists at the same university, trainee psychologist participants were assured that they were under no obligation to participate, and that their comments would be treated confidentially and without prejudice.

Data gathering

In order to provide the necessary detailed and contextualised dataset as a basis for subsequent statistical phases of the research, a qualitative approach was adopted (APA, 2006; Opie, 2004; Frederickson, 2002). Data gathering by focus group was chosen in preference to individual or group interview as it allows for the more or less explicit development and elaboration of ideas and themes both within and between participants (Barbour, 2007).

Seven focus group stimuli were included in the schedule for each focus group (see Appendix 1). The stimuli were intended to gather data relevant to the research questions by fostering group discussion about learning through supervision, its facilitators and barriers, and its

theoretical underpinnings, as well as background information about the context of group members' fieldwork experiences. Though focus facilitators were guided by the definition of supervision as proposed above, the definition was not offered within the focus groups in order to avoid limiting participants' perspectives and/ or implying inadequacy of their experiences.

An eighth stimulus was included in the focus group schedules for Year 2 and Year 3 trainee EPs, which was designed to elicit their views about the developmental progression of fieldwork supervision needs and experiences across the three years of initial professional training in England (see Appendix 1). All focus group discussions were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Data analysis

Using a broadly inductive-deductive approach, focus group transcript data were analysed thematically (Richards, 2009; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). In order to support trustworthiness and credibility within the analytic process, thematic analysis took place in three stages, combining intra- and cross- university subset analyses to provide a level of inter-coder moderation and participant validation:

- Stage 1 Cross-university moderation of EP trainers' initial coding of a single 'trial' focus group transcript in order to develop a preliminary coding framework

- Stage 2 Intra-university completion of coding of the university's three year group focus group transcripts; generation of intra-university potential themes from codes; member checking of potential themes with trainee EP participants;

- Stage 3 Cross-university review by EP trainers of potential themes in relation to codes across the entire data set; refinement and final naming of cross-university themes.

No modifications to potential themes were indicated as a result of participant member checking.

Findings

Seven main themes emerged from the thematic analyses of the 12 focus groups (see Figure 1 below). It should be noted however that main themes are not viewed as being entirely mutually exclusive. Rather, the main themes together represent inter-connected, broad emphases across the data corpus; application of a final, exclusive parsing of meaning was resisted as this would obscure the detail of meanings derived from a fine-grained qualitative analysis.

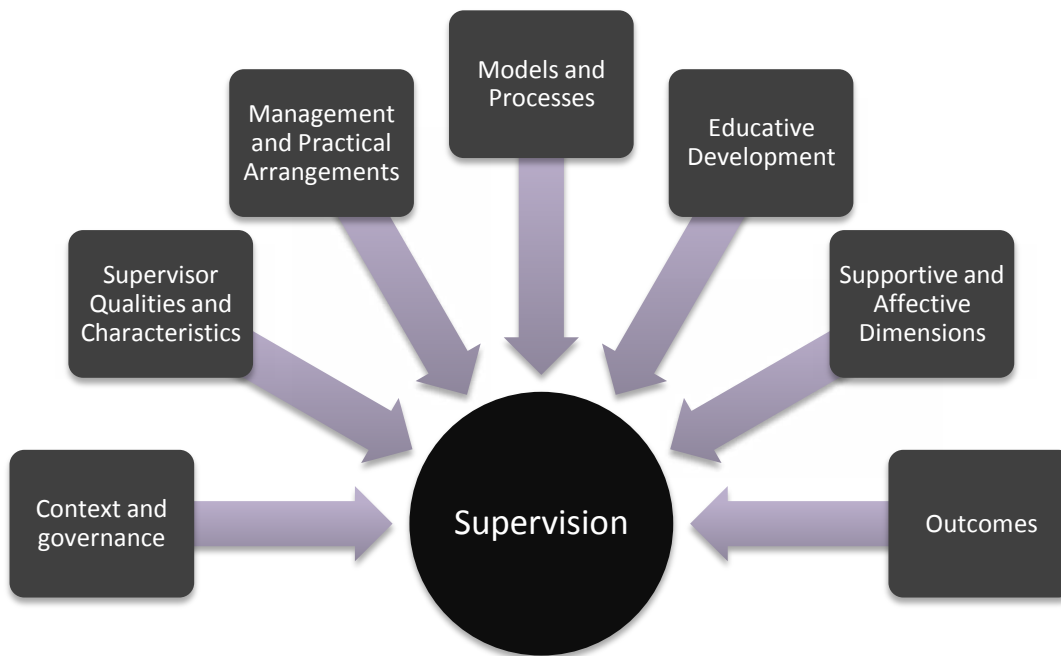


Figure 1: Seven main themes representing trainee psychologists' experiences and needs within practice placement supervision

Context and governance

This theme referenced the commitment to the process of supervision, whilst also highlighting considerable variations across services and regions. Professional body requirements for access to supervision at specified levels were seen as essential for ensuring that this provision

was made for trainees: *'I don't think supervision is generally included as part of normal practice, because I am a trainee and I get it, but nobody else really does'*. The absence of universal access to supervision was seen by the trainees as a characteristic of the service culture: *'the culture of supervision ...how much they prioritise supervision in the service... that had a knock-on effect of how much they prioritised supervising me'*.

Access to supervision was seen as being protected by formal agreements between the universities and the placement providers. The national move away from formal employment of trainee psychologists, and the relative strength of service-university links, were also seen as factors facilitating the university's appropriate governance of placement supervision. The importance of attending supervisors' training at the university was highlighted:

'The supervisors are supposed to come to the ...university for a training day in year 2 and year 3. I know my year 2 one didn't come ...and maybe that's partly why my supervision wasn't to the standard of some other people's...but my year 3 one came...it did seem to make a big impact...the expectations that the university had of supervision and I think that did help.'

The increased impetus for front-line selling of psychological services ('trading') led to financial constraints relating to supervision for trainees: *'I work in a traded service and I was assigned a new supervisor and she was assigned [only] ...six hours for two terms worth of working with me... we spent the first three weeks arguing back and forth to try and get her more time'*; trainees concluded that: *'if it's a traded service, supervision has to have allocated time and if it doesn't it's unethical'*. Many trainees highlighted the importance of the role of the university in ensuring their access to suitable placement experiences and supervision: *'I think as trainees we*

have in the back of our mind the university is our protector'. The involvement of the university meant that trainees were not placed in the position of making complaints: 'At one of the three-way meetings... my university tutor... highlighted... how often it [supervision] needed to be and the length and I think that... was picked up by the deputy and then this year I have...regular supervision every week.' This protection is of clear value in a context of a power imbalance where trainees may feel vulnerable: *'A lot of people want to stay in the service they're in when they finish the course and to make a big fuss over supervision that is not easy to do'.*

Notably, the findings also suggested that the culture of supervision could be distorted when it was located within line management reporting and monitoring structures: *'Supervision was more to do with what ...the service wanted from me rather than what I needed from supervision.'*

Supervisor qualities and characteristics

This theme focused on the qualities and characteristics of the supervisor, relating primarily to the importance of the relationship that developed between the trainee and their supervisor:

'It is about your relationship with your supervisor, if you've got a good relationship with your supervisor, they're accessible via phone, email...chatting in the office...there's almost like a safety net underneath, where you feel like they're approachable, whereas I think when you don't have that relationship everything becomes much more difficult.'

Trainees highlighted the inter-personal characteristics of a good supervisor:

'The... importance of the personal as well as the professional skills of the person who's being identified... that it's not just something you earn by years in the field, that you

actually have to have particular qualities in somebody to make it an effective relationship'.

And identified that the skill of a good supervisor rests on their ability to match the support offered to the needs of the trainee at a particular time:

'I think it's a real skill though on the part of the supervisor because sometimes I don't feel as empowered when I get direct advice, I feel more empowered being facilitated ... I think it's a ...skill on the supervisor's part to understand when I want facilitating...and when I actually want the answer from them'.

Crucial to a good supervisory experience was trust and the sense of security that it generated: *'It's that, like, unbiased, non-judgemental space to bring something and not feel worried or conscious that you're going to say or do anything wrong or that you should know something'*. For some trainees this sense of trust was more difficult to achieve when the supervisor also held a line management role, as there was a sense of conflict for the trainee between creating a positive impression with a potential future employer, and being able to be completely honest: *'you can start thinking how much of this should I share, you don't want them to think you aren't coping'*. The need to establish the bounds of confidentiality within supervision was discussed.

Supervisors were perceived as being protective by helping trainees with time management: *'She is almost quite protective of my time and you know, makes sure I'm not overloaded'* and supervisors were able to support trainees in balancing the demands of the placement and academic/ research tasks from the university:

'My current supervisor has placed much more emphasis ...on understanding the personal and...the strains of the course and understanding when ...our deadlines are and even at

the beginning of the year, she noted all these down and made sure that my diary ...reflected the needs of the university course'.

Trainees valued supervisors who were open to different styles and approaches to practice: *'Having permission to develop in your own way and in your own style as a new generation psychologist as opposed to...more of what's been before'*. Trainees recognised the need to negotiate the style and approach to supervision at the start of the relationship, and periodically thereafter: *'There's maybe something about having a discussion when you first start ...when you actually say 'how are we going to do this?' And you need to set those expectations'*. Furthermore it was evident that trainees valued exposure to different models and approaches to supervision and that their needs change over time: *'It is quite refreshing to...speak to other people who employ different models of psychology and have a different take on it'* and *'In my opinion, I don't think that contracting should just happen the once at the start of the relationship, my supervisor's always checking in with me, 'is this ok?'*

Management and practical arrangements

The third theme relates to the practical arrangements for supervision, particularly the clarification of expectations/ entitlements, negotiating access, and time demands. Some trainees felt compromised when negotiating their time entitlement:

'I think there is a risk that if the expectation that it is less than 90 minutes [mandated weekly entitlement] , and if it's an hour and then if you overrun you can end up feeling you're quite needy... I almost end up feeling guilty about the time'.

There was a positive view that one-to-one supervision meetings could be supplemented by less formal approaches where logistics permitted this: *'We had an hour and a half once every two*

weeks, but that's because I get a lot of incidental supervision, because having an office with all the other psychologists, and then the peer supervision, balances up'. There was a strong theme that indicated that many supervisors offer more than the mandated levels of supervision, with supervisors providing flexible and responsive support to trainees: 'I think a lot of them do extra, I think it's more time than they get allocated'; 'I also contact her outside of work if I need a report checking or something, so she's really helpful'.

Trainees indicated that their supervisory needs changed over time and that a more diverse range of experiences, including access to specialists within the service, was helpful to their development: *'I undertook some therapeutic work and I had a supervisor who was a specialist in that kind of field and I think that really brought on the things we learned in university...it really helped me and it was challenging'*. Trainees also highlighted the need to have continued opportunities to observe and be observed as they progressed through their training: *'It wasn't through... supervision face-to-face that I felt my practice developed, it was through being observed'*.

Models and processes for supervision

Focus group participants highlighted the value of exploring different theoretical orientations and approaches to supervision:

'Myself and my supervisor explored the use of different models in supervision and I found that really interesting...exploring questions that wouldn't naturally have come up during conversation... made you really think differently about the situation because you were going down a different route than you might.'

Whilst there was some ambiguity in trainees' understanding of supervision models which had been employed, there was also the recognition that development of competence in relation to such models is a national statutory requirement. Where a single approach was adopted, trainees felt they would have benefitted from a wider exposure to models of supervision.

A number of trainees described accessing different modes of supervision including group, and peer, supervision and saw this as providing an additional dimension to one-to-one supervision meetings:

'I think peer supervision is helpful...other people will bring different perspectives and it really kind of puts your mind to different perspectives as well, in a safe way.'

'Our group supervision...feels more psychological if you like, and quite often uses a solution circle or a solution-focused type model'.

'We often do a 'reflective team' approach ...it's often with qualified EPs who have been through...and have similar issues themselves. I think it's less directive... possibly because we are not working with discrete tasks anymore.'

There was a strong sense that with time trainees are ready for and value a change in the style of supervision to embrace a more collaborative and challenging approach:

'Now you are coming up with your own ideas more.... I think in year 1 maybe you see your supervisor as the expert, somebody who is going to have all the answers. Whereas now it's kind of sharing thoughts and your supervisor challenges you'.

'I think it would have been frustrating to have just one fixed model of supervision... I think there are times when it is good to kind of...be challenged and to have things reflected and to have questions and explorations'.

Trainees valued the opportunity to learn from more experienced practitioners and highlighted the desire to share practice, work collaboratively and to continue to conduct observations as their professional awareness grows:

'In the first year I did observe quite a lot but I really didn't know what I was looking for and I thought well they just have this really effective conversation, I can do that, but actually now... I know it wasn't just a conversation, I kind of wish I could replay them, so that I could pick out the effective part and apply them to my practice'.

Trainees valued access to a wide range of colleagues and to share casework thinking with their supervisor and with more experienced EPs: *'My supervisor brought different pieces of casework that she's completed that's relevant to a piece of casework that I'm doing, ...it built a relationship between me and her in that she felt comfortable sharing and we were both part of the...system.'*

Educative development

Trainees described how supervisors supported the development of evidence-based practice and the explicit application of psychological theory: *'I guess it was that kind of scaffolding almost like at the start we were very, very supported and then gradually she felt I was more confident and she let me go off'*. Specifically, trainees highlighted the development within supervision of the ability to develop hypotheses and formulations, ethical sensitivity and the effective use of language. They described the value of opportunities to rehearse (role play) professional scenarios in order to develop professional 'fluency'.

This process was supported through observation: *'I think what I found really useful was...that my tutor would come to observe me and then we'd brought that observation to supervision and I had a chance to reflect first'*. This process enabled trainees to become more reflexive about their practice: *'Actually I need to talk about the psychology and what's going on and understand my practice'*. For some trainees the process facilitated a greater awareness of the many psychological models and approaches they were using, providing helpful reassurance about their developing professional skills, promoting more general development of 'professional identity'.

With growth in competence and confidence trainees stated that they valued being challenged in their thinking: *'In year 2... I've had my hand held much less. In year 1 my expectations of me were much lower and now...you know, I'm pretty much working as a psychologist and...and that's reflected in the supervision that I'm receiving'*.

'I think it's easy and good for the supervisors to challenge you, why you got there...and force you to defend and articulate what it was. Because I don't think you do that necessarily on your own'.
'...I found my supervisor particularly challenging but in a positive way... and I felt really motivated and inspired ...'

It was evident that over time trainees became more robust and keen to expand their practice: *'I am not looking for him to validate that, what I'm looking for are other ways that they might ...bring my thinking... to expand the way I might work'*. Trainees were keen to progress beyond case formulations to explore other psychological dimensions in their work: *'I find that having the space to talk about the ethical dilemmas or the conflict... with parents or the teachers'*.

Supportive and affective dimensions of supervision

The quality of the supervisory relationship was crucial in creating the feeling of professional safety and trust: *'I experienced a safe place where I can talk about issues related to work but also sometimes, you know, personal things or...doing the doctorate [training]'*.

However, for some trainees the introduction of communication technology to deliver supervision seemed to challenge this aspect of the process:

'It's quite difficult to have that sort of interaction with people over a video because you're talking when she's talking and then you stop and there's always that delay...it is not conducive to anything more than the rudimentary...it just fails to provide that personal, affective dimension'.

For professional learning to take place, trainees felt it crucial to be open and honest about their experiences, both positive and negative, without worrying about creating a negative impression of their developing professional skills: *'I felt that it's been very open, very collaborative, I could actually be very honest, I didn't feel...that I couldn't say something or I couldn't say where I was finding something more challenging'*.

The crucial role of the supervisor was highlighted in helping with the often turbulent emotional experience of developing a new professional role, by containing their anxiety, and boosting their confidence: *'The thing that I find quite useful is talking about the process and my emotional responses'*. Others noted that: *'Supervision sessions were used to develop my confidence ... and nurture me in my role as a psychologist'*, and *'I've felt surges of confidence because she'll write back to me and say 'excellent report, well done'*. The process also helps to set reasonable boundaries: *'It's really kind of finding out what my role is as a psychologist and*

actually the limits of what I...should be doing, and that I don't have to change the world with a piece of work'.

Trainees also recognised how the supervisory relationship changes over time and that it feels more collaborative and mutually enriching in the later stages of training:

'In your third year when you have a little bit more experience under your belt and when...you're settled within a Local Authority... it's two people learning together almost...equal might be the wrong word but it's valued by the other person...(the) whole process feels different'.

The sharing of ideas and practice provides a rich learning environment for both parties: *'She's taken on some things from me and she's often reflected back that she's finding supervision really interesting.'*

Outcomes of supervision

Trainees explored the practical, theoretical and affective outcomes of supervision and described how supervision had been instrumental in the development of core professional skills: *'The way I write reports, just the...language I'm using and thinking about, that has been developed through talking to my supervisor'.* Furthermore, the process equips them with healthy and sustainable working practices: *'Just reining you in a bit and saying 'just don't do too much, calm down.'* Trainees also described the process of meta-learning as being facilitated by supervision: *'I've learned so much about learning through the process of supervision. I hadn't had supervision before so found it hard at first but now...it is just the heart of good professional learning for me'.*

Trainees saw the supervisory process as an essential element in integrating diverse psychological approaches and perspectives into a coherent model of applied psychology practice: *'What supervision ... helped was ... integrating different models of psychology...initially I used to think about them as stand-alone ... but I found supervision quite helpful just to try to integrate everything... using different perspectives to think about the problem'*.

There was an indication that supervision provides trainees with the foundations of an ability to reflect and to apply ethical principles/ frameworks: *'Being the reflective practitioner has very much come through supervision, the critiquing, being your own biggest critic, and looking at yourself and looking at what you have done and what you could have done to improve that situation'*; *'Ethics, especially when you're working in a business model... how do you work ethically when there's obviously money involved?'*

Discussion

The findings of the present study provide a unique insight to the distinct process of professional practice placement learning for educational psychologists in the English context. Though much has been written and theorised about professional practice supervision generally, with some focus upon supervision for practitioner educational psychologists, the authors recommend a full systematic review of the international literature on approaches to supervision for school psychologists and trainees (interns). Specifically, the authors found that published empirical research into the specific practice placement experiences of *trainee* educational psychologists in England has been minimal.

The present findings, to some extent, complement the preliminary investigations of Heaney (2010), providing confirmation of some main themes relating to the experiences and

needs of trainee educational psychologists during the critically formative period of practice placement supervision. In particular, the findings of the present research map clearly onto Heaney's (2010) identifications of contextual and systemic issues (Theme 1: context and infrastructure); shared expectations (Theme 3: practical arrangements); and, relationship factors (Theme 6: supportive and affective factors). Within this, however, the present analysis, based upon a larger dataset, arguably offers a more detailed and nuanced picture. For example, the issues of university governance and university-service links were identified more strongly within Theme 1 (context and infrastructure) in the present data set, offering an expanded view on how access to supervision that is experienced as effective is regulated and contracted within and between practice placement providers and universities. Notably, Hess, Doll, Woods, Hatzichristou and Nelson (2010) present a variety of ways in which the interrelationship between universities and practice placement providers may be structured (e.g. joint faculty/ service employment posts, faculty staff presence on service management or advisory boards), leading to areas of synergetic and strategic development (e.g. research/ evidence-based practice; ethics/ practice protocols; professional development/ supervision). Such broader activities between universities and psychological services may serve to counteract the limitations of standalone training/ guidance offered to practice placement supervisors. At the same time, significantly increased access to in-depth supervisor training focusing on models of the supervisory process, applications of professional practice models, and adult learning, might directly improve the quality of practice placement experience (Gonsalves & Milne, 2010).

Within Theme 3 of the present data (practical arrangements), clarifying expectations, negotiating access and time demands were also represented within Heaney's (2010) findings, however the value of supervisor flexibility and responsiveness, access to specialist psychologists,

and of having the opportunity to observe practice and be observed in practice, are novel. Similarly, within Theme 6 (supportive and affective dimensions), whilst safety and trust, collaborative learning, and ‘containment’, confirmed findings from Heaney (2010), the role of communication technology in the supervisory relationship is a new feature, which the authors consider likely to become an increasingly prominent aspect of supervisory relationships in response to technological developments and time constraints.

Four present themes (2: supervisor qualities; 4: models and processes; 5: educative development; 7: outcomes) are identifiable in various degrees within Heaney (2010), but are significantly more prominent from the present analysis. In respect of supervisor qualities, trainee psychologists valued a supervisor’s openness to difference, particularly in a context where they may feel the need to manage the impression they are themselves creating as a prospective employee and colleague. This extended to a willingness to review and renegotiate the supervisory relationship, though notably neither the present study nor that of Heaney (2010) explored either the length of supervisory contract/ relationship, or a circumstance where an active and positive change of supervisor had been made. Trainees in the present study also identified the supervisor’s protective role, which does not feature in previous research. The present findings differentiated models and processes relating to psychological practice with clients, from those relating to the trainee’s supervisory experience itself, which may be explained in part by statutory professional practice requirements which first came into force in England in 2009 (HCPC, 2012b). In addition, the positive experience of peer supervision was also prominently highlighted.

The importance of educative development was more clearly evident in the present data with particular focus on challenges to learning, rather than challenges within the supervisory relationship/ arrangement itself. Such positively viewed learning challenges were linked with a

developmental progression in the educative focus of supervision over the three year training period, as well as a supervisor's ability to reassure the trainee that dealing with such challenges is an expected part of their learning at that stage.

The emergence of a theme relating to a range of outcomes of supervision for trainees themselves was perhaps the most significant addition to Heaney's findings (2010). Perhaps more than any other finding, this theme highlights something about the 'learning journey' for trainee educational psychologists, which is an essential link between the required broad learning outcomes of training (HCPC, 2012b), and the range of learning opportunities provided (e.g. seminars, directed study, supervision) (Hughes & Tight, 2013). As such, it has the potential to provide both faculty staff and placement supervisors with insight to *how* trainee psychologists generally develop professional competence during training. For example, the development of the use of language, an integrative approach, and an ability to navigate ethical sensitivities and dilemmas, can be highlighted, supported and reflected upon for trainees during their learning journey, thereby providing further reassurance and meta-learning, as positively identified within the present research. Future research accessing narrative accounts has the potential to shed further light upon such 'intermediary' outcomes in the practice learning of trainee educational psychologists (cf. Dornan & Morcke, 2014).

Notwithstanding the present insights to the practice placement learning experiences of trainee educational psychologists, the authors consider that there are five specific areas for future knowledge development. First, the present findings give some preliminary indications of variations in trainee psychologists' experiences and perceptions across the years of training and between university regions. The design of this study permits further analysis of the dataset in order to explore fully these possible inter-group differences, which will be subsequently reported.

Second, the findings reported here are based upon data from approximately one third of England's trainee educational psychologists in 2012. A second completed phase of research is to report upon a comprehensive survey all of the trainee educational psychologists in England in order to identify more general patterns and trends across the population.

Third, although there is some literature relating to the practice placement experiences of trainee educational psychologists outside England (e.g. Newman, 2013; Smith Harvey & Struzziero, 2008), such data that do exist have not been collected and analysed by similar means. It would be useful to identify contrasting and similar school psychology training contexts within which comparable data could be gathered in order to identify universally common and contextually or culturally relative elements within practice placement supervision for initial professional training (cf. McNamara, Murray & Jones, 2014). Fourth, Atkinson and Woods (2007) used focus group methodology to elucidate the experiences of practice placement supervisors within a now defunct English educational psychology professional training context; the present findings offer a contemporary and theoretically relevant framework within which to replicate that previous knowledge enquiry. For example, how do practice placement supervisors view the context and infrastructure of their supervision, what value do they attach to using a variety of supervision and practice models, and what relevant qualities and characteristics do they bring to bear or seek to develop?

Finally, the authors acknowledge that knowledge advances relating to the supervision of trainee educational psychologists and their learning on practice placement, ultimately require translation into the practice of each individual trainee psychologist and their supervisor/ supervisory team (Miller & Frederickson, 2006). Although the present research provides some indications of the dynamic processes of managing supervision (e.g. through negotiation,

flexibility, and identification of a developmental progression), detailed understandings of why, how and when elements of effective supervision are operationalised or combined were not accessible from the present research design. The researchers propose a final phase of research in this field, utilising an explanatory case study design, in which trainee-supervisor pairings are examined contemporaneously within a framework developed from earlier phases of research with both trainee and supervisor participant groups.

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Appendix 1 – Trainee educational psychologist focus group schedule

Year 1

Introductory information:

- a. *Context for practice placement (e.g. bursary/ post; local authority/ private provider; size of service; brief demographic information; main areas of work);*
 - b. *Current role of supervisor; supervision from one/ different supervisors*
 - c. *Supervisor's previous experience of supervision (if known).*
1. *What organisational arrangements are made for supervision (e.g. allocation of time; supervisory contract; informal/formal contact arrangements; arrangements for meetings)?*
 2. *What have been the most useful aspects of the supervision you have received? What factors have enabled you to access effective supervision?*
 3. *Are there any developments in your practice that you would identify as having been brought about, largely or in part, through the effective supervision you have received?*
 4. *Were there any aspects of supervision you felt were missing or insufficient? What would you have liked more of in supervision? What factors have inhibited effective supervision?*
 5. *Have you had experience of particular theoretical models of professional supervision? If so, what has been the contribution of these to effective supervision?*
 6. *Are there ways in which the university and/or the fieldwork placement could better support trainees in accessing effective supervision?*
 7. *What recommendations would you make for an accreditation framework for placement providers?*

Year 2

Questions/ activities as for Year 1, plus:

8. *How has your experience of supervision in year 2 been different from your experience in year 1? How have your supervisory needs changed between years 1 and 2 of the programme?*

Year 3

Questions/ activities as for Year 1, plus:

8. *How have your supervisory needs and experiences changed over the course of the three years of the programme?*

