The role of the educational psychologist in multidisciplinary work relating to fostering and adoption

Fostered and adopted children form a vulnerable group with a diverse range of educational, social and mental health needs, and are likely to benefit from input from a range of professions, one of these being educational psychology. Cara Osborne, Roger Norgate and Maria Traill report on the results of a questionnaire sent to all educational psychology services in England, with a view to clarifying the nature and level of educational psychologist input into this area of work. Sixty-nine per cent of services were involved to some extent in such work, with a skew in favour of work with fostered rather than adopted children. A wide range of work was carried out, and was considered to have led to improved communication between agencies, enhanced working arrangements and a greater understanding of factors relating to fostering and adoption. Despite this, the level of current service involvement was generally lower than desired, and in response to this, some services highlighted the need for further research into the value of educational psychologist input into this area of work.

Introduction

The Green Paper Every Child Matters (ECM) (Department for Education and Skills, 2003a) and the Children Act 2004 highlighted the problems that can arise from the division of responsibilities between local authority departments. At the extreme, this can result in duplication of work, lack of accountability and the potential for inaction. Consequently, the legislation advocated collaborative, integrated working, with the aim of enabling a more consistent approach to supporting children and their families. The needs of looked after and adopted children have increasingly been viewed from a multidisciplinary perspective, with a growing emphasis on work that includes partnership between agencies at both a strategic and operational level. Looked after children represent one of the most vulnerable groups in our society and many of them experience early disadvantage, abuse, loss and repeated changes of home and school placement. These factors can affect learning, social and emotional development; it is therefore vital that local authorities work to ensure that these children are properly supported. The aim of the current study was to examine existing multidisciplinary work within this area from the viewpoint of educational psychologists.

The educational needs of looked after and adopted children

There has been a developing consensus that the academic achievement of looked after children is problematic. In 2007, 64% of looked after children left care with one or more GCSEs or GNVQs and 13% left with five or more GCSEs at A*–C. This compares with 99% and 62% (respectively) for the general population (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008). Looked after children are also more likely to be permanently excluded from school than the general pupil population (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008) and more likely to have special educational needs (SEN) (Fletcher-Campbell and Archer, 2003). Approximately 27% of looked after children have a Statement compared to just 3% of the general pupil population (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008).

Consideration of the circumstances surrounding the education of looked after children helps to illuminate these figures. Looked after children typically come from a background of abuse, neglect or family dysfunction (Department for Education and Skills, 2003b), thus they have often experienced considerable trauma before being placed in

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1 Equivalent data for adopted children are not available.
care. Once in care, they frequently have to contend with changes in placements, often in combination with a move to a new school. Such moves are unlikely to coincide with normal school entry points, so looked after children are often highly visible as being ‘different’ to their peer group (Division of Educational and Child Psychology, 2006). The net result is that they are liable to experience a disjointed home and school life that is likely to affect their educational achievement.

Conversely, adopted children may experience difficulties at school because they are not perceived to be different to their peer group. Research suggests that teachers lack an understanding of the continuing effect that early adversity and attachment difficulties may have on a child, even once placed with an adoptive family (Phillips, 2007). As a result, adopted children may struggle to access the same level of support available to looked after children. This is troublesome given that research shows that adopted children are more likely than birth children to experience difficulties that may impede academic performance, such as disorganisation (Behen et al., 2008) and poor concentration (Howe, 1997).

The mental health needs of looked after and adopted children
High rates of mental health problems have also been found among looked after and adopted children. A national survey for the Department of Health found that looked after young people aged 11–15 years old were four to five times more likely to have a mental health problem than those in the general population, with behavioural, emotional and social difficulties (BESD) representing the main category of need (Meltzer et al., 2003; see also Ingersoll, 1997, for evidence suggesting that adopted children have higher levels of mental health problems than non-adopted children).

High levels of mental health problems are hardly surprising given these children’s exposure to risk factors. However, the circumstances surrounding the child or young person’s entry into the care system may accentuate these problems. Further loss and rejection may follow whilst they progress through the care system, leading to a cycle of emotional, behavioural and relationship difficulties. Moreover, instability of placement may result in difficulties in accessing treatment, further exacerbating the problem. Indeed, only around a third of children in the Meltzer et al. (2003) study indicated that they had sought counselling of some type. The result is that looked after children are more likely to suffer mental health problems, but less likely to receive treatment for them (Williams et al., 2001).

The role of the educational psychologist
As a profession, educational psychologists (EPs) would seem well placed to offer support to this vulnerable group (Jackson and McParlin, 2005). Indeed, Sinclair et al. (2005) reported that EP work with looked after children was perceived positively by both carers and social workers. Perhaps more importantly, EP input was also associated with a reduction in levels of truancy, running...
away and placement breakdown. This suggests that EPs may have an important role to play in supporting the needs of these children and that the impact of their role may extend beyond the realm of education per se.

In order to understand the context of these findings, it is important to consider the type of work that EPs might be involved in with looked after and adopted children. A report by the Division of Educational and Child Psychology (2006) scrutinised EP practice in this area, from the perspective of EPs with a designated post for looked after children. The report highlighted that EPs have specialist skills for working with children:

. . . they are aware of factors which enhance confidence, emotional well-being and allow children to flourish. They have knowledge of how children learn and why they sometimes fail, managing behaviour and knowledge of childhood difficulties . . . they have a contribution to make to understanding the dilemmas of looked after/adopted children such as the feelings of rejection and alienation can have on their functioning and sense of belonging . . . can thereby influence the practice of significant people in the lives of looked after children in the provision of appropriate and effective support. (p 9)

This report suggested that there has been an increase in EP work with looked after and adopted children in recent years, particularly in terms of supporting strategic work. Moreover, some local authorities now have designated EP posts within looked after children teams. The report highlighted a number of areas in which EPs work with such teams, including: supporting school attendance; reducing exclusions; enhancing emotional well-being; supporting continuity in school placements; promoting attainment; and providing advice on educational issues.

At a practical level, such work involves running training courses and consultation sessions for school staff; providing advice to carers, along with strategies to overcome difficulties their child might face; promoting after-school activities; supporting children and carers at key times, such as starting and leaving school; and involvement in early identification of children with difficulties which might lead to a breakdown of school placement.

However, whilst providing an excellent overview of current EP contribution to this area, a limitation of the Division of Educational and Child Psychology report (2006) was that it focused solely on good practice in services that had a designated post for looked after children, and did not attempt to examine the possible reasons behind the absence of such a post in other services or the potential barriers to the development of this work. This is important, as research has found that EP involvement with looked after children is variable around the country, with some local authorities keen for greater collaboration between EPs and other agencies (Department for Education and Skills, 2006). This suggests that there may be factors that impede the development of multi-disciplinary fostering and adoption work in some local authorities.

One barrier that might be affecting EP work with looked after and adopted children is the time available to invest in work of this type. The review of services in England (Department for Education and Environment, 2000) highlighted concerns that EPs spent too much time on statutory assessment work2 and that this might be preventing them from using their training and experience as effectively as they might. It seems likely that there are other factors influencing the development of EP work in this area. However, this issue has been somewhat overlooked by past research, so it is difficult to establish a clear picture of the current

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2 Both in terms of deciding whether a Statement of SEN is necessary and, where appropriate, in justifying the lack of a Statement.
nature and extent of EP work of this type. Consequently, the current study sought the opinion of all EP services in England, irrespective of their current level of input to this work, with a view to providing further understanding of this issue.

**The current study**

This article relates to a more detailed study which was commissioned by the Association of Educational Psychologists (the main professional association) and funded by the Children’s Workforce Development Council (Norgate *et al.*, 2008). The aims of the study were to determine the nature and extent of EP work in this area, the importance placed on it by services and any barriers to the development of such work.

**Methodology**

A questionnaire was sent to all principal EPs in England, together with a letter explaining the purpose of the research and emphasising the importance of making a response regardless of the EP service’s level of involvement in this type of work. In order to maximise the response rate, the project was also advertised in the Association of Educational Psychologists’ newsletter, on EPNET (an internet site for EPs) and on the Research in Practice noticeboard.

The questionnaire included questions about the amount of time devoted to fostering and adoption work, the nature of the activity being undertaken, the perceived importance of this work and perceived barriers to developing work in this area. Some of the questions were qualitative and open-ended; others were quantitative and required a rating or data response.

**Results**

In total, 88 questionnaires were returned. In some instances, more than one EP from a service completed the questionnaire. After taking this into account, questionnaires were received from 84 of the 150 local authorities in England, a response rate of 56%. This is a good response for an exercise of this type.

**Current level of Educational Psychologist involvement**

Of the services that responded, 69% were involved, to some extent, in work relating to fostering and adoption (additional to general casework contact). There was, however, wide variation in the amount of time devoted to such activity. Most services spent less than 20 days per year on such work, but some had full-time posts in relation to either fostering or adoption. The average time allocated was 67 days per year. This level of provision was perceived to be relatively stable, in that about two-thirds of respondents did not anticipate any change to the time devoted to this activity in the near future.

Responses suggested that, on average, about half of this time (52%) was spent on work relating to fostering and about a quarter (27%) was spent on work relating to adoption. The remaining time related to work that could not easily be divided into either ‘fostering’ or ‘adoption’. Work to support children with attachment difficulties was an example of an activity where the boundaries between fostering and adoption work were blurred and where it proved unhelpful to divide time commitments in this way. The figures, therefore, need to be taken as ‘best guess’ estimates rather than as precise entities. Nevertheless, the fact that nearly twice as much time was devoted to work relating to fostering as opposed to adoption is of interest. One respondent bluntly expressed the reason for this discrepancy as, ‘Once the child is adopted, that’s it’, implying that, following adoption, the only support received is via the generic service provided to all children. Other questionnaire responses suggested that the reason for the discrepancy might be related to the well-established structures

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*Most EPs are responsible for a group of schools and their normal caseload will include children who are fostered or adopted.*
for supporting foster carers that exist in
many local authorities:

There is very little formal or planned
involvement in post-adoption support –
where this occurs it is sporadic and
incidental to existing casework – and
could involve any of the educational
psychologists. There is more involvement
in fostering through well-established
systems that have been built up over a
number of years.

Whilst this may be understandable, it
suggests that practice lags behind
current thinking about the need to
provide continued support to adopted
children and their families. This issue
will be examined in more detail in the
discussion.

Those EPs who were involved in work
relating to fostering and adoption
reported working with a range of
professional groups, including social
workers, Child and Adolescent Mental
Health Services (CAMHS), school staff,
clinical psychologists, Connexions
workers and paediatricians. The nature
of the work varied but generally fell into
three categories: i) consultation on
educational needs, ii) training and
support and iii) contribution to fostering
and/or adoption panels.

Consultation on educational needs
A substantial number of respondents
indicated that they were involved in
some way in supporting the educational
attainment of fostered and adopted
children. Typically, EPs with a specialist
role for looked after children worked
closely with colleagues who had a
school responsibility, in order to ensure
that they were properly briefed on the
social care plans for children attending
the schools they supported.

Additionally, many EPs reported that
they were responsible for monitoring the
academic attainment of looked after
children at a local authority level and
were frequently involved in intervention
programmes designed to support the
educational needs of these children.
Some provided practical support in the
form of consultation sessions on
education issues, which social workers,
school staff, parents or carers could attend. In addition, more informal
support was sometimes offered. By way
of example, one respondent indicated
that they tended to act as a ‘point of
contact’ for social workers, providing
support and advice on any educational
issues that arose.

Some of the EPs were involved in
assessment work with individual
children, in order to clarify the children’s learning needs. Such work often
contributed to personal education plans
(PEPs), although EPs were rarely
responsible for writing them. Finally,
some also managed screening processes
relating to children entering the care
system.

Training and support
Many respondents reported involvement
in training. Such training tended to be
offered to a wide range of individuals,
including other EPs, social workers,
foster carers and adoptive parents, and
the nature of the training varied
accordingly. Professional support for EP
colleagues tended to focus around issues
relating to complex casework, whereas
training for social workers typically
focused on SEN arrangements or thera-
peutic support techniques. In contrast,
training for foster and adoptive parents
(and prospective carers) generally
covered specialist topics such as attach-
ment difficulties, emotional literacy and
advice on behaviour support. These
sessions were often delivered in
conjunction with social workers or
colleagues from CAMHS. Such training
had often been accommodated into the
regular programme of training provided
by the local authority. As reported
above, more focused support was some-
times offered in the form of educational
surgeries or consultation sessions which
anyone could book in order to discuss
an issue of concern. Again, these were
often delivered jointly with colleagues
from other disciplines.
Work relating to fostering and adoption panels

Some EPs sat on the local fostering and/or adoption panels. Such work included reviewing applications, interpreting assessments, providing advice on the educational needs of the children concerned, attending pre-adoption interviews and generally contributing to discussions and recommendations.

Advantages of multidisciplinary working

Two major themes emerged when EPs were asked to identify the aspects of this work that they perceived had been successful. First, they reported that multidisciplinary work had led to improved personal and professional relationships with individuals from other agencies. This in turn had enhanced the level of trust that existed between agencies.

Very good relationships have been made (over the past five years) with social care managers and practitioners.

Improved relationships between agencies had also led to more effective communication and information-sharing arrangements between agencies. Consequently, EPs felt that they were now able to provide a swifter and more efficient response.

Consultation meetings help the people involved around the young person to develop a shared understanding of the key issues . . . services are able to co-ordinate their involvement.

Second, respondents reported that their knowledge and skills had improved as a result of being open to different ways of working. Some also commented that this had impacted positively on the quality of the decision-making surrounding individual cases with which they had been involved.

Cases are looked at from many perspectives. Different members pick up on different aspects of each case. There is genuine and open discussion.

Whilst EPs appreciated the new perspective they gained from working with other agencies, they also felt that they had been able to influence the perspectives of other agencies.

Social workers are becoming more aware of the importance of education for looked after children.

Thus, overall, EPs were positive about the benefits of multidisciplinary work in this area. The communication and trust that had developed between agencies had led to an improved, more efficient way of working. Importantly, respondents also felt that all the individuals involved were better informed as a result of such joint working.

Aspects of multidisciplinary working that could be improved

The questionnaire also asked whether the current arrangements could be improved. Many respondents stated that they felt the work was often unhelpfully pressured and more time was needed in order to undertake the tasks required. Some reported that the quality of their work would improve if they had more time to carry out joint work with colleagues from other agencies. Others reported that they needed more time to carry out specific activities, such as complex casework, reading reports ahead of panel meetings, supporting foster and adoptive parents, carrying out assessments and offering therapeutic support to children and young people.

More opportunities for discussion of issues/outcomes in relation to successful foster/adoptive placements. More opportunity for participants of the panel to reflect upon the process of decision making by the panel.

Some respondents cited inherent difficulties in working with other agencies. Often, such difficulties emerged as a result of different priorities held by
agencies. Perceived differences in the importance placed on education were considered to be particularly problematic.

Working with social workers on expanding their views re education of looked after children.

[Social workers need to] acknowledge that education is as important as welfare as far as children and young people are concerned.

A number of respondents suggested that these competing priorities impeded the development of better approaches towards supporting looked after children. Additionally, the combination of different working practices, expectations and terminology was considered to be inhibiting good multidisciplinary working.

Not all services are as committed to a multi-agency approach and can be less reliable in their involvement. Communication (even with good email access) can become quite convoluted and things can get ‘lost in translation’ between different professionals (i.e. a continuing need to work on language issues). Admin support can be difficult – whose budget does this come out of? Which department should the person be based in?

Consequently, some EPs suggested that a set of shared aims might help to focus agencies and provide a more holistic approach, as opposed to what was viewed as ‘piecemeal’.

Better co-ordination, i.e. one database that all appropriate agencies can access to improve information sharing. Joint training events both delivering training and attending training. Joint casework rather than doing individual pieces and putting it together afterwards.

Overall, competing priorities and different working practices were perceived to have an adverse effect on attempts to develop multidisciplinary work in this area. Notably, however, the difficulties reported by some, such as lack of communication between agencies, were not universally reported. Indeed, as noted earlier, some respondents reported that communication between agencies had improved as a result of multidisciplinary working. This suggests that such difficulties can be overcome. At present, however, the extent to which this has been achieved appears to be variable across local authorities.

The importance of multidisciplinary work

In general, EP services perceived that their work in relation to fostering and adoption made a useful contribution. When asked to rate the importance of this contribution on a scale of 1–10 (where 1 = low importance and 10 = high importance), respondents provided a mean rating of 8.32. In support of this, they highlighted the training they had received on child development and psychological processes and the resulting knowledge and range of specialist skills they were able to ‘bring to the table’.

Educational psychologists bring a wide range of expertise regarding attachment, emotional well-being, families and schools, which is of great value and relevance.

However, although most respondents flagged the level of professional skills they had, many acknowledged that this did not necessarily mean that other professionals were not equally well placed to provide a similar level of support. Indeed, some respondents questioned the uniqueness of the skills contributed by EPs within this area of work. In support of this, they cited the range of other professional groups involved with looked after children which appeared already to be working effectively. Such responses reflect a debate within the EP profession itself about what EPs’ unique contribution is.
This issue is particularly relevant when considering where EPs would be best placed in order to maximise their impact for the benefit of children and families.

There are a number of professionals from other services involved in this area – I wonder what else EPs can bring – something – (but maybe not a lot?).

Time constraints would not allow EPs time to do this aspect of work justice. Also I feel that health and social services trusts have historically done this work well.

These arguments provide a different perspective and suggest that an important consideration should be what skills and knowledge agencies can add to existing support structures through joint working, rather than what skills and knowledge agencies can provide per se. This issue will be considered in more detail in the discussion.

The remainder of the questionnaire explored perceptions about services’ current arrangements and whether these could be improved. This was examined through the use of a rating scale similar to that described earlier. The net outcome was that EP services ranked what they were currently doing in respect of fostering and adoption substantially below their desired level of involvement (see Table 1). As might be expected, this discrepancy was even greater for services which were not currently involved in any fostering and adoption work.

Given that the majority of respondents reported that their service had no plans to change its current level of provision, this incongruity between current and desired practice presents an anomaly for services. In order to explore the reasons underlying this discrepancy, respondents were asked to identify the main blocks to development of work of this type, and what would need to happen in order to enable change to occur.

Many of the respondents cited time and service capacity as the main barriers to change.

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<td>Respondents’ perceptions of the scope for change in work relating to fostering and adoption</td>
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<td>On a scale of 1–10</td>
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<td>Where would you currently place your EP service?</td>
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<td>All responses (n = 86)</td>
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<td>Those currently involved in such work (n = 57)</td>
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<td>Those not currently involved in such work (n = 29)</td>
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Given that additional money to fund such activity was unlikely, services could not expand to accommodate such work. This implies that a shift in existing priorities would be needed; however, this would require a mandate from senior managers, because such changes would be likely to reduce the level of service to powerful interest groups, such as schools. Such logistics were more complicated where EP services had service level agreements with schools which contractually determined how much service would be delivered.

An additional complication indicated by several respondents was that some managers within Children’s Services did not fully recognise the contribution that EPs could make to this area and this therefore impeded the development of such work. Nevertheless, it was acknowledged that Children’s Services departments are still relatively new and thus some services were still grappling with
the changes brought about by the development of these new departments. As a result, issues such as those relating to fostering and adoption had often not reached the top of managers’ agendas. The lack of progress in this area was therefore not necessarily due to a lack of interest but, rather, to a lack of time or resources.

Children’s Services are in the midst of a restructure; this makes the re-framing of educational psychology priorities a challenge.

Other respondents noted difficulties in overcoming preconceived views of who should be involved in this type of work. Historically, fostering and adoption work fell solely within the remit of social care, and this was still a view encountered by some services. Conversely, EPs were considered by some to be primarily responsible for SEN, rather than possessing a range of skills that could be applied to a number of areas within Children’s Services departments, including fostering and adoption.

Lack of recognition of educational psychologist role in all ECM outcomes. Educational psychology service remains rooted in access and inclusion discussion . . . Recognition of educational psychologists as having wider role in facilitating child development and learning.

Following on from this, some respondents highlighted the need to generate evidence to support the value of EP involvement in this field in order to provide a research-driven case for such developments.

More awareness of research into factors relevant to positive foster/adoptive placements and how psychological knowledge can contribute to planning/decision making regarding foster/adoptive placements.

In order to gain a further sense of the types of barriers impeding progress within this area, the questionnaire subsequently explored what changes respondents would like to make if, hypothetically, unlimited funding was available for fostering and adoption activity. The most common suggestion was the appointment of a specialist EP, or, where such a post already existed, an increase in the time available. It was envisaged that such a role would enable the postholder to provide extended support to foster carers and adoptive parents. Various types of support were suggested, including group training sessions, consultation sessions, advice lines and home visits.

Prioritise interventions aimed at equipping foster carers and adoptive parents to deal with issues arising as a result of early trauma, attachment difficulties and emotional issues arising for this population.

Respondents also stated that they would like to be involved with more direct work with children and their families, either through assessment or therapeutic support.

More work with children in care, so they feel ‘looked after’ by the psychology service (e.g. special reports written for the young people themselves, ongoing counselling/coaching where appropriate).

Thus, the emphasis was on proactive, early support that might reduce the risk of placement breakdown.

Some respondents suggested that any appointment of a specialist EP should ideally be full time, in order to enable the postholder to become fully embedded with other agencies. The importance of developing closer links with schools in respect to looked after children was also raised. A number of respondents suggested that they would like to offer training and support to schools with the aim of enhancing their ability to engage with these children.
Training and support (e.g. coaching or mentoring) for designated teachers in schools . . . they are asked to act as an advocate for fostered children in school and need to build the requisite knowledge base and skills to do so.

Finally, respondents highlighted the importance of receiving funding for their own professional development in order to enhance their skills when undertaking such work. In particular, respondents were keen to undertake specialist training and learn from more experienced colleagues working in other local authorities.

Significant time should be spent on training and updating knowledge about ‘what works’ in relation to fostering/ adoption.

Discussion
The results of the study suggested that most of the EP services surveyed were already involved in fostering and adoption work in one form or another. Moreover, this work was undertaken with a wide range of professional groups, including social workers, CAMHS, school staff, clinical psychologists and Connexions staff. Nevertheless, there was considerable disparity in the extent to which services were involved with such work and approximately a third of services indicated that they were not involved in any work relating to fostering and adoption. Thus, in line with previous studies, the findings indicate that there is still substantial variation across local authorities in the amount of work being done by EPs in this area (Division of Educational and Child Psychology, 2006; Department for Education and Skills, 2006).

Those services that were involved in fostering and adoption work allocated an average of 67 days per year to such activities, equating roughly to a 0.25 full-time equivalent post. The type of work undertaken varied, but included providing training and support to other professionals and parents/carers, offering consultation on education issues and acting in an advisory capacity on fostering and adoption panels (see Norgate et al, 2008, for examples of detailed case studies). Such work was perceived to have led to positive outcomes; in particular, it was felt that it had led to enhanced working relationships and increased the knowledge and skills base of those involved, resulting in a more efficient, and better-informed, approach to supporting looked after children. Unfortunately, this was not the experience of all respondents. Some recognised that multi-agency work presented a number of challenges and were still struggling to develop working relationships with other agencies. In some cases, EPs were conscious that they were working in areas which other groups perceived to be ‘theirs’ and acknowledged that such friction would take time to work through. In many cases, this was considered to be a natural product of the different priorities and expectations held by agencies. This suggests that a key consideration when carrying out work of this type is the development of a shared understanding of desired aims and outcomes, and the particular role of each agency in contributing to these.

The positive outcomes described by some respondents are nevertheless encouraging and suggest that the problems caused by differences in working practices can be overcome where there is commitment to do so. A fruitful avenue for future research would be to investigate the specific approaches to multidisciplinary work taken by local authorities where such work is functioning particularly well, with a view to capturing examples of good practice.

The results revealed a notable difference in the amount of time allocated to fostering and adoption work, with more than twice as much time allocated to work relating to fostering. It is unclear whether this distinction emerged because fostered children are perceived to have greater needs or whether, as suggested by some
respondents, work relating to fostering simply has a more established history within services. The extent of the discrepancy between fostering and adoption work had not been anticipated and the questionnaires did not probe this further. However, research demonstrates that children are still extremely vulnerable post-adoption (Dhami et al., 2007) and are liable to experience difficulties that may impact on their education (Behan et al., 2008; Howe, 1997; Phillips, 2007), suggesting that post-adoption support should remain an important priority. Future research would do well to explore this apparent disparity between fostered and adopted children, in terms of whether such a distinction is valid and how services might address this area of work.

Although the current study did not examine barriers affecting work relating to fostering and adoption separately, it did examine the barriers affecting work relating to fostering and adoption as a whole. Previous research has often overlooked this issue, tending to focus on those services that are actively involved in fostering and adoption work (e.g. Division of Educational and Child Psychology, 2006), rather than examining the factors inhibiting involvement. However, this issue is important if such work is to develop. The fact that one-third of respondents in the current study were not involved in multidisciplinary work relating to either fostering or adoption requires further consideration. Moreover, even those respondents whose services were already involved in this work perceived their level of involvement to be substantially below where they would ideally like it to be. It is therefore important to consider the factors impeding the development of work in this area, both for services that are already involved and for services that are yet to contribute.

As might be expected, lack of time and service capacity were cited as major obstacles hindering progress in this area. EP services were inevitably under pressure and a shift in focus towards fostering and adoption work would have required additional funding or a change in service priorities. This was particularly difficult for those services that had formalised agreements with schools about the level of service provided.

When faced with the question of what could be done if further funding became available, respondents placed an emphasis on providing proactive support for children and their families, with a view to reducing the risk of placement breakdown. In particular, respondents suggested that funding for a designated EP would enable the postholder to provide better support for children and their carers, develop closer links with other agencies and schools and engage in their own professional development. Notably, these suggestions paralleled what was already being done in this area by some services. Thus, respondents appeared to have a shared understanding of what could be offered within this area, regardless of whether their service was currently involved in such work. Put another way, those services that were not currently engaged in this work were aware of what could potentially be offered, whilst those services that were already engaged were aware of how such activity could be developed and expanded. In both instances, development was perceived to be impeded by a lack of capacity and would require a clear mandate from line managers that this was how they wanted EP services to develop.

Despite these difficulties, most respondents considered fostering and adoption to be an important area of work in which EPs could make a valuable contribution. However, some respondents were unsure whether this contribution was qualitatively different from that already provided by other agencies traditionally responsible for looked after children; moreover, a number of respondents stated that this view was shared by some social workers and even some senior managers. In light of competing priorities and limited service capacity, the ability of EPs to make a unique contribution to this area is an important consideration. If the
work undertaken by EPs could be carried out as effectively by other professionals, then it is unclear whether EP services should be seeking to increase work in this area, particularly where this is at the expense of involvement elsewhere.

It is important to consider whether such concerns are valid and, if not, how they might be allayed. Some respondents suggested that research evidence was necessary in order to determine the added value that EPs contribute, and hence help provide a 'business case' for their involvement in multidisciplinary teams. The results of the current study go some way towards addressing this, in that they provide examples of instances where multidisciplinary work is functioning particularly well and leading to observable differences in the working practices of the professionals involved. A key point to note, however, is that local authorities differ considerably in their structure. The extent to which EPs are able to apply their skills and knowledge to add value to fostering and adoption arrangements may ultimately be determined by the particular structure of the service in which they are based. A further complication lies in the definition of what constitutes ‘added value’. In the current study, the majority of respondents were positive about the value of their input. Whilst this is heartening, such views remain subjective. In the absence of measurable outcomes, it is important to acknowledge that this does not necessarily mean that such work has actually led to a difference for children. It remains unclear how, and indeed whether, these practices are ultimately helping looked after and adopted children and their families. A useful avenue for future research would be to evaluate the impact of multidisciplinary work on the well-being of looked after and adopted children, in addition to educational indicators such as attainment, exclusions and employment or training rates. This would provide a richer picture of the impact of EP input and its importance in supporting multidisciplinary teams.

The results of the current study are encouraging, in that they suggest that EPs are reasonably well represented within the area of fostering and adoption. Moreover, multidisciplinary work with other professionals is generally perceived to be working in an effective manner. However, time and funding issues continue to present difficulties, and work in this area is not at the level most EPs would wish for. A minority of respondents reported that their service was not involved in such work at all; this was generally due to funding restraints, but in some cases was because other professionals were already perceived to be doing the job effectively. Such views point to the need for further research within this area. The extent to which EP input is perceived to be adding value to services may in fact be determined by the specific organisation of those services. Consequently, future research must seek to elucidate the circumstances under which such work functions well, both in terms of improving working relationships between agencies, but also in terms of specific outcomes for looked after children. Such research is critical in driving this important agenda forward.

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