Title - Work to be Done? A Survey of Educational Psychologists' Contribution to Special Schools for Profound and Multiple Learning Difficulties

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This article explores the perspectives of Educational Psychologists across England with regard to their professional involvement, role and contribution to special schools for children and young people with profound and multiple learning difficulties (PMLD). An online survey was distributed to all Educational Psychology Services in England and to private Educational Psychology practices. Data collected from 206 respondents was analysed using descriptive statistics and quantitative and qualitative content analysis. The findings suggest a complex national picture, including great variation in the frequency of Educational Psychology visits and indirect contact with the special schools. Whilst the work carried out by Educational Psychologists in these special schools is primarily individual, statutory led casework, systemic work is considered to be "ideal" contribution. Educational Psychologists' views on their role in PMLD settings seem to feature limited ideas. The authors suggest that improving Educational Psychologists' skills and knowledge of PMLD, building relationships with special schools and finding a niche in supporting, amongst other things, the emotional wellbeing of the school's community, might be ways forward for working in PMLD schools. The continued need for the profession to understand and market the specific role it can play in PMLD settings concludes this paper.

***Key Words*: educational psychology, special schools, profound and multiple learning difficulties, special educational needs, working in special schools**

Background

A significant increase in the number of children and young people with PMLD has previously been reported by head teachers of special schools within the UK (Male & Rayner, 2007). More recent figures suggest that 83% (or 8,736 pupils with PMLD) are educated in special schools (Public Health England, 2014). Additionally, special schools host increasingly complex cases of profoundly disabled pupils, and the need to prepare for the impact of this changing population in the education system has been emphasised, with one governor stating "the diverse range of children (…) is causing us to restructure our school" (Carpenter, Egerton, Brooks, Cockbill, Fotheringham & Rawson, 2011, p7). Educational professionals therefore need to be equipped to meet the challenges of the changing demographic makeup of students entering special schools catering for PMLD and this is particularly pertinent to Educational Psychologists (EPs), whose roles include not only supporting and responding to the needs of the children and young people (CYP) with special educational needs, but also supporting the schools within which they reside. Special schools represent a distinctive, segregated form of provision and when related to the needs of those with PMLD, often require alternative and highly differentiated resources, pedagogies and curricula (Rayner, Gunter, Thomas, Butt, & Lance, 2005). Additionally, previous research suggests significant emotional pressures which impact on staff that are particular to those working with pupils with PMLD (Ware, 2004; Kiernan & Kiernan, 1994).

Specific functions of the EP in special schools catering for PMLD, outside of the required statutory role, is yet to be formally established in UK and indeed, research into the contribution of EPs to special schools in very scarce across the globe. One large scale study conducted by Gillman and Medway (2007) in the US compared regular and special educational teacher's perceptions of school psychology. The most common requests from special education teachers to the school psychology services seemed to be assessment for a learning disability (72%), academic consultation (57%) and behavioural consultation (62%).

In the UK, Farrell et al (2006) carried out a wide scale study to obtain views on educational psychology services from a variety of stakeholders. Although this study was not limited to special schools, it included their views, as well as the EPs' perspectives. Whilst 24% of EPs (including Principal EPs) reported examples of own work related to in-service training of school staff and other professionals, only 7% of special schools recognised this as an example

of distinctive EP practice likely to have a high or very high impact on what at the time were called, the Every Child Matters outcomes. A further 34% of the respondent Principal EPs referred to consultation and 42% of EPs to a range of individual child work within the special educational needs (SEN) area. An example of individual work, said to reflect the 'typical range of work' in a special school included an EP being 'asked to assess learning potential of a particular child and to suggest strategies to improve learning/accelerate progress' (op cit., p27).

Whilst the two studies mentioned above bring some insight into the work of EPs and special schools, the authors have no knowledge of any other research carried out explicitly into the contribution of EPs to special schools for CYP with PMLD. Likewise, no previous research was found to explore the current contribution of EPs to these settings, specifically from the perspective of the EPs.

Study Aim

In contrast with the paucity of research in this area, UK Government communication mentions a specific role for EPs in working with CYP with severe and complex needs, including those with PMLD (DfEE, 2000; Farrell et al, 2006). It is also perceived that the apparent needs within the context of a special school catering for PMLD differ markedly to that of mainstream schools and to a certain degree, other special schools (Aird, 2000a; Male & Rayner, 2007). Given this context, the authors considered a study linking EPs and special schools to be highly relevant.

Whilst the authors focused on both schools' and EPs' perspectives of EPs work in special schools catering for PMLD, this article only presents the views of the EPs regarding their current contribution to special schools for CYP with PMLD. By eliciting the EPs' views, the authors hoped to get a much needed insight into the current and potential contribution EPs can provide to special schools for PMLD and go some way to informing future EP practice.

Method

Participants

All 146 publicly maintained Educational Psychology Services (EPS) in England were contacted by email either via their Principal EP or administration support services, and invited to complete an online survey. In addition, 267 private and/or independent EPs were also emailed with the same invitation, to their addresses provided on the British Psychological Society (BPS) and the Association for Child Psychologists in Private Practice (AchiPP) websites. Emails containing the survey link were also published in the EPNet website, an online forum of communication for EPs. In total, 407 emails were sent and followed up by four e-reminders, at weekly and then two weekly intervals. A number of 207 EPs completed the survey.

Of the 207 respondents, over 80% of EPs worked in local authority services (varying from fully commissioned by LA to fully traded). Whist half of the respondents were maingrade EPs, responses were also received from Trainee EP to Principal EPs as well as private and/or independent EPs. A large range of specialisms were self-identified by EPs, with the most frequently identified being Social Emotional and Mental Health, and autism. Less than 10% of the respondent EPs (18 in number) identified themselves to have a specialism in PMLD. The majority of EPs (approximately two thirds) indicated more than 3 years' experience of working with CYP with PMLD. Responses were received from across England.

Measures and data analysis

The online survey targeted information about the current and ideal contribution of EPs to special schools catering for PMLD and was developed in order to gather both quantitative and qualitative data. The survey was designed in collaboration with an expert jury which consisted of two Senior EPs, two EPs and a university tutor on the Doctorate for Educational and Child Psychology. A participant validation group was also created, consisting of a special school teacher and teaching assistant from two different school settings, and two EPs from two different local authorities. Feedback from these two groups informed the final online survey, published via an online survey tool.

The survey aimed to collect data on the following broad areas:

- The current contribution of the respondent EP to special schools catering for PMLD (e.g. links with schools, frequency of visits, type of work carried out);
- Potential opportunities for EPs to work in these settings; and

- Potential barriers to EPs working in these settings.

The survey data was collated and analysed through both descriptive statistics and content analysis. Quantitative data was analysed using descriptive statistics whereas qualitative data, provided by responses to open ended questions, was analysed via quantitative and qualitative content analysis (Krippendorff, 2013).

Ethical considerations

Prior to the study commencing, ethical approval was obtained from the relevant forums and relevant ethics guidelines were observed and adhered to (e.g. BPS, 2010; HCPC, 2012). All the participants gave informed consent to the participation in the study and publication of the findings.

Overview of findings

The data analysis produced a detailed picture, with features of interest for EPs' work in special schools catering for PMLD, grouped within the following descriptive themes:

1. Practicalities of EPs contact with special schools catering for PMLD
2. The current EP work in PMLD schools (including the role of EP – school relationship and perceived barriers when working with these schools), and
3. The preferred future from EP's perspective.

These themes are explored fuller below.

Finding 1: practicalities of EP's contact with special schools catering for PMLD

Just over one third of the EPs who completed the survey indicated that they were a main point of contact for a special schools catering for PMLD and the majority of the respondents (60.4%) expressed that they were not. Furthermore, four participants were directly employed by a special school (Fig 1). In comparison with this current picture, it is interesting to note that 68.4% of the participants indicated that they had previously been the link EP for a special school catering for PMLD (Fig 2), suggesting a shrinking work for the EPs these special schools, at a time when Britain is said to become less inclusive (United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), 2017), and with its Government

having been asked to indicate how national legislation protects the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (e.g. DfE, 2010).

[insert figures 1 and 2 near here]

When exploring who the school staff contact *for* EPs are, one quarter of participants identified the Special Educational Needs Coordinator, closely followed by the Head Teacher (n=43) and Deputy Head Teacher (n = 31), as their main point of contact. Only 2.9% of the EPs identified the class teacher as a main school contact, whereas 11.6% of EPs could not identify anyone as a school main contact. Some noted that they were not currently link EPs whereas others highlighted that their access to staff in the school was case dependent. 30% of EPs thought they would like to have contact with the class teacher, closely followed by the head teacher. Several EPs noted that they were happy with their current arrangements and overall it appears that EPs have access to staff on an individual case by case basis, guided by the needs of the child and with a whole school approach.

When exploring specifics of their contacts with special schools catering for PMLD, nearly a third of EPs indicated they had not visited or communicated by email or phone with these schools in the previous academic year (2015-16). This may reflect the high number of participant EPs who were not currently a link EP for a special school but also suggests that the EPs had not visited this school in any other capacity, i.e. outside of a link EP role and thus not as 'routine' work. A large percentage of the remaining respondents (29.5%) indicated that their visit to a special school catering for PMLD depended on the needs of the school, whereas 48% had scheduled school visits and other forms of communication with schools, in almost equal proportions, between 3-4 days, 5-10 days and to 11 days+ a year.

Content analysis of the data highlighted a needs-led or case led basis for visits and communication with schools. Statutory work was often noted as the primary reason for visits, including transfer reviews, annual reviews and statutory assessments. One EP stated their involvement was '*ONLY for statutory assessments for EYFS [Early Years Foundation Stage] children'*. Another factor that influenced the communication was EP time purchased by special schools catering for PMLD. An EP noted that their special school historically bought a two day a week package from the EP service but now this package has ended, the school only receives "core" time.

Finding 2: EPs' current work in special schools catering for PMLD

As per Figure 3, the most common area of work identified by EPs was statutory led work and individual casework, chosen by over 80% of respondents. Consultation and attendance to multiagency meetings were also popular areas of work, identified by over half of respondents. Just under half indicated that they carried out or had previously carried out parent work and staff training, with the least frequent work reported being intervention and staff supervision.

[insert figure 3 near here]

Although a minority 11 of the 207 respondent EPs indicated they carried out whole school work, including project work and work with the schools governing body, joint work with other professionals and SEN and Disability Tribunals were also highlighted. Specific intervention work identified included use of Video Interaction Guidance (VIG) and Video Enhanced Reflective Practice (VERP).

Relationships matter – but how much?

Just over half of the respondent EPs believe that they have an at least good relationship with the special school catering for PMLD, whereas almost 20% rated it as inexistent, and 3%, as poor (Figure 4). A large proportion of EPs provided further information to justify their answers and this data was analysed using content analysis. As probably expected, most EPs who rated their relationship as inexistent motivated their choice by not currently being involved with a special school catering for PMLD. Other EPs who classified their relationship as 'inexistent', 'poor' or 'adequate' indicated that schools did not purchase EP expertise, as the following comments show: *'The special school does not trade so therefore I am not able to carry out any systemic work which I think is what the school needs'* (rating: adequate), or '*The special school does not buy into the service'* (rating: inexistent).

[insert figure 4 near here]

When EPs rated their relationship as good or excellent, many EPs commented that they felt that this was due, in part, to a mutual respect and understanding of each other's skills and expertise, as exemplified in some quotes below: '*The school seem interested in what I have to say*' (rating: good); '*they valued the work completed around EHCP [Education, Health and*

Care Plan] conversions' (rating: good) and '*the school are generally well engaged and prepared for working with me, and seem to value our work together'* (rating: good).

Barriers for EPS when working with special schools catering for PMLD

The participants were asked to provide at least three potential barriers to working within PMLD settings. The consequent content analysis identified an interesting picture, featuring confusion about the role of EP in PMLD and need for a shared understanding of roles, time restrictions, statutory work, austerity cuts and the 'culture' of special schools which cater for PMLD.

Time restrictions appeared as a consistent barrier, occurring 142 times (out of 207). This related to EP time not being purchased by schools, in addition to EP time being very restricted, impacting the depth and range of work they could carry out. Related to this last point, EPs commented on the impact of 'lack of qualified EPs' and staff shortages.

One reoccurring theme identified was the role of the EP within a PMLD setting, with poor EP confidence (n=29), knowledge (n = 56) and experience (n = 33) appearing consistently in responses. Reasons for these features varied, and included the EPs self-perception, perception of how others view them or their perception of special school staff skills, as apparent in the following accounts: '*EPs not feeling confident to use the skills they have or could develop to meet this population's needs'*, *'Having less knowledge than the staff/less practical experience'* and '*School staff doubting EP ability to contribute because of lack of knowledge'.* The presence of other professionals within the school structure was another barrier identified, with one participant suggesting that EPs felt *'not really needed'*. A shared understanding appeared central to EPs forming positive relationships as well as acting as a potential barrier with special schools. As one EP surmised, *'I wonder if there is an incongruence in the perceived support that the school feels the EP is able to offer'* whilst another concluded '*Further work is required to broaden staff perceptions of what our role is and the support we can offer'*.

Interestingly, statutory work was frequently mentioned by EPs within barriers to their contribution in special schools which cater for PMLD: '*statutory pressures overriding early intervention work'* and '*Statutory work taking preference'.* Other constraints included austerity cuts, a poor understanding of the EP profession by the government and Local Authority restrictions on EP work. The impact of school budget cuts within the context of

traded services (and schools not choosing to buy in time from the EPS) was also highlighted by many.

Other areas emphasised by EPs included difficulties experienced when communicating with special schools in addition to the 'culture' of the special school. Several EPs noted that staff did not appear open to new ideas or recognise areas for change, suggesting a culture of *'going it alone'* with a '*highly developed identity and internal culture, making it hard to access from the 'outside'.*

Finding 3: The preferred future - the EPs' perspective

EPs were asked what their ideal contribution at a special school which caters for PMLD would look like, and were provided with a variety of different examples (summarised in Table 1). On this occasion, forms of non-direct pupil work, including systemic work, consultations, staff training and work with parents were the most popular choices amongst EPs.

[insert table 1 near here]

Additionally, qualitative content analysis identified EPs supporting school staff as an emergent theme, justified by the EPs' perception that the PMLD context has an emotional impact on the school staff. Ways in which this could be achieved included staff coaching, supervision of staff, facilitating peer supervision and reflective groups in addition to teaching supervision skills. Consultation was suggested frequently by EPs as a method in which to provide support and guidance in addition to problem solving. As one EP noted:

> *'working with this group of children can be very challenging emotionally; I would like EPs to offer supervision for staff to provide the emotional space and containing that they may need'.*

Support and engagement with parents was another theme, via EPs attending parent drop-ins, joint consultations with parents and staff, parent training and using tools such as VIG for assessment and intervention. Additionally, community support was suggested, with ideas including *'supporting parents with finding community based experiences/activities for their children', 'Parent support/work to look at effect on siblings of children with PMLD'* and *'Emotional management of living with PMLD - parents and siblings'.*

Many EPs noted perceived useful skills and knowledge they held in relation to problem solving models and frameworks for practice, in addition to areas such as attachment, metacognition, detailed functional assessment and the use of soft system methodology. Frequent ways of working for EPs such as person-centred planning and gaining the voice of the child were also highlighted. Knowledge of current research and evidence based practice were also noted as strengths, when considering potential opportunities for EPs working with special schools catering for PMLD.

Further opportunities identified included joint casework with other professionals, a '*team approach'*, although difficulties with carrying this out such as time constraints or inability to work with others were discussed. A role in transition work for young adults and their future apprenticeship, training or educational provision was also noted, '*Particularly building independence and considering post-school opportunities to contribute to society'*. Individual work was acknowledged '*when appropriate'* in addition to individual or group evidence based interventions. Additionally, respondents also identified working to join/link with mainstream schools and supporting parents in understanding the implications of choosing specialist provision over mainstream provision.

Discussion

The aim of the present study was to explore the views of the EPs across England with regard to their current contribution to special schools for CYP with PMLD. As the research literature in this matter is very sparse across the globe, the authors chose an exploratory study in order to get an insight into the current and potential contribution EPs can provide to special schools catering for PMLD, as well as to provide suggestions for informing future EP practice. The findings above detailed the respondent EP's views. The discussion that follows critically analyses these findings within the current literature and national context and, for ease, is grouped into three main areas:

1. EPs contribution to special schools catering for PMLD
2. Is more training of the EP required?
3. Finding and marketing a niche

EPs contribution to special schools catering for PMLD

This paper presents an interesting first attempt to gather a picture of the current contribution EPs are making to the PMLD settings. With a large proportion of the EPs who responded not currently (60.4%) or having never been a link EP for a special school catering for PMLD (31.9%), this is highly suggestive that EPs do not have these settings included in their general programme of work, although EPs are generally seen as the psychology professionals with greatest expertise in special educational needs.

The implications of this on the EPs' experience and knowledge are important to consider in the context of the picture presented by EPs, of role uncertainty related to special schools for PMLD. This included low self-assurance on the part of the EPs working in these settings, alongside the wide range of perceived experts involved with the school, many of whom were permanent members of staff.

From the scheduled visits which did take place, over a quarter of EPs indicated that their involvement was responsive to the requirements of the school. Furthermore, a considerable variation in frequency of EP contact was presented.

Qualitative information given provided some context to why this occurred. Primarily statutory led work (traditionally time limited and case based) and individual case consultation, alongside discretely purchased time might explain some of the variation identified. Interestingly, the work described is still similar to earlier findings of Farrell et al. (2006), who found that all respondent groups (EPs, Principal EPs, schools, local authorities and others) identified assessment and consultation about individual children as the two main activities carried out by EPs. The variation in frequency of school visits described in the paragraph above might be related to the current variation in EPs' workforce, statutory demands and models of EP service delivery across the country.

A small number of EPs commented on carrying out project work within the school which required sustained input. Interventions and staff supervision were the least frequent type of work carried out. This profile was contrary to what EPs highlighted as their ideal contribution, which included systemic work and additional whole school work such as training, working with parents and consultations.

When placing the findings into context, the introduction of Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) in 2014 is likely to have had an impact on the amount of statutory work undertaken by EPs in these settings in the past two years. The statutory requirement for all statements of

special educational needs to be transferred into EHCPs has inevitably impacted on the type of work carried out by EPs in special schools, where every CYP is required to have an EHCP. It could be argued that this high frequency of statutory work undoubtedly affected how the role of the EP in these settings is perceived by special schools such as these. As Farrell et al (2006) note, given the shortage of EPs, many schools have limited access to their services and as such, it is vital that EPs are known to ”add value” to the work already carried out if they are to be judged as having something to contribute over and above another professional (Farrell et al, 2006, p100).

This view links to the suggestion by EPs those special schools catering for PMLD may not understand the role of the EP and what they can offer. As one EP commented,

> *‘I feel there is, or has been, a difference of opinion between what we offer and what the school think or hope we offer! We have tried to address this but it can be difficult to change perceptions’.*

This perception of the EP role is something which has been written about extensively (e.g., Farrell, 2009). The requirement for EPs to be involved with all statutory work alongside the national shortage of EPs, suggested as partial reasons restricting EPs ability to carry out further additional work is only likely to perpetuate the idea of individual, one off pieces of work (Farrell et al, 2006). This comes at a time when EP services report anticipating more of their services will be commissioned and funded by schools through traded services (Truong and Ellam, 2014). As such, it stands to reason that schools will need to consider the value added of EP services in relation to their financial cost and against other services which could potentially provide a similar service at a lower cost.

As noted in the section above, time was a central theme and impacted by and on so many things related to EPs work in PMLD settings. Influencing factors included the duration of the relationship between the EP and special school, the frequency of contact and access to the special school, perceived impact and value of the work carried out and a shared understanding between the two. When considering this from a theoretical perspective, Allport’s well researched Contact Hypothesis, which suggests that contact between members of different groups can work to reduce prejudice and intergroup conflict (Allport, 1954), may provide some understanding for this current situation between EPs and special schools catering for PMLD. Indeed, it was suggested, in part, for the findings in Gillman and

Medway (2007) study as to why special education teachers perceived school psychologists to be of more value compared to regular education teachers. As Allport's theory suggests, interpersonal contact and opportunity to communicate may well be a current and future factor to be taken into account if EPs wish special schools catering for PMLD to develop their understanding and appreciation of EPs' work.

Is more training of the EP required?

In Wales, the publication of `Educational Psychology in Wales' (Welsh Assembly Government, 2004) highlighted a potential shortfall of EPs (currently confirmed across UK) and the need to EP specialisms. The publication urged EPs services to employ a sufficient number of EPs to work with children with severe and complex difficulties, alongside stressing the importance of continuous professional development (op.cit., 2004). Interestingly in this study, a substantial number of EPs highlighted their lack of knowledge or skills in the area of PMLD. The DfEE report (2000) into educational psychology services notes that schools want the development of specialisms from their EPSs, highlighting that, amongst others, this is particularly important in support of special schools. It is said that currently they feel that their own staff have more specialist knowledge than individual EPs on particular types of special needs but with a development of a specialism, they could use them as a source of knowledge and expertise to 'enable them to function in an effective way' (DfEE, p54). Therefore, whilst it is recognised that children placed in special schools are receiving highly specialist support and teaching practice, it is also identified that there is a place for outside agencies, such as the EP Services, to provide ongoing support and professional development.

Lunt and Majors (2000) consider the concept of professional knowledge and highlight the desire of EPs to attend training in specific difficulties in order to develop their knowledge. Considering the vast range of difficulties encountered by EPs, it is important to acknowledge that there will inevitably be a limit to how much specific knowledge EPs can acquire, in spite of ongoing professional development. If EPs are to contribute to working in special schools catering for PMLD, it may involve redefining what the knowledge or value added they are bringing. Lunt and Majors (2000) note that EPs are often brought in when school-based strategies have stopped being effective and the EP can use their psychological knowledge to complement education. This involves the EPs using tools they possess as psychological practitioners which don't necessarily require an in-depth knowledge of PMLD. Effectively

applied psychology through the use of evidence based practice and current research, the use of principles of consultation and psychological frameworks may well be basic tools that EPs can successfully use in a variety of settings, including special schools catering for PMLD.

Finding and marketing a niche

Farrell suggests that one key challenge for the EP profession is to overcome "some of the feelings of insecurity and self-doubt which are reflected in some of the literature" (Farrell, 2009, p74). If one is to consider the value added of the EP, a recent review of clinical and educational psychology training highlights that, specifically, the EP is required to understand psychological models related to the influence of the school ethos and culture and the curriculum (DH & DfE, 2016). As Boyle and Lauchlan (2009) highlight, "EPs have an evidential base to their practice that underpins their unique position in the education system" (p79). This can be linked to the idea presented above, where EP knowledge can be used in a systemic way to support whole school practice.

Indeed, there is an already acknowledged significant emotional pressure associated with working in PMLD settings (Ware, 2004; Kiernan and Kiernan, 1994); EPs' role for supporting staff and the school community through the use of the mediation, facilitation and problem solving skills they possess has been highlighted in this study in addition to having been noted in other papers (e.g. Dunsmuir & Leadbetter, 2010; DfE, 2011). Furthermore, training represents an effective way to not only disseminate knowledge but also support special schools through their knowledge of a wide variety of disabilities and professional practice. It is well known that undertaking systemic work is an area of great potential for EP's work, with likely wider effect than individual work, if done effectively (e.g. Salas, Weaver & Shuffler, 2012). This said, the authors believe that, in accordance with BPS (2017), other areas of EP involvement, focused on auditing and researching, exploring, identifying and applying targeted and effective assessment and intervention work with CYP, bringing in and building and / or co-constructing psychological formulations in order to change perspectives in PMLD settings are of equal importance. Promoting skills such as problem solving, functional behavioural analysis and VIG through consultation and direct work is also important.

A case can also be made for EPs providing such support for mainstream schools educating CYP with PMLD. Simmons and Bayliss (2007) suggest that it is an error to assume that it is

only special schools which can provide education to those with PMLD. Wills (2006) discusses the potential opportunity for EPs to have a role in direct training and group work to facilitate social inclusion in mainstream schools alongside supporting assessment, communication and the curriculum. In this current research, all of these were highlighted by EPs as areas within which EPs were either currently supporting and/or would be potential opportunities when working with special schools catering for PMLD. As such, they could be argued that such skills could be utilised in mainstream settings to support CYP with PMLD and ultimately foster inclusion and non-discrimination.

When considering the EP's role in such settings as well as generally, it may be useful to re-visit the basics and reflect on the inherent assumptions that come with the "EP" title: educational psychology is about CYP in educational settings and tackle challenges around learning difficulties, social and emotional problems, disability or complex developmental disorders. As PMLD settings are a small but consistent and distinctive part of educational offer in England, the authors believe that EP's initial training should necessarily include knowledge and skill relevant to this area; it is then up to individual EPs to keep and increase competence in this area of work, express with clarity what their role might be and offer potential contribution.

Strengths and limitations of the study

A clear strength of this research is the sample size and characteristics. 207 EPs provided responses from across England, almost equally representing the North, South, East and West and participants ranged from current Trainee EPs, main grade and Principal EPs to EPs in private practice. Another layer of strength for this study is the design of the data gathering instrument. An expert jury and participation validation group were used, and this allowed input from relevant professionals into the creation of the survey; in addition the survey was piloted on a small group of EPs before it was finalised,. The use of an online survey not only allowed EPs to be reached from across England but also provided both quantitative data in the form of descriptive statistics and qualitative data, producing a very rich set of data. Finally, this is the first time EPs have been asked to provide perspectives on work in the field of special schools specially related to CYP with PMLD.

In comparison, a shortcoming of the data is that approximately a quarter of respondents who initially consented to carrying out the survey did not complete the survey. There are several

hypotheses as to why this may have occurred. It is possible that EPs did not have time to complete the survey; or, they may have felt that the survey was not relevant to their practice and thus could not contribute. This may have been compounded by the structure of the survey which was primarily aimed at those who had been or currently were a main point of contact for a special school catering for PMLD. On reflection, different options to capture data from EPs who were not in regular contact with special schools may have led to an increased response rate and the capturing of additional rich data.

Implications for future work

This research presented some glimpses of potential future EP work within special schools catering for PMLD, as expressed by the respondents. One opportunity is the use of VIG or Video Enhanced Reflective Practice with staff and CYP. Given the specific needs of these schools, as well as the emotional impact for staff, it would be of interest to explore if such tools would be effective.

It is also important that the findings from this research are considered in relation to EP practice. An important role of the EP in working with immediate systems around the child, such as the school, is said to be in being able to provide a meta-perspective or 'helicopter view' (Wagner, 2008). This position is said to be assisted by the fact that the EP is not a full time member of the system (Beaver, 2011). The distinctive role of the EP is said to be the ability to provide a comprehensive picture of the whole child in context, considering the child's problems from a range of different perspectives (Frederickson & Cline, 2009). The importance of building relationships with special schools should not be overlooked. If EPs wish to develop positive working relationships with these specialised settings, investing time, where available, appears to be key. This may lead not only to a better understanding of both the EP role in addition to the scope of work EPs are able to offer, it may also allow the EPs further understanding of these distinctive settings and foster all important shared understanding.

EPs should also consider carefully their value added in these settings, be it through training, specific support around areas such as challenging behaviour or supporting the emotional wellbeing of the setting. Naturally, this will involve negotiations with the special schools in regards to the best use of their time in addition to a considered approach to working in these settings by EPs and EPSs. Ultimately change is said to occur when individuals within a

system make a paradigm shift from an individualist perspective to an interactionist and systems viewpoint, allowing for possibilities to emerge (Fox, 2009).

Conclusion

Webster, Hingley & Franey, (2000) highlighted two strands considered to be important in professionalisation: strengthening status aspects and improving quality of services to clients through enhancing the skills and knowledge of practitioners. It is suggested that the second leads to the first; that the value of a profession is inevitably judged by clients in terms of the service they receive.

Following on, the authors of this article believe that ultimately, the EPs need to find their own confidence in their contribution within these settings. They need to recognise and disseminate the value added they possess in the skills and knowledge that are specific to the role of the EP. Thus instead of becoming fixated on the knowledge they do not currently obtain, they should set about marketing those they do. Be it problem solving frameworks, supervision skills, or psychological theories, these are all relevant and potential contributions to special schools catering for PMLD. Perhaps only when what is included above in the paragraph is actualised, a shared understanding will be fostered and the contribution will begin to evolve.

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Answer Choice		Response Percent	Response Total
1	Systemic (whole school/whole class work)	82.6%	171
2	Individual work (including assessments)	62.8%	130
3	Interventions	58.5%	121
4	Staff training	72.9%	151
5	Work with parents	72.9%	151
6	Staff supervision	57.5%	119
7	Consultations	77.8%	161
8	Statutory work (transfer reviews; Education, Health a	49.8%	103
9	Attendance and contribution to multi-agency meetin	60.9%	126
10	Other (please specify):	15.0%	31
		answered	**207**
		skipped	**0**

Table 1: Participants' responses to the question: What would an EP's ideal contribution to a PMLD special school look like?

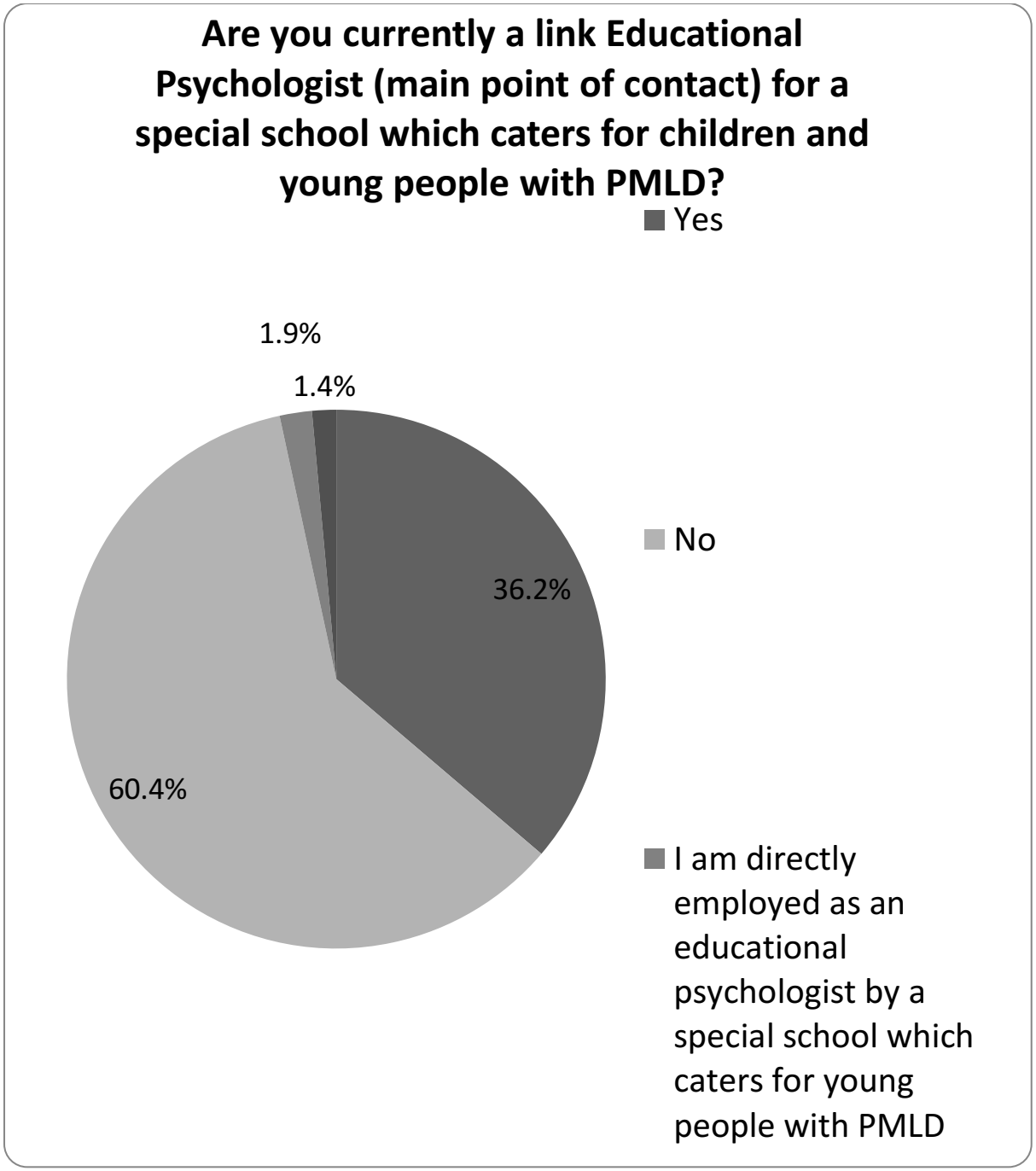

Figure 1: Graphical representation of participants' responses to the question: 'Are you currently a link Educational Psychologist (Main point of contact) for a special school which caters for children and young people with PMLD?'

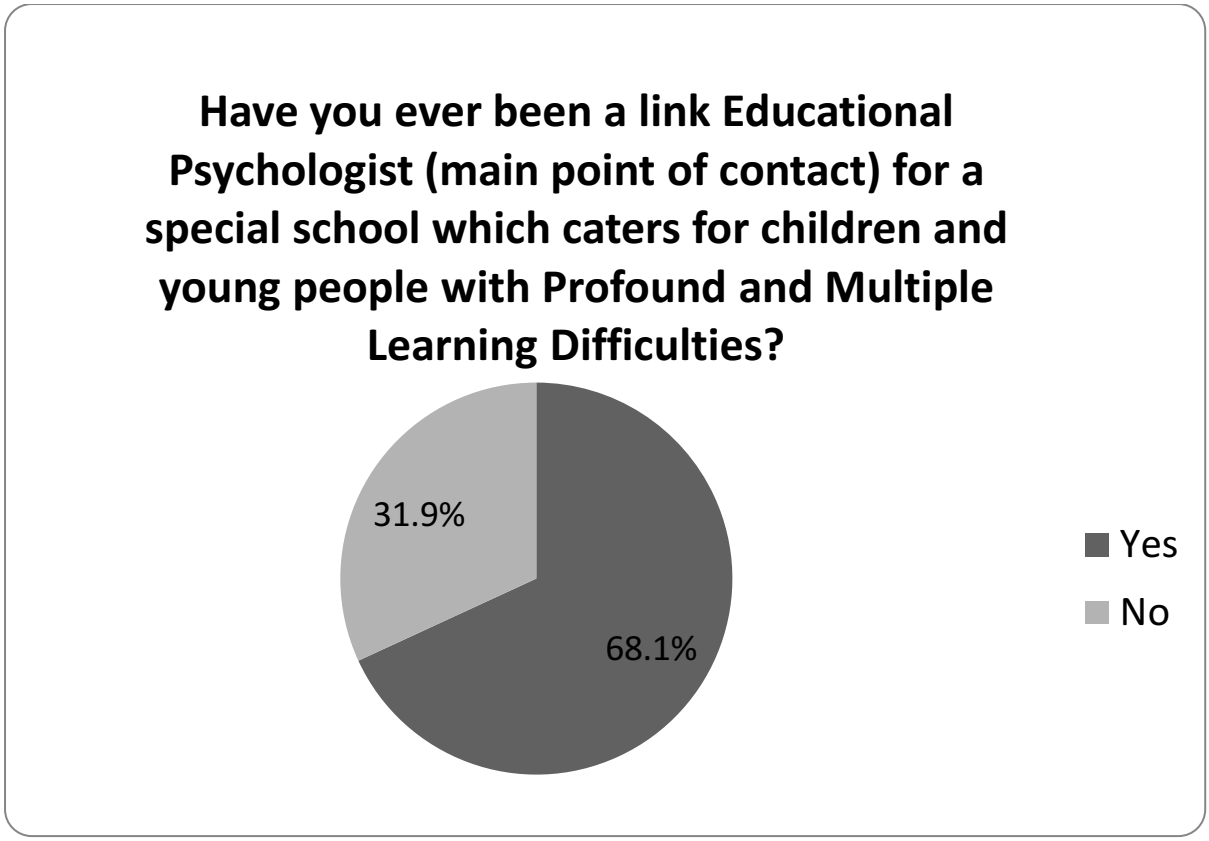

Figure 2: Graphical representation of participants' responses to the question: Have you ever been a link Educational Psychologist (main point of contact) for a special school which caters for children and young people with profound and multiple learning difficulties?

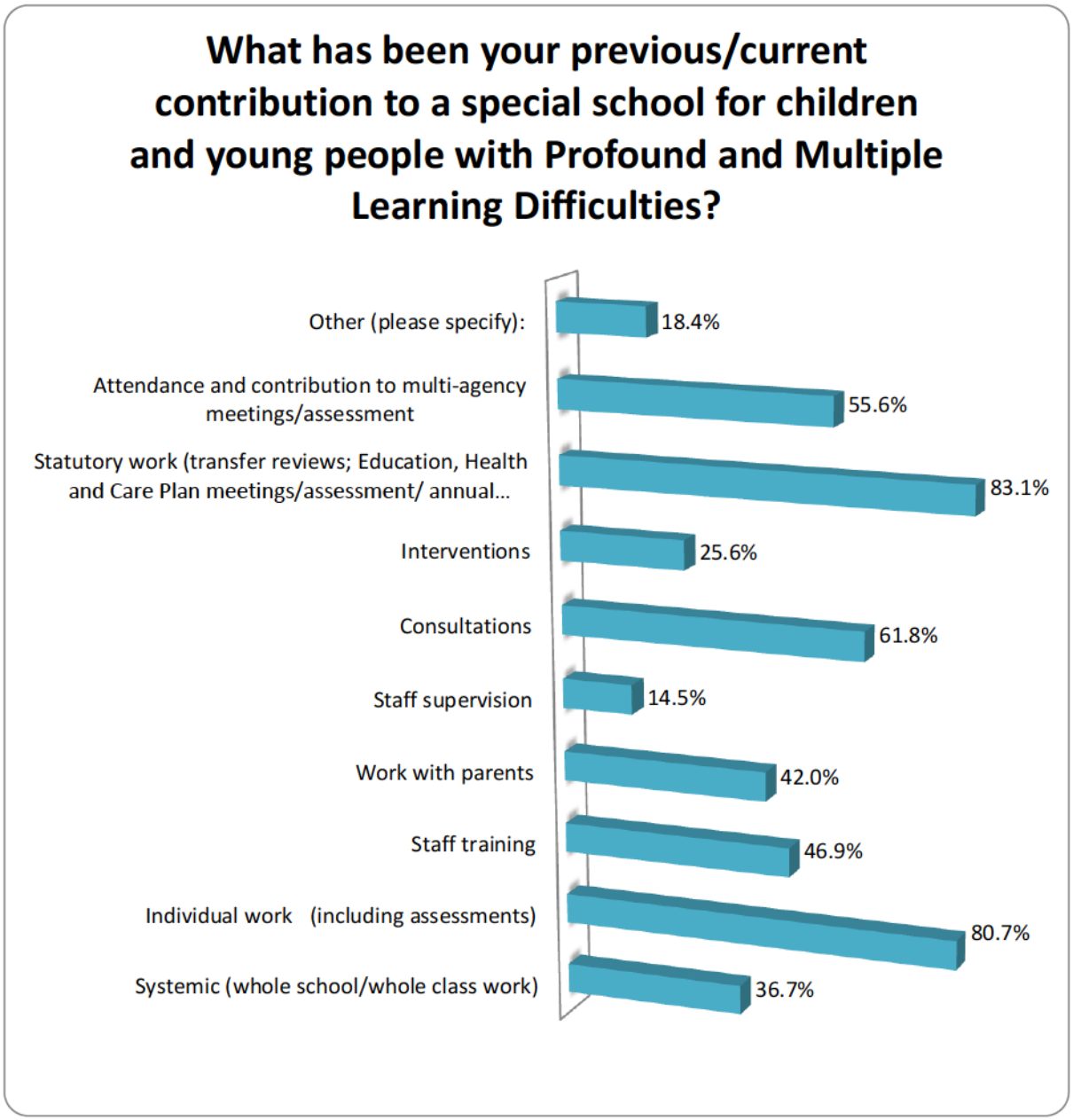

Figure 3: Graphical representation of participants' responses to the question: What has been your previous/current contribution to a special school for children and young people with profound and multiple learning difficulties?

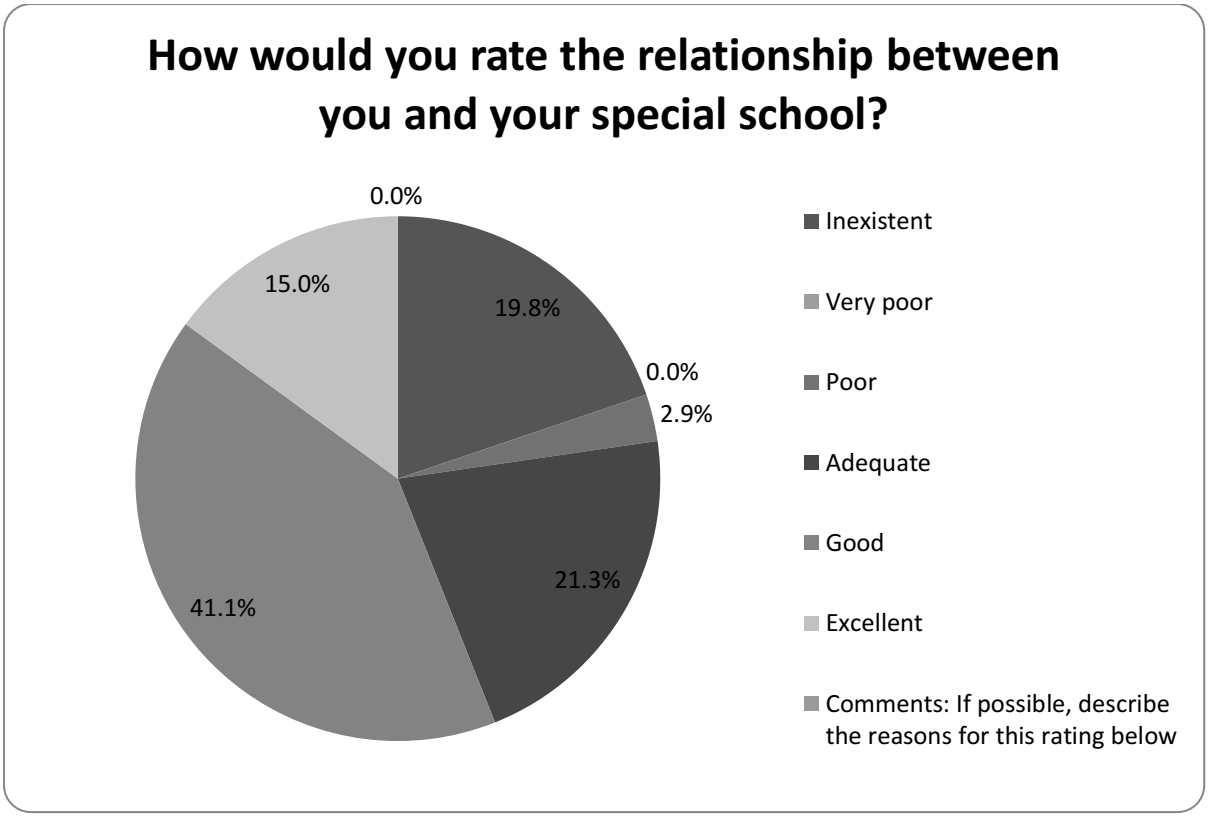

Figure 4: Graphical representation of participants' responses to the question: How would you rate the relationship between you and your special school?