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An Exploration of Educational Psychologists' Use of Contextual Observation in Practice

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Introduction

In 2017, discussions between representatives of regional Educational Psychology Services (EPSs) which offer practice placements for trainee educational psychologists (TEPs), and the respective regional English university provider of EP training, identified a valuable opportunity for research around educational psychologists' (EPs') use of observation in practice. These discussions considered the aspiration to teach TEPs the skills of observation more rigorously, disseminated in a consistent way to trainees, through explicit reference to an evidence base. Also, the aspiration for EPs to have a model to reflect on and review their practice in this area "systematically" (Health and Care Professions Council, 2016, p. 12) using an evidence-based point of reference.

Historically, the benefits of having consistent approaches to assessment have been at the heart of frameworks such as Every Child Matters (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2004), and the Common Assessment Framework (Children's Workforce Development Council, 2007). Research on EP assessment (e.g., Bourke & Dharan, 2015; Shapiro & Heick, 2004; Woods & Farrell, 2006) has tended to focus on what assessment methods EPs use, but do not provide any explanatory detail of how EPs "operationalise" them (Fallon et al., 2010). For example, The British Psychological Society (BPS, 2002) sets out "A Framework for Psychological Intervention and Assessment" (Professional Practice Guidelines Division of Educational and Child Psychology, BPS, Appendix 1, 2002). This outlines what a psychological assessment involves, what purpose it serves, the principles underpinning assessments, and guidance on the reporting of assessment outcomes. The framework does not provide EPs with a range of assessments from which to choose, or specific criteria to meet when employing the "variety of tools, techniques and approaches" that a psychological assessment should involve (BPS, 2002, p. 26)[^1].

Consequently, there are variations both between EPs' approaches to assessment methods and across EPSs (Boyle & Lauchlan, 2009; Shapiro & Heick, 2004; Woods & Farrell, 2006). More recently, the British Psychological Society Professional Practice Guidelines (BPS, 2017) refer specifically to observation as an assessment procedure: "the application of systematic observation and measurement of behaviour in a range of contexts and settings" (p. 9). It does not set out a framework for guiding the process of observation, or what ought to be considered. It is hoped that research in this area will generate an evidence base that will, over time, promote consistency in EP practice in relation to observation, and reduce ambiguity and opacity in communicating the skills of observation in practice.

There is current interest in EPs' use of contextual observation in a professional context. On the basis of her experiences as a TEP, Speed (2019) evaluates the use of observation within the process of psychological assessments and some of the issues arising, in particular: legal and ethical considerations, validity and reliability, observation techniques, and the differences between individual EPs' approaches to observation. Speed's (2019) discussion provides an indication that there is a curiosity within the profession about how others are approaching observation in their practice, and a desire to marshal some of its variance, offering practice review and reflection in a research forum, and presenting it in a way that allows for observation to be effectively taught and evaluated from a starting point of a clear evidence base.

A preliminary focus group with EPs, TEPs and Assistant EPs in a single EPS discussed their use of observation in their practice. The participants were aware that they had particular skills and knowledge that were different to other professionals yet it served to draw further attention to what Fallon et al. (2010) had suggested:

> EPs need to emerge from initial professional training being able to articulate a coherent view of their psychological skills set, as well as a clear view of the context within which this can be applied for the benefit of children and young people (p. 12).

A principal finding from the preliminary study was that observation is used to contextualise issues identified through EP involvement and that it is frequently used and valued by service users. The authors identified a need to use these findings to offer a definition of observation in educational psychology practice that captures its significance for the profession. This definition positions "contextual observation" as a rigorous tool for practice, and henceforth, the present study

will refer to the same term:

> *Contextual observation is used by EPs as an information gathering method that occurs in vivo or by video capture and may be used across the range of role functions.*

Following the preliminary study, the authors met to discuss and make explicit the skills, knowledge and understanding behind the process of observation. This discussion identified 11 appraisal categories with prompts, relevant to professional practice in respect of the use of contextual observation. These were presented as a bespoke analytic framework, so called as it was used to analyse a set of 16 systematically sourced papers that presented EP use of observation in research and practice, following systematic evaluation using an adapted quality evaluation checklist.

The first author systematically searched a range of academic databases and six key educational psychology journal titles, finding 16 papers that reported EPs' use of contextual observation across a range of professional practice contexts. It was found that the ways in which contextual observation is reported in published papers is often lacking in detail, and does not allow for a comprehensive understanding of the complexity of the process of observation (cf. Speed, 2019). From this, it was concluded that notwithstanding an available wealth of practitioner expertise, the scientific evidence base that EP training providers are able to draw upon in order to inform the profession-specific teaching of contextual observation skills to TEPs is fragmented and inadequate.

The present research developed the bespoke analytic framework into useful initial guidelines for best practice of contextual observation. This was achieved by using the prompts from the bespoke analytic framework as semi-structured interview questions for EPs (available from the first author on request). It was the intention to capture variance in practice, communicating *why* and *how* EPs carry out contextual observation, in a way that is transparent. The present research examines this articulation of specific skills in relation to EPs' uses and methods of observation, and aims to answer the following research questions:

1) *Why do EPs carry out contextual observation?*
2) *How do EPs carry out contextual observation in their practice?*

Method

Design and Participant Recruitment

This study employed an in-depth survey utilising semi-structured interviews (Cohen et al., 2007; Kvale, 2007). Purposive and convenience methods were used to recruit a sample of six EPs across four EPSs in the North-West of England. To contextualise the analysis of data and enhance credibility, the authors considered participant background factors (see Table 1).

Table 1

Participant Background Information

EP	Training Provider	Professional Training	Years in Practice	Current Role	EPS Region
1	A	2005–2006	13 years	Main Grade EP	North-West
2	A	2006–2009	10 years	Main Grade EP	North-West
3	B	2008–2011	8 years	Senior EP	North-West
4	A	2012–2015	4 years	Main Grade EP	North-West
5	C	2014–2017	2 years	Main Grade EP	North-West
6	A	2015–2018	1 year	Main Grade EP	North-West

Data Gathering Methods

A bespoke analytic framework was utilised as an interview schedule. The first author piloted this interview schedule with a practising EP. All interviews were face-to-face and transcribed. There were six interviews in the final data set.

Data Analysis. Data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) model as a broad guide for thematic analysis. An inductive, data-driven approach was adopted allowing links between semantic themes and the data in order that the themes reflected the views and perspectives of the participants.

Findings

Why Do EPs Carry Out Contextual Observation?

It was found that contextual observation is used by EPs to gather and triangulate information gathered before and after observing the C/YP, to generate and test hypotheses and to assess the C/YP's functioning in their environment. All of these reasons contribute to a broad process of knowledge building in order to inform a holistic view of the C/YP. These findings are presented and discussed below.

Theme 1: To Gather and Triangulate Information

All six EPs referred to contextual observation as part of an information-gathering process alongside the referral information, consultation with school staff and parents/carers, discussion with other professionals involved with the child or young person (C/YP) and direct work with the C/YP. It was found across the data that EPs carry out contextual observation to gather information about the C/YP's functioning in their environment in order to be able to triangulate it with information collected before and after the contextual observation. EP5 said "I'll never just observe a child without having some form of consultation, it's never just a stand-alone exercise, I always have consultation either before or afterwards".

Using contextual observation as part of individual case work was common for all the EPs. Two EPs said that they also use contextual observation for whole classes or groups. Both EPs said that this is usually commissioned by the school with the purpose of observing class or group dynamics and interactions.

Theme 2: To Generate and Test Hypotheses

It was found that the information gathered during contextual observation helps the EP to identify exceptions to other information gathered during the involvement. Identification of exceptions is part of a process of testing hypotheses already generated from prior information, and also generating new ones, as the EP asks "why?" they are seeing something different, and then considering "so why was this different? Let's figure this out" (EP3). Generating and testing hypotheses is linked to triangulation. EP3 explained:

> What the parents and the teachers have provided you with is their overview of how they feel the child is most of the time and with the exceptions to that, so your information needs to feed in to see which bits match and which bits don't and why.

The data collected with regard to contextual observation being used to generate and test hypotheses further illuminates the finding that contextual observation is often one part of a broad information gathering process and that contextual observations are planned as an opportunity to generate and test hypotheses "I use the observation as part of [my] assessment to start testing some of the hypotheses that may have been generated from either the referral information or the initial consultation" (EP4).

Theme 3: To Assess the C/YP's Functioning in Their Environment

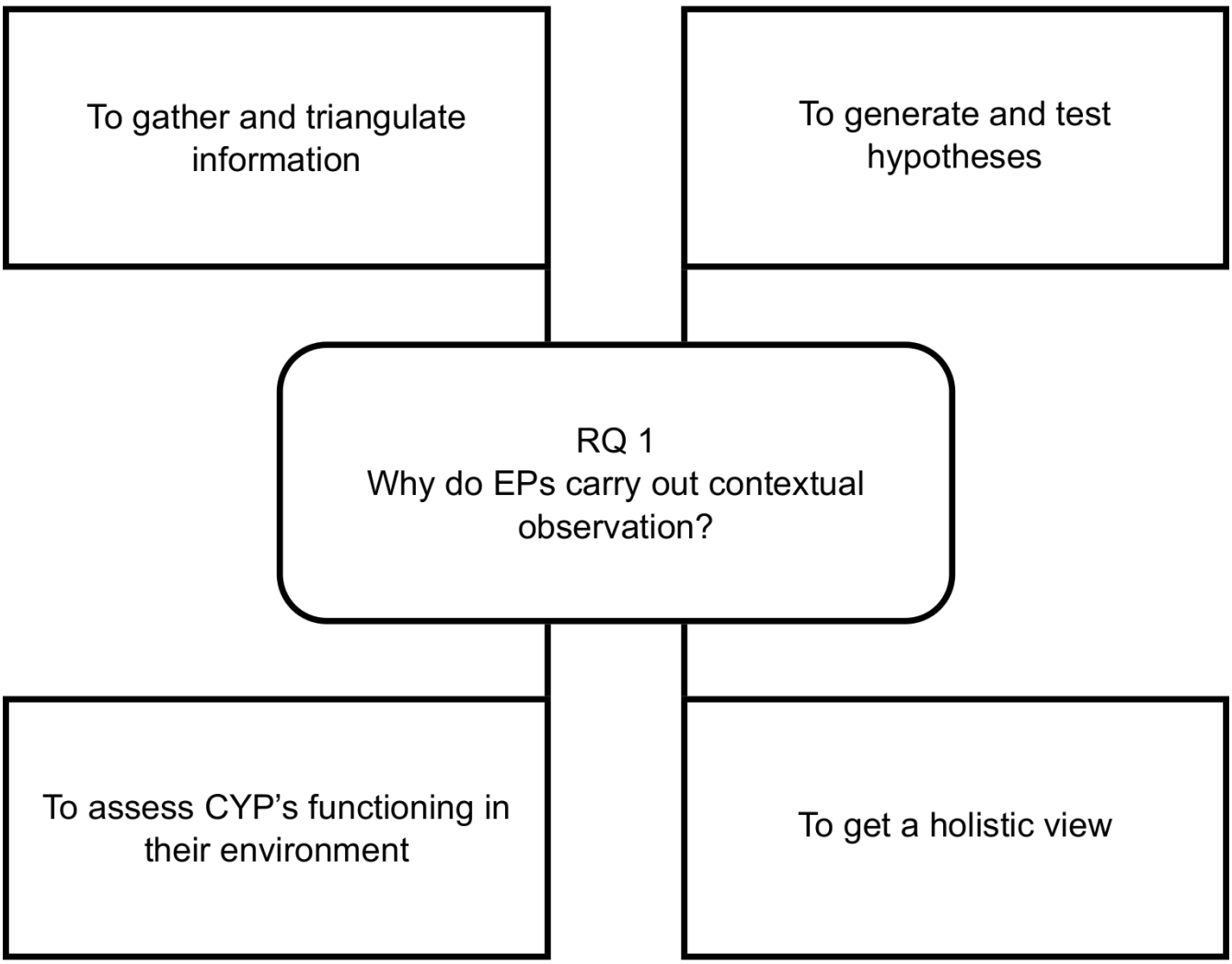
Three EPs referred specifically to "assessment" when talking about contextual observation, each describing it "as part" of their assessment. "Assessment" was also used in the context of "observation towards an Education, Health and Care Assessment" (EP6). It was found that all EPs use contextual observation to gather information about how the C/YP is functioning in their environment. All the EPs gave similar examples of what they look for when carrying out contextual observation. EP3's response was reflected across the data "where do the issues arise? Is it about interaction? Is it about, you know, particular approaches and how they respond? Is it about environment and whatever else?"

Theme 4: To Get a Holistic View

This theme illustrates further that contextual observation was found to be part of a broad process of knowledge building in order to get "an holistic view" and an "overall look" (EP5), and "a helicopter view" (EP6). EP2 said that the reason EPs take a holistic view is that "we are trained to look at the whole child". The use of "trained" (EP2) illustrates that the approaches that EPs take in their contextual observations of C/YP are not by chance. EP6 felt that "something that observation gives you that is quite unique... it allows you to see all those extraneous factors around the child". EPs reported that they often take a broad view of the C/YP during contextual observation, before carrying out direct work with C/YP at some point afterwards: "it's looking at everything that's happening to this young person, before just doing more direct work, which sort of narrows it down to the child, whereas observation gives you richer information" (EP5).

Figure 1

Thematic Map for the Themes Identified for the First Research Question



How Do EPs Carry Out Contextual Observation in Their Practice?

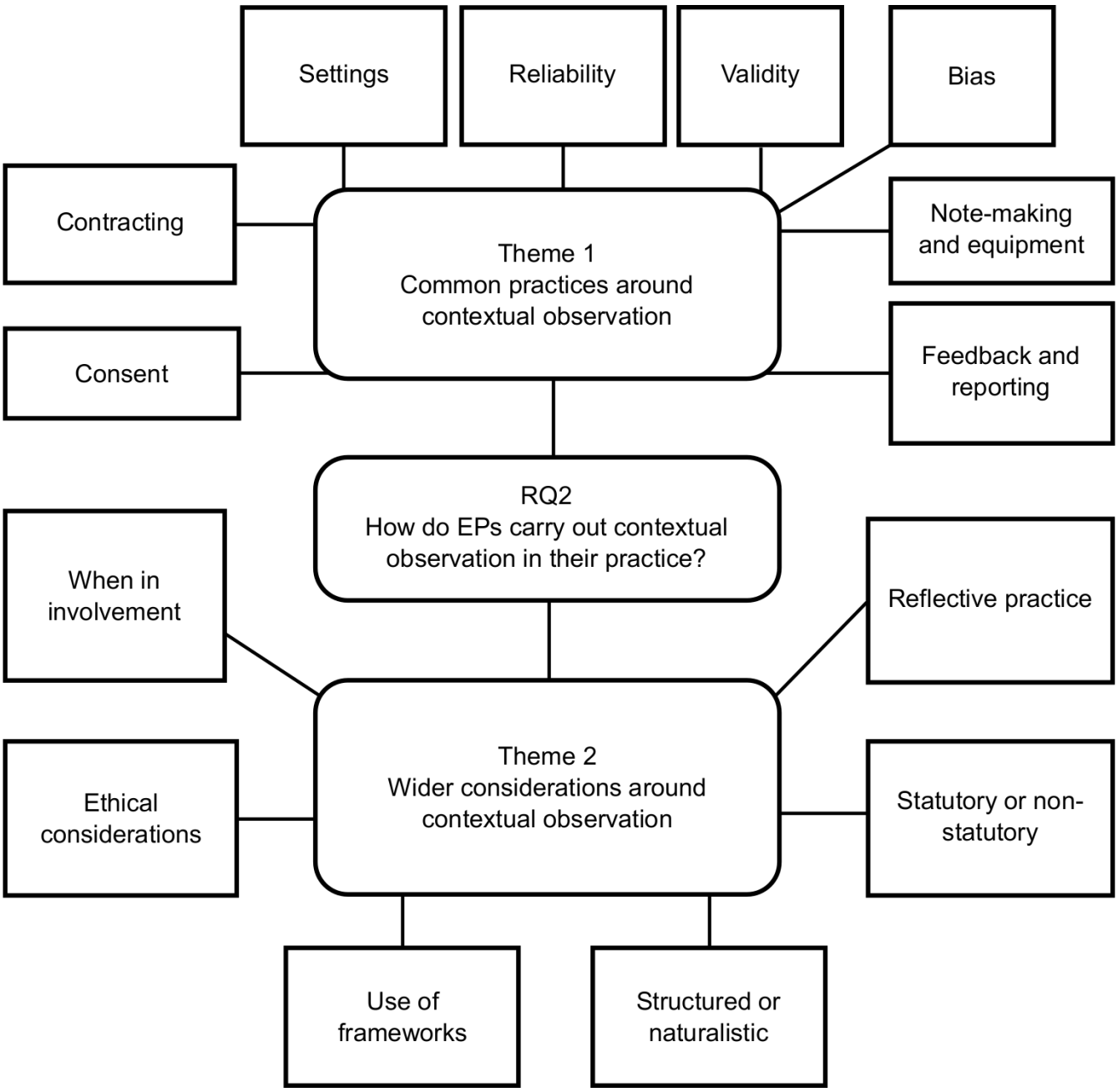
It was found that there are practices that all participants had in common in terms of how they carried out contextual observation or what they considered, these were things such as getting consent, contracting, and considering reliability and validity. There were also aspects that had variation between practice, such as when an EP carries out contextual observation, and what ethical considerations are made. All findings related to how EPs carry out contextual observation are presented and discussed below.

Theme 1: Common Practices Around Contextual Observation

Consent. All EPs said that they would obtain consent for being involved with a C/YP at the beginning of their involvement. All EPs mentioned parental consent, with one EP talking about obtaining consent for involvement directly from a young person if they were Gillick competent (EP4). Three EPs specifically mentioned that they obtain written consent relating to contextual observation. EP6 said that if their involvement was for a statutory assessment, then the consent given for that assessment to go ahead was also the consent for the EP to carry out the observation. The findings were not specific around whether the consent form, which is always signed at the beginning of the EP's involvement, specifically referred to the EP potentially carrying out con-

Figure 2

Thematic Map for the Themes and Subthemes Identified for the Second Research Question



textual observation, or whether it referred to a more general description of EP involvement that the parent or young person was agreeing to. Four EPs said that they have an initial consultation with parents and school staff before carrying out a contextual observation as part of non-statutory work, and the data indicates some overlap between consent and contracting in these instances, where contextual observation was discussed and agreed as a potential next step during an initial consultation with parents and school staff.

Further, if another C/YP, for whom there has not been a referral, comes to the EP's attention during the contextual observation the EP would inform the SENDCo as they would need parental consent to discuss the other C/YP. This is notwithstanding safeguarding concerns.

Contracting. The common findings were that all of the EPs contract their contextual observation and that this involves explaining the purpose of the contextual observation and making arrangements. All EPs said that they contracted the contextual observation before carrying it out, although there was variation as to with whom. Five EPs said that they would contract the observation during the initial consultation with whoever was present, and these EPs said that this is almost always parents, as well as staff. The findings showed that for these five EPs, contracting involved providing information about the purpose of the contextual observation, as well as making arrangements.

Settings and Contexts. One EP had carried out a contextual observation in a post-16 setting. One EP said that they had not carried out any contextual observation in a specialist setting. All of the EPs carried out contextualised observation in early years, primary and secondary settings as part of their day-to-day practice. EPs reported that their approach to contextual observation across settings is very similar, although two EPs said that secondary school contextual observation can be more difficult. This was due to the young people often being more socially aware, the movement between lessons and school staff impacting on the validity of the contextual observation as how a young person behaves in one lesson may be affected by factors such as their enjoyment of the subject or their dynamic with the teacher for example.

Across these settings, two EPs said that they always carry out contextual observation in more than one context, with the classroom and the playground being most popular. Four EPs said that they thought that observing across contexts is important, although whether they did so in practice depended on factors such as time. EP1 felt that it "depends on the need of the child. If they've got social difficulties, then I would absolutely try and observe them on the playground as well".

Reliability. A common finding was that EPs are mindful that what they see on one occasion may not be seen in the same way on a different occasion because of the variety of factors that could influence the C/YP and the observation setting. A common factor mentioned across the data was the effect of the presence of the observer. One EP said that they did not think that the presence of an EP was a unique influence; rather, the presence of anyone would cause an observer effect. For example, EP5 said "I think any type of involvement with the child is never going to be fully reliable because you're always having that impact on them". When talking about reliability, all EPs referred to triangulation "informing a broader perspective which also draws information from other places" (EP3).

EP6 explained how they approach reliability in contextual observation:

> Whatever the age of the child, I'd usually discuss my observation with the teacher and parents after I'd carried it out to check that the behaviours that I've seen are maybe typical or if they're not typical sometimes things are flagged that teachers go, "Oh yeah, we didn't think about that, maybe it's this instead".

The findings around reliability were found to overlap with those around triangulation, identification of exceptions and generating and testing hypotheses.

Validity. One EP suggested that all information gathered during contextual observation is valid in its own right, and triangulating it with information from other sources is vital for ascertaining how it contributes to the EP's psychological formulation. Broadly, the findings indicate that validity and reliability are not mutually exclusive of each other in the context of contextual observation, and may be directly linked to the wider interaction of the processes around contextual observation, those being information gathering and triangulation, identification of exceptions, and generating and testing hypotheses.

EP2 felt that whatever is observed,

> is an accurate snapshot of that moment in time and it gives you the information about that moment which is an experience that the child has had, and interactions that the child has had and usually there are themes from that which feed into information you've already got.

Bias. All EPs talked about the information that they had from the referral information, and/or consultation leading to a certain amount of bias. EP1 said that for them, this was "part of the consultation model" because they use contextual observation to explore the issues that those people around the C/YP are most concerned about. It was also found that what EPs look for is not always limited to finding evidence of the presenting issues in consultation; instead, they are open to seeing things that are exceptions. EP4 explained that,

> because I've been primed with that information I will be looking more in line with those hypotheses, but because I think we're trained to be scientist-practitioners, as much as I'm looking to confirm a hypothesis, I'm also looking to disconfirm it.

In addition, another EP explained that there are wider considerations of bias possibly relating to knowledge of the Local Authority and processes, the socio-economic status of an area and how these things impact upon families and the wider school context, and that there "is always a schema".

Four EPs talked about the need to be reflective, which involves having a conscious awareness of the bias they have, and actively looking more broadly during the contextual observation. The impact of having this reflective thought process was found to be that the EPs actively took a holistic

view. There was an acknowledgment of the importance of professional training shaping these responses to bias.

It was a common finding across the data that EPs felt strongly that they needed to have a holistic understanding of the C/YP, through the use of contextual observation alongside other sources of information and provides further evidence that contextual observation is part of a wider process of information gathering.

Note-Making and Equipment. All EPs said that they write their notes by hand. Some write long-hand using bullet points, others write down any key things that are said, verbatim. Some of the EPs also create codes for certain behaviours as part of a structured approach for an antecedent/behaviour/consequence observation (ABC observation; Dyer, 2013), for example. Another EP said that if they were using a checklist in a structured observation they would always have a paper copy.

It was also found that most EPs write their contextual observation notes onto a blank sheet of paper without any structured headings.

One EP referred to using video, in the context of Video Interactive Guidance (VIG; Kennedy et al., 2011), but not as a medium for capturing contextual observation. Video was not mentioned by any other participants.

Other than a pen and paper, the most common equipment that the EPs reported using was a clock in the classroom, and/or a timer for structured contextual observation.

Feedback and Reporting. Five out of six EPs said that they provide some feedback to the Special Educational Needs and Disability Coordinator (SENDCo) or class teacher immediately after the contextual observation. EP6 specifically mentioned feeding back to parents, usually the same day. EP4 said that they would not feedback following the contextual observation, but after they had collected any further information they felt they needed. What the EPs feed back includes differences between the consultation and what the EP had seen in the contextual observation, as well as "quite practical" things they felt the teacher could try to implement or change (EP1). In addition to verbal feedback, 2 EPs specifically report the contextual observation in written form for the school and parents.

Theme 2: Wider Considerations Around Contextual Observation

Timing of Contextual Observation. All EPs said that they carry out contextual observation in every piece of work although at different stages. Four EPs reported that it takes place after consultation. One EP reported that sometimes it will be prior to a consultation in order to aid their understanding of context during the consultation. One EP said that they were not prescriptive about where in the involvement it occurred, but they always carried out a contextual observation.

Ethical Considerations. All of the participants talked about ethical considerations relating to contextual observation. The first of these is whether to tell, or not tell, the C/YP that they are being observed. Four EPs said that they do not usually tell the C/YP that they have come to observe them

Times when the C/YP would be informed included if the EP was going to work directly with the C/YP after the contextual observation. Also, "children who need advanced warning for any kind of change in their environment are quite often pre-warned that there's going to be either someone coming into the classroom" (EP5).

One EP explained that if a young person was Gillick competent, then their permission would always be sought prior to the contextual observation. Age-appropriate child assent to the observation was highlighted, including indirect indications through child behaviour (e.g. seeming uncomfortable with the EP's presence) and the increased self-consciousness of many secondary school students.

EPs also described being considerate and talked about physically positioning themselves out of the C/YP's eye line in order to minimise intrusiveness.

All EPs said that when they first enter the setting, they do not want the C/YP to be pointed out so that they do not feel singled out. EPs 5 and 6 said that they ask a member of school staff to identify the C/YP before entering the classroom. EP6 felt that "observing is real skill because you've got to do it without looking as though you're focusing on one child, 'cause [*sic*] you don't want them to feel singled out".

Use of Frameworks. "Frameworks" as described by the EPs were not associated with carrying out a structured observation but rather as being tools for guiding information gathering about a wide range of factors relating to the C/YP. Examples given were materials from dynamic assessment, which prompted EPs to look for how the C/YP responds to teacher input and tasks. Another example was using some of the content of the Cognitive Assessment Profile (CAP; Deutsch & Mohammed, 2010), and another was the Interactive Factors Framework (IFF; Frederickson & Cline, 2002). EP5 referred to the IFF explicitly as a psychological framework that they also used after gathering information across the involvement, to help them "interpret that information alongside other sources". The four areas of need within the Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Code of Practice (Department for Education, Department of Health, 2014) were also cited as a framework, most often used in statutory work. Almost all EPs talked about having internalised frameworks such as these so that they are "embedded" (EP5) and "automatic" (EP1), with EP2 also saying "the more you do it, it's just in your head" (EP2). One EP referred to "mental schema" (EP3).

The findings, therefore, identified some differences between frameworks used during contextual observation as

tools to structure the gathering of the information, and those frameworks used afterwards to interpret that information.

Structured or Naturalistic. The data identifies that "structured" contextual observations were understood by most of the EPs to be quite narrow in focus, with the EP often having a specific hypothesis, often around a specific difficulty or area of difficulty.

EP4's explanation distinguished clearly between naturalistic and structured observation "I would like to observe the child during structured and unstructured times, that's more for my purpose of information gathering, but if I was to do a checklist in an observation, I would call that a structured observation".

Structured contextual observation was also understood to be defined by the use of approaches such as time sampling, event sampling, ABC observation, or a checklist. Some examples of checklists provided were the Conners (3rd ed.; Conners, 2008), Childhood Autism Rating Scale (Schopler et al., 2010), and specific criteria within The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (5th ed.; DSM-5; American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

It was also found that sometimes an EP may use both a naturalistic and a structured approach during the same contextual observation. EP5 recalled:

> I was doing a naturalistic observation and partway through, because I was seeing similar behaviours occur, I wanted to record this in more of a structured way, so I switched to an ABC approach just so I could unpick what had been happening before and afterwards.

Statutory and Non-Statutory Work. Four of the EPs identified some differences between contextual observation carried out as part of statutory work, and non-statutory work. The common difference was that EPs have a wider focus during statutory work with four EPs talking about using the SEND Code of Practice as a framework for structuring the information that they gather.

On the other hand, two EPs did not feel that there was any noticeable difference, because they were still using the contextual observation to gather information in order to work towards identifying the C/YP's needs.

Discussion

The EPs who took part in this study carried out contextual observation in order to gather and triangulate information from other sources, assess the C/YP's functioning in the observation setting, and generate and test hypotheses. This is done as part of a wider process of involvement to contribute to a professional view of the C/YP. The EPs were found to have a lot in common in how they carried out contextual observation, with very little variance reported between practices. There was found to be some variance within practice. The factors which caused this were those such as whether the contextual observation was part of statutory or non-statutory work, the presenting issues of the involvement which influenced the EPs' choice of framework guiding their information gathering, the decision to carry out a structured or naturalistic observation, as well as the age and wider understanding of the C/YP's ecological systems; at the centre of both the common practices, and the variances, were the C/YP, and the EPs' commitment to work in their best interests.

The findings captured that the EPs use contextual observation as part of the assessment of individual C/YP, with limited reporting of its use for group or whole-class observations, for example. The authors' review of the literature had identified this gap in the literature relating to the limited reporting of EP use of contextual observation in the individual assessment of C/YP.

Reported in the findings was that most of the EPs do not tell the C/YP that they will be observing them, unless they are Gillick competent, or for a reason pertaining to their social and emotional circumstances. This presents a contrast to other forms of EP assessment, where a C/YP would be asked explicitly if they would like to work with the EP, and would have the opportunity to withdraw consent. The reason given for not telling the C/YP why the EP is in the setting was to promote objectivity by reducing the impact of the observer's presence, and their influence on behaviours and environments in order to see the C/YP in their most natural context. At the same time, observer effects cannot be separated from considerations of reliability and validity, and there was some variance in the findings between EPs who felt that whatever was observed was valid, with changes to the C/YP's behaviours seen as an interesting exception, and those who felt that differences in the C/YP's behaviour could render the information gathered less valid for the purpose of the assessment. The latter view was less common, and there was particular emphasis from other EPs on not viewing an exception as an example of unreliable or invalid data, but rather as an important piece of information that needed to be considered in light of wider sources. As such, triangulation was viewed as very important by all the EPs, with consideration given to how the information gathered through contextual observation fits with that from other sources, and what it means for formulation in relation to the client C/YP. Speed (2019) cautioned against biased interpretations of contextual observation but this research has found that EPs do not interpret information from contextual observation without reference to other information, which includes talking to setting staff, parents and other professionals involved with the C/YP. This is also guided by training on reflective practice, which supports EPs to be mindful of their own bias and to use triangulation to check their understanding. This process of triangulation was widely reported to be linked to generating and testing hypotheses, illuminating the core reasons why EPs carry out

contextual observation.

The findings described how EPs may generate and test their hypotheses using contextual observation. It was generally found that the EPs developed an expectation of what they may see during the contextual observation based on prior consultation, and then considered how the information from contextual observation does or does not fit, and why this may be the case. Most of the EPs reported that they use "frameworks" to guide this information gathering, although these were mostly described as being internalised, having developed from professional practice experience. Notably, Kelly et al. (2008) highlight that schemata "evolve with experience" (p. 77) which is reflected in this research where EPs reported that with experience, frameworks become "automatic" (cf. Anderson et al., 1978). The same authors refer to the function of schemata within a hypothesis testing process and explain that schemata provide a means of organising, matching and checking information that is gathered. This perhaps goes some way to explain the previously reported vagueness, or opacity, around how contextual observation is carried out (Speed, 2019). It is acknowledged that further research would be useful to identify specific examples of the frameworks and theories that are internalised by EPs, which would provide even greater insight into how contextual observation is carried out. The EPs' explicit orienting of contextual observation within a hypothesis testing framework within this research brings contextual observation further into focus through a scientist-practitioner lens (Lane & Corrie, 2006).

This study highlights the breadth and depth of thought that is involved in the process of contextual observation and demonstrates that EPs are very mindful of associated limitations, and approach these with consideration for ethical practice. The interviews facilitated the participants' articulation of these issues and did not identify areas of thought that were novel for the participants; instead, it drew attention to the confidence with which the EPs were able to talk about why and how they carry out contextual observation. Some of the findings were aspects of practice that are naturally less explicit as they are concerned with the thought process of the EP. The guidelines make these processes explicit as well as communicable for training purposes. Incorporating the key findings from the analysis of EP interviews thereby provides practice-informed initial guidelines of considerations for best practice of contextual observation: initial Contextual Observation Guidelines (COG, appendix 1).

It is intended that the prompts within the initial COG are minimally directive, because the data identified some variance, and it is not the intention to remove autonomy in individual practice. Rather, it is the intention of this research to inform EPs through practice-based evidence and to make areas of practice in contextual observation such as consent, assent and contracting, use of frameworks, reliability and validity more explicit (Speed, 2019).

In relation to reliability and validity in particular, whilst it was not explicitly referenced in the interview dialogues, reflections on the analysis have led to the authors wondering about the use of the terms "reliability" and "validity" in relation to qualitative research, and whether there are potential limitations in using these terms for this purpose. For example, in order to meet the criteria for reliability in a quantitative research sense, several hours of observation data on a single C/YP may have to be gathered in order to be able to make claims around the reliability of the data, which is not a practical or feasible use of EP time. The authors propose that the terms "usefulness" and "trustworthiness" could be offered as alternative terms and considered in future related research by way of scoping whether these different constructions may be helpful in conceptualising and offering further guidance around developing useful and defensible practice of contextual observation.

The research reported here is small scale. Data analysis achieved a reasonable degree of saturation (cf. Braun & Clarke, 2021), and so the interview schedule was considered to be fit for purpose in facilitating the participants to talk about why and how they carry out contextual observation in their practice.

The interviews were carried out in geographically proximate areas, and three training providers were represented in the small sample. It is acknowledged that there are 13 educational psychology training providers in England, and so it is possible that those that were not included may have given their graduating practitioners a different orientation and skills set than the ones elicited within this study. It is suggested that any further research takes this into consideration during participant sampling.

Findings indicated that there are some areas that could be explored in greater detail, although the identified gaps were captured as explicit prompts in the initial COG, thus ensuring that those who use it would be guided to think explicitly about those things.

It is suggested that future research may also consider whether video capture more generally is used by EPs who did not take part in this research. This is particularly pertinent considering the adapted ways of working EPs are adopting in the current pandemic. This may have an influence on future practice in terms of "virtual" observations and video capture being adopted into every-day practice, and it will be important that the COG aligns with these approaches to contextual observation.

It is anticipated that EPSs may volunteer to trial the initial COG in order to identify how it could be further revised and refined, and where there may be any need for further research to clarify ambiguities. This would continue momentum towards the production of a final version of the COG that can be used across EPSs nationally and perhaps beyond, as well

as by providers of initial professional training programmes.

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