

Developing as a trainee educational psychologist: establishing the psychological contract)

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Abstract

There are two significant components of the three-year full-time doctoral programme required to train as an educational psychologist (EP) in England. These are the university-based academic component and the educational psychology (EP) service-based practice component. The purpose of this paper is to outline the 'psychological contract' to help understand the psychology of starting the bursary placement in the second year of the programme. Establishing the psychological contract is a concept that comes from organisational psychology to explain the dilemmas that face anyone starting a new job. Essentially it suggests that employees go through three stages of adaptation before they reach 'nirvana' – where there is mutual acceptance between the trainee educational psychologist (TEP) and the EP service. Strategies for moving through the three stages are outlined based on practical examples from trainees. Establishing the psychological contract is particularly relevant for understanding the psychological tasks that face a TEP starting their placement.

Keywords

Psychological Contract, Bursary Placement, Supervision, Trainee Educational Psychologists.

Introduction

To train as an educational psychologist (EP) in England you have to undertake a three-year full-time doctoral training programme. The first year is largely based at the university. However, in the second and third year, trainee educational psychologists (TEPs) have bursary placements in educational psychology services (EP services). One key issue for developing as an effective TEP is establishing a good working relationship with your EP service – as well as the schools you are working in. This paper provides an outline of the psychological contract that you need to establish on your bursary placements.

It is divided into two sections:

1. Understanding the psychological contract
2. Developing the psychological contract with your supervisor, EP service and schools

Understanding the psychological contract

The psychological contract is a concept developed by organisational psychologists (for an overview of the development of the concept see Coyle-Shapiro & Parzefall 2008). This paper is largely based on Schein's (1988)

conceptualisation and the developments by Rousseau (1989, 1995, 2001). Edgar Schein (1988) used the term psychological contract to explain the unwritten set of expectations that develop between a manager and the employee in any organisation. An employee is likely to have a written formal contract detailing basic conditions of service, such as times for work, rates of pay, sick leave arrangements and entitlement to holidays. Schein suggests that there is also an unwritten psychological contract. This consists in the expectations that the employee has of the organisation (represented by the manager) and that the manager has of him/her. It is an unspoken agreement between two people. At the most fundamental level it is likely to include expectations on the part of the employee that they will be treated fairly, and on the part of the manager that the employee will enhance the image of the organisation.

For trained and employed EPs there is a formal contract between themselves and their local authority, or other employer. The formal contract is enshrined in the EP's job description and is to do with the responsibilities of the post and the conditions of service. The formal contract is one of the bases for the delivery of services to schools. (However, it is likely the informal contract that is developed between the school and the EP is more important when it comes to actually delivering services.)

For a TEP starting their bursary the position is not even this clear – for either the EP service or the TEP. The new Practice Placement Partnership Framework (2013) is designed to clarify the expectations and responsibilities of the TEP, the placement provider and the university (p. 4). However, there is a lot less detail in this than in a formal employment contract.

In addition, the new process for obtaining bursaries excludes part of the mechanism that is usually the foundation of the psychological contract. Normally employees go through an interview process the culmination of which is being offered a job. The system for TEPs is rather like a blind date, with neither the service nor the TEP choosing the other (though the TEP does indicate which services they feel they can travel to). Therefore that really important part of the initial process where the TEP indicates that they want to go to a particular service and the service accepts them is missing. (I am not arguing for a return to this system since in reality it was for both parties a lot more pragmatic than this. I am simply stating that this was an important component of developing the psychological contract.)

Despite the absence of a formal employment contract the EP service will have an expectation about the role the TEP will play. This is certainly likely to include the expectations about what services you should provide to schools and general procedure about how these services should be provided. The EP service's expectations about what the

TEP might offer could include the assessment of individual pupils' abilities, providing a consultation to special educational needs coordinators (SENCOs) and parents and advice on emotional and behavioural difficulties. How they are provided could relate to time-contracted work in schools, the writing of reports and meetings with parents.

Schools will also have expectations about the procedure surrounding a TEP's work (which is likely to be the same as for their regular EP). This may include who the EP should communicate with, how often the EP should visit, and how information should be fed back. They may also have some unspoken expectations about how the TEP should actually do their job (e.g., the use of psychometric tests, undertaking classroom observations, consulting with individual teachers and meeting parents). Different EP services, different supervisors and different schools will have different expectations about what services should be delivered, and how, by the TEP.

However, the TEPs may also have expectations about the EP service and the schools. These may include expectations about the work (e.g., how children should be included or what support should be given to a pupil with English as an additional language). It may also include expectations about how the EP service and schools should treat the TEP. These may be relatively trivial things from schools, like being offered a cup of coffee and a place to hang your coat, as well as more important factors such as the SENCO not running down the EP service or another support service in public. From the EP service the TEP may have expectations about the level of support they receive (e.g., for writing reports).

Some EP services are now moving to more formal contracts with schools because of traded services. However, even with traded services most of the expectations are not written in formal contracts but are the unspoken expectations of both the EP service and school about what is reasonable. It is important to remember that even as traded services develop and contracts become more formal and include a costing element, it will still be the unspoken psychological contract that will determine the effectiveness of the EP service, and the TEP's work.

Denting the psychological contract

The importance of the psychological contract is understanding that EP services, and schools, have unspoken expectations about how the TEP should behave – as you have of them. As long as these expectations mesh then the relationships will function effectively – each side acknowledging the other's role. However, it is when the psychological contract is dented, often described as breached or violated, that problems arise (Morrison & Robinson 1997). Contract breaches are a cognitive awareness that one of the expectations has not been fulfilled, whereas contract violations include a component of emotional distress – a feeling of anger or betrayal if a promise has not been kept. For example, the school may expect that part of a psychological assessment is undertaking a psychometric test. If the TEP does not do this, the psychological contract is breached. On the other hand if the TEP had promised to respond immediately to a phone call for advice to a parent and you do not respond, then the contract can be seen to be violated – as an agreement has been broken.

From your perspective if you have assessed a child, recommended a certain course of action and found that the school has not even read the report, let alone implemented

the plan, then once again the psychological contract will be breached. On the other hand if you hear the supervisor running down your training course the contract may be violated as you may have an emotional reaction to this event.

If the psychological contract is sufficiently dented, by either breaches or violations, then it will break and the relationship which holds together the effectiveness of the TEP to schools, and the EP service, will be lost. A broken psychological contract can often be recognised by a lack of communication, and by emotional strain, between the TEP and some of the people they are working with.

Not only but also an individual matter

The psychological contract will be affected by the state of the EP service and of the schools. A failing school with falling rolls will have very different expectations to a new academy with a new dynamic head. The psychological contract will also be based on past experiences – for example the TEPs from UEL they have had on previous bursaries.

To further complicate matters, the psychological contract is not simply between the EP service, or a school, and a TEP but rather between individuals and the TEP. Clearly the psychological contract between you and your supervisor is crucial. In addition, the psychological contract between you and the SENCOs in the schools you visit is particularly important.

The psychological contract is partly based on the individual TEP's needs in terms of self-concept and the need for recognition. It may also be related to such factors as the time of life of the individuals involved: a new supervisor with a very experienced TEP will have a very different relationship to that between an experienced supervisor nearing retirement and a very inexperienced TEP. Other reflexivity factors may also enter the psychological contract as well as age, such as gender, sexual orientation, race and culture – as well, of course, as perceived class.

Developing the psychological contract with EP services

The psychological contract that you develop with your supervisor and schools is not fixed but develops over time. The dynamic nature of the contract means there are strategies you can use to strengthen it – or dent it. Schein (1988) suggests that an individual goes through three stages when developing a psychological contract with an organisation. These can be adapted to illustrate the stages that a TEP on their bursary goes through. These three stages are:

- I. Induction
- II. Socialisation
- III. Mutual acceptance

For each of the stages there are a series of tasks that the TEP must undertake. These are described in this paper in terms of developing the psychological contract with your supervisor. However, they can as easily be applied, with some slight modification, to developing your psychological contract with schools.

Stage one – Induction

Tasks at the induction stage for the new TEP

The tasks at the induction stage are to share the unspoken expectations about the TEP, and the EP service. The difficulty here is to make a match between your needs and the needs of the service.

Task 1: You need to have developed a realistic assessment of the skills and knowledge you have and the services that you can offer. This will vary from TEP to TEP and depend on previous experiences, both before coming on the training course and over the first year and your own personal skills and self-concept. Completion of the Professional Record of Proficiency (PROP) at the end of Year 1 should help you in this process.

Task 2: You need to accurately communicate these skills but also your own values and needs in terms of training opportunities. Communication of values around inclusion, social justice and diversity may be particularly difficult, but essential if your supervisor is to understand you. Needs in terms of training opportunities should be based on UEL requirements and should not be unspoken.

Task 3: You need to accurately diagnose the supervisor's and school's expectations from partial and often contradictory information. EPs and schools may have different expectations about what you should be doing as a TEP. Understanding these differences is central to this task.

Task 4: You need to listen to the values and needs of your supervisor (and other key people in the service such as the principal) and make a match with your own position.

Strategy at the induction stage – understanding expectations

In order to develop the psychological contract, you need to develop and shape an understanding of the EP service. This should consider what you can do before you start in September, which might include phone calls, meetings and some written means of communication. This strategy then needs to extend into the first few weeks of placement – on your induction period. Some services offer a formal induction process which may be spread out over a number of days. Other services will leave this process to your supervisor.

Each move that you make, each question that you ask, is simultaneously giving you knowledge and shaping your supervisor's perception of you. It is important to remember that this is not a win/lose strategy but a win/win. You are not trying to gain an advantage but to develop a strong psychological contract.

Key steps for your strategy to develop are:

1. What 'knowledge' does the supervisor have about you?

For example:

- Do they know what you did before you came on the training course?
- Do they know your interests – personal, professional?
- Do they know your life circumstances?
- Do they know where you were on placement in Year 1?
- Do they know about the UEL course?

2. What meaning do various words have for your supervisor?

For example:

- Assessment, Consultation, Intervention, Therapy
- Inclusion, Special Educational Needs
- Supervision, Advocacy

It is particularly important to understand the frameworks that your supervisor uses in terms of assessment and consultation.

3. What is 'critical' to your supervisor at this time?

For example:

- What does the supervisor talk about: referrals, schools, the service, the local authority?
- Do they have a specialist interest or role in the service?

4. How does the service hang together?

For example:

- Who are the linking pins and opinion leaders?
- Who do they suggest you talk to/shadow?
- Who (what schools) do they warn you about?

5. How do decisions get made?

For example:

- Does the supervisor allow you to do things differently?
- Do they suggest they/you take issues to the senior/principal?
- Who OKs your research?

The purpose of the above strategy is to understand the shadow as well as the formal side of the EP service. The shadow side is not negative – it is simply the areas that are not usually discussed – they are in the shadow. The strategy does not intend to imply that some ways of doing things are better than others – that is a completely separate issue and goes directly against the purpose of this paper which is to strengthen the psychological contract.

Stage two – Socialisation

Tasks at the socialisation stage for the TEP

The first few months of work as a TEP can be exciting and interesting – they can also be traumatic. It is important to remember that it is the same with most jobs (remember the first few months as a teaching assistant, or teacher or community support worker). This socialisation phase has been called 'reality shock' as it's the first time you really have to confront the gap between one's 'espoused theory', what is said about being an EP, and 'theory in practice', how one actually has to work as a TEP (and as an EP). The tasks at this stage are coming to grips with reality.

Task 1: You need to accept the reality of other people's limitations. EPs and teachers can be just as unmotivated, illogical, angry and careless as you can be!

Task 2: You need to deal with resistance to change. For instance, it can be particularly frustrating, having worked all weekend to come up with a solution to a problem, to find the teacher not interested or your supervisor wanting you to rewrite your report.

Task 3: You need to learn how to work in terms of coping with too much, or too little, organisation, and too much, or too little, job definition. Though most TEPs like freedom, the ambiguity of many situations, the lack of policy and guidelines or the lack of supervision can be very stressful.

Task 4: You need to learn how to cope with too much, or too little, work. Usually the issue is too much work; however, you need to learn that the work will always fill the time available – including some time in the evenings and at weekends. There is always another paper to read, or some tidying up of a report that can be done to fill the time and to reduce anxiety.

Task 5: You need to locate your place in the service. This includes finding out who it is comfortable to talk to, who to get advice from and who to have a drink with (they may well not be the same people).

Task 6: You need to develop an identity by demonstrating what you are good at. However, this can be very scary as it means someone will be looking at your work.

Strategy at the socialisation stage – negotiating the ‘balanced ticket’

Negotiating and developing a more explicit understanding of some of the unspoken assumptions is one strategy for strengthening the psychological contract. A useful way of conceptualising this is the development of a ‘balanced ticket’, as described by Foxet al. (1990), when working with schools.

In essence this requires a number of strategic steps revolving around meeting with your supervisor where you agree on the activities that you will carry out. This starts with the September three-way meeting between supervisor, TEP and academic and professional tutor but should become part of your thinking over the two years of placement.

Key steps for your strategy to develop are:

Time: Agree a symbolic starting point (the beginning of each term, the end of each term?)

Formal: Make it more formal than your normal supervision (e.g., complete PROP, review the observations)

Clarify: How can the time be divided between the various placement activities and the contracts/expectations of schools?

Listen: What does the supervisor think is the most effective way to complete the activities?

Negotiate: What are your priorities. How do they fit with the services?

Agree: ‘Balanced ticket’ to use the time to meet schools, services and your priorities.

Record: Keep accurate record of how you spend your time

Review: At next formal meeting

Negotiating a balanced ticket is not only a key to developing the psychological contract, it is also essential to developing as a practitioner. If you are to develop practitioner-based evidence, you need to develop your understanding of what you do and whether it is effective. Being open and reflective with your supervisor is the beginning of this process.

Stage three – Mutual acceptance

Recognising the stage of mutual acceptance

The third stage of developing the psychological contract – ‘nirvana’ – is when there is mutual acceptance between you as the TEP and the EP service. There are a number of crucial events that symbolise the service’s acceptance of you as being a ‘proper EP’. Your supervisor may:

1. Give you positive feedback – especially reinforcing if also given in public
2. Invite you to take on new roles and responsibilities
3. Share with you service secrets:
 - Developments – things that are going to happen (e.g., new posts)
 - What others really think of you
 - How things really work – key people in the local authority
 - What really happened about historical events?

The sharing of secrets helps rationalise why things work in the service the way they do. The importance of sharing service secrets, psychologically, is that once shared they cannot be taken away – it means that you are trusted.

4. Invite you to functions where staff are out of role (e.g., a personal party)

Strategy at the mutual acceptance phase: ‘building relationships’

One strategy for getting to ‘nirvana’ is to remember that the psychological contract is a two-way process. If you can recognise your supervisor’s trust by the above points then you can strengthen the psychological contract by building the relationship with the supervisor.

You can:

1. Give the supervisor positive feedback, especially when they have made a significant effort to help you. Let them know how you are going to let the UEL programme team know how helpful they have been.
2. Share new material and ideas with the supervisor. Let them know of opportunities to link with the programme (e.g., Xmas Conference).
3. Share secrets with the supervisor. What is the course really like? What are your worries about becoming an EP? (I am not suggesting breaking confidences about people but rather the sharing of valuable unspoken information that can give the supervisor insight into your world).
4. Invite the supervisor to... coffee, a drink, shopping, a party?

There are clear ethical boundaries in the above process, related to power issues. These need to be kept in mind and not transgressed. However, implicit in developing the psychological contract is understanding the psychological relationship that you have with your supervisor and the other people you are working with.

Conclusions

The paper describes the various stages a TEP has to go through to build a sound psychological contract with their supervisor. It describes some strategies to help move through this process. There are also strategies that the training provider can put in place. TEPs will develop initial

expectations about their bursaries before they are started. Some of these expectations will be shaped by the tutor team as well as TEPs who have been through the process. Research has show that it is at this early stage that expectations can be changed – before they are fully formed (Tekleab & Taylor 2003). Starting the bursary can be stressful both for the TEP and the supervisor. It is important to remember that there will often be unfinished business both literally and metaphorically between the supervisor and the TEP. This may relate to:

- how they were chosen to be your supervisor
- their previous experiences of being a supervisor (and being supervised)
- their knowledge of the programme
- their impressions of you.

On top of that, they will have their own pressures at work and at home. Recognising all this helps prevent you from seeing yourself as the centre of the universe. There are always a whole range of hidden agendas – the shadow side of this service. The essence of this paper is find out about these agendas and to get them into the open where they can be dealt with in a mature fashion. It is better to share expectations, values and attitudes, even when they are not in harmony, than be made to feel pressured and helpless by what you do not understand. Establishing a sound psychological contract is a particular challenge for TEPs starting their bursary, but it is also an issue throughout your career – there is work to be done every time you join a new service or take over some new schools. Use your psychology – become empowered and make a difference

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