

Assistants in Educational Psychology Services Who are they and what do they do?

DEBRA HARLAND, KATE KITCHINGMAN AND SOPHIE ELDER

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Authors: Kate Kitchingman, Debra Harland and Sophie Elder – Assistant Educational Psychologists at Gateshead Psychological Service.

Introduction

Within Educational Psychology Services (EPSs), the practice of employing assistants is increasingly common. In an environment where there is a high demand for services, assistant posts offer EPSs the opportunity to enhance their offer and increase capacity (Woodley-Hume & Woods, 2019a). Some services employ assistants with the longer-term goal of attracting post-holders back following doctoral training (Lyonette, Atfield, Baldauf & Owen, 2019). For assistants, the posts offer an insight into the role of the Educational Psychologist (EP), opportunities to deepen their understanding of the application of psychology and potentially an advantage when applying for university training courses (Woodley-Hume & Woods, 2019b).

Across the UK, assistant posts in EPSs vary in title, remuneration, role and responsibilities, and there is a lack of clarity and consensus around their remit. Roles are dynamic and may be negotiated on an individual basis, however, where the role of the assistant is unclear, previous studies highlight pitfalls such as the conflation of the role of the EP and the assistant (Monsen, Brown, Akthar & Khan, 2009), potential for this to lead to a devaluation of the profession (Collyer, 2012) and a risk of under- or over-expectation of assistants (Woodley-Hume & Woods, 2019a).

Previous research in England has been small scale, focused on a limited number of local authorities, or pre-dates current legislation and training routes. The absence of a large-scale study may contribute to the difficulty in establishing a consensus on the role of the assistant.

For existing and prospective assistants, a lack of awareness of employment conditions may be detrimental given the variations in job titles, salaries and responsibilities within a highly competitive context where posts typically have a large number of applicants who are eager to gain experience to enhance applications for university training courses (Woodley-Hume & Woods, 2019a). Greater transparency would aid individual decision making and empowerment.

Finally, the lack of data on the demographics of assistants as a discrete section of the educational psychology workforce hampers action around equality, diversity and inclusion. Inclusion and diversity concerns within the educational psychology workforce are ongoing. As assistant posts may be viewed as an entry point into the profession, an awareness of diversity and of potential barriers to the profession at this stage may contribute to these wider conversations.

The present research aimed to address the above gaps in knowledge and provide a broader view of assistant roles in Educational Psychology contexts in England. It explored who assistants are, their working conditions, roles and responsibilities.

Method

The research involved an online survey of assistants working in educational psychology contexts in England. In the absence of a framework specific to assistants, questions relating to activities within the role were created based on the core functions of the EP according to the matrix in the Currie report (Scottish Executive, 2002). Although not ideal, the researchers deemed this to be appropriate, as it covered responsibilities detailed in previous research and reflected discussions at national assistant network meetings.

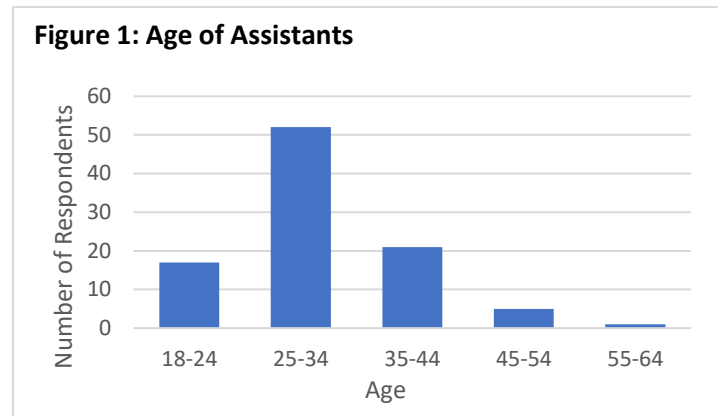
The survey was publicised via the EdPsy website, Twitter, Facebook, Association of Educational Psychology (AEP) emails and an established assistant network mailing list between May and July 2022. It received 96 responses.

Ethical approval was granted by the Principal EP at Gateshead Psychological Service. Data were anonymous and consent was explicitly sought and given by all participants.

Demographics of Assistants

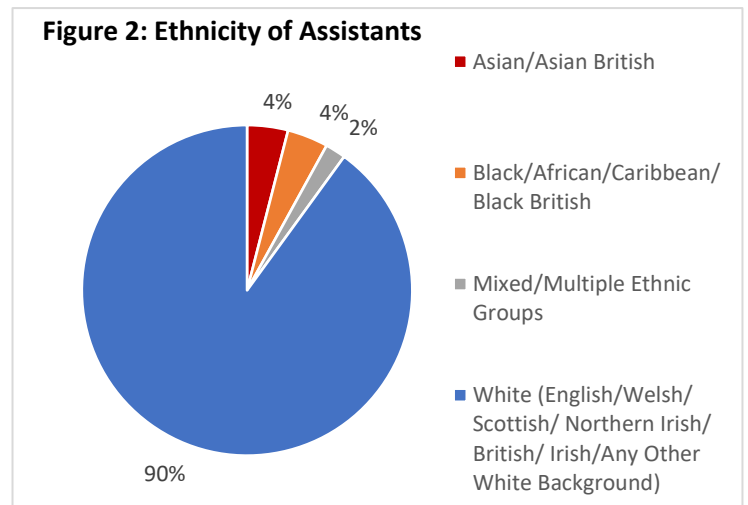
Age

54% of respondents were aged 25-34 and 18% were 18-24. The Association of Educational Psychologists members survey (AEP, 2021) reported only 19% of the wider educational psychology workforce was aged 25-34; the majority was aged 35-54. This potentially reflects the time taken to qualify as an EP. Assistant roles are often seen as a step towards doctoral training, therefore may attract people at the start of their careers who are generally younger.



Ethnicity

90% of assistants reported their ethnicity as White, 4% as Asian/ Asian British, 4% as Black/ African/ Caribbean/ Black British and 2% as Mixed/ Multiple ethnic groups. Our data echoes reports commenting on the under-representation of certain ethnic groups within the educational psychology workforce; the AEP (2021) reported 86% of the wider workforce as White, 2% as Asian/ Asian British, 4% as Black/ African/ Caribbean/ Black British, 4% as Mixed/ Multiple Ethnic groups, 2% as Other ethnic group/ national. Within our sample, there is an under-representation of people of Mixed/ Multiple ethnic groups and an over-representation of people with a White background compared to data on the wider workforce and 2011 census data as reported by the AEP (2021).



Disability

91% of respondents did not consider themselves to have a disability, 6% did and 3% preferred not to say. This data is similar to that gathered by the AEP (2021). Within the UK population, 21% of working-age adults have a disability (Kirk-Wade, 2022). Although there may be some variation in definitions of disability, our data suggests that there is an under-representation of disabled people within the assistant workforce.

Allsopp and Avila (2021) explore some of the barriers to the profession for disabled people and highlight difficulty accessing postgraduate qualifications, the connection between disability and socio-economic barriers and lack of promotion of the educational psychology career route to

disabled people, alongside practical inaccessibility, for example heavy test kits, travel to different settings and impractical seats in classrooms. These are some of the barriers to the profession that should be considered universally in light of the British Psychology Society Declaration on equality, diversity and inclusion (BPS, 2020) and the Equality Act (2010).

Gender

95% of respondents identified as women¹. This mirrors the proportion of female applicants for doctoral training places which was 90% in 2021 (AEP, n.d.) and the wider workforce which is 86% female (AEP, 2021). This could partly be explained by the fact that 80% of undergraduates on psychology courses are female (UCAS, 2019). However, literature suggests that there is growing gender disparity across the profession (Lyonette et al., 2019).

Sexual Orientation

88% of respondents described their sexual orientation as heterosexual, 7% bisexual, 1% gay man, 3% gay woman/lesbian, 1% other and 1% preferred not to say. These results are comparable to those gathered in the AEP member survey (AEP, 2021).

Working Conditions

Job titles

Various assistant posts exist within EPSs. 77 respondents to our questionnaire held the title 'Assistant Educational Psychologist' (AsEP), 16 'Assistant Psychologist' (AP), 1 'Lead AP' and 2 'Psychology Assistant'. Anecdotal reports from assistant network meetings suggest that typical responsibilities do not always vary according to job title, although salaries often do. 71.9% of assistants were paid in line with Soulbury scales: 84.4% of AsEPs, compared with 21.1% of those with a different title. Salaries in assistant job advertisements vary significantly, with some assistant posts offering less than others. One respondent reported feeling 'exploited' within their role due to concerns around pay and commented that the 'assistant psychologist role should be protected'.

Table 1: Assistant Job Titles

Job title	<i>N</i>	%
Assistant Educational Psychologist (AsEP)	77	80%
Assistant Psychologist (AP)	16	17%
Lead Assistant Psychologist	1	1%
Psychology Assistant (PA)	2	2%

Length of Contract

We were interested in the length of employment assistants were offered. 52% of initial contracts for assistant roles were 1 year or less, with 76% 2 years or less. Whilst this aligns somewhat to recommendations that AsEPs should not be in post beyond 4 years (Soulbury Committee, 2019), it might have a negative impact in terms of encouraging diversity; insecure posts may constitute a barrier to the profession.

¹ We used the terms woman and man to report respondent's gender, in line with APA guidance. AEP data on gender is reported in their research using the terminology male/female.

Table 2: Length of Contract of Assistants

Length of initial contract	<i>N</i>	%
5/6 months	6	6%
1 year	44	46%
1.5 years	4	4%
2 years	19	20%
Permanent	23	24%

Responsibilities

Based on conversations within assistant networks, we were aware of significant variation in the tasks assistants undertake as part of their roles. We hoped to explore this through our research. Our questions aimed to map directly onto the core functions of the Currie Matrix (Scottish Executive, 2002) to illustrate the activities assistants completed.

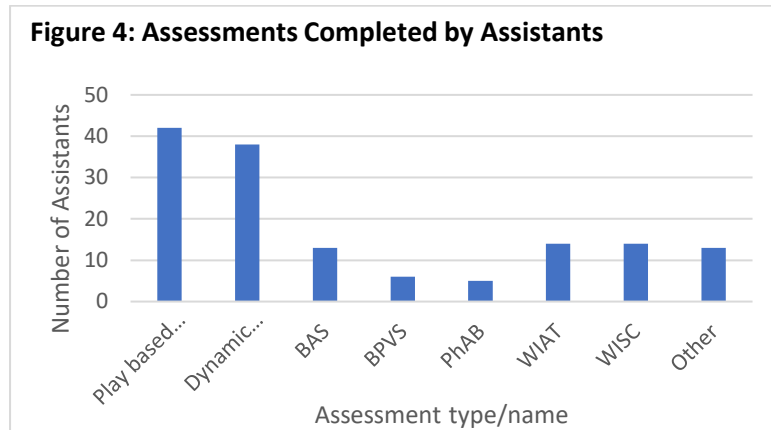
69% of assistants gained experience in all five functions of the Currie matrix (Training, Consultation, Intervention, Assessment and Research); 73% of AsEPs and 53% of APs gained experience in all five areas. The most common function that was not undertaken by AsEPs and APs was research. This contrasts with previous studies which found that most assistants contributed to research (Woodley-Hume & Wood, 2019b).

The most common activities completed by assistants were training for school staff, observations and consulting with school staff. Over 90% of respondents indicated this was part of their role. Figure 3 illustrates the range of activities assistants undertake.

Figure 3: Activities undertaken by assistants

Activities undertaken by assistants	<i>N</i>	%
Training for school staff	89	93
Observations	89	93
Consulting with school staff	88	92
Collecting children and young people's views	82	85
Participating in review meetings/planning meetings	77	80
Holding discussions with parents	74	77
1-2-1 therapeutic work with children and young people	70	73
Group work with children and young people	70	73
Dynamic/play based assessment	57	59
Contributing to school initiatives/curricula	54	56
Contributing to local authority initiatives	53	55
Research -Local authority level	53	55
Action research/case study	52	54
Training for parents/carers	50	52
Training for CYP	41	43
Contributing to school policy/procedures	36	38
Standardised assessment	36	38
Providing advice/support to local authority teams e.g. Virtual School	35	37
Training for local authority	32	33
Research -regional/national level	9	9

We also explored the type of assessments assistants administered. Primarily, assistants completed play-based or dynamic assessment. However, over a third of assistants ($N=36$) administered standardised or psychometric assessments e.g., BAS, WISC, WIAT. One respondent was concerned that they did not have sufficient training to complete standardised assessments. Previous literature suggests this is a contentious subject (Woodley-Hume and Wood, 2019a).



Respondents were asked whether there were other activities that were part of their role. One common activity was ‘admin’; several assistants reported being responsible for administrative tasks such as room bookings, note taking and gathering data. Other activities included ‘attending local authority SEND panels representing the EPS’, ‘report writing’ and ‘providing statutory advice’. This highlights the scope and variation in the role.

We asked respondents about their involvement in casework. Previous research highlighted debates around whether casework is within the competence and remit of assistants (Collyer, 2012; Monsen et al., 2009). In our study, 51 assistants said they had full individual responsibility for casework with EP oversight, 38 supported EPs with casework and 7 did no casework. When analysed by job title, 57% of AsEPs and 41% of APs had individual responsibility for casework, 36% of AsEPs and 53% of APs supported EPs with casework and the proportion who did no casework was the same in both roles (6%).

Table 3: Levels of Responsibility for Casework by Job Title

	AsEP	AP	PA	Total
Full individual responsibility for casework with EP oversight	44 (57%)	7 (41%)	-	51 (53%)
Support EPs with their casework	28 (36%)	9 (53%)	1 (50%)	38 (40%)
Don't do casework	5 (6%)	1 (6%)	1 (50%)	7 (7%)

Workload

Given the pressures on EPSs as a result of increased statutory work and a national shortage of EPs (Lyonette et al., 2019), we felt it was important to consider the workloads of assistants. 40% reported having a heavy workload (responses included ‘heavy but manageable’ and ‘unmanageable’). Of these respondents 97% felt their level of workload reflected the situation in their whole service. This points to a wider issue within EPSs, as heavy workloads may have implications for staff wellbeing.

Career Progression

Prior Experience

Assistant roles often require a minimum of one year's relevant experience. 50% of respondents had over five years' experience prior to their role.

Doctorate places

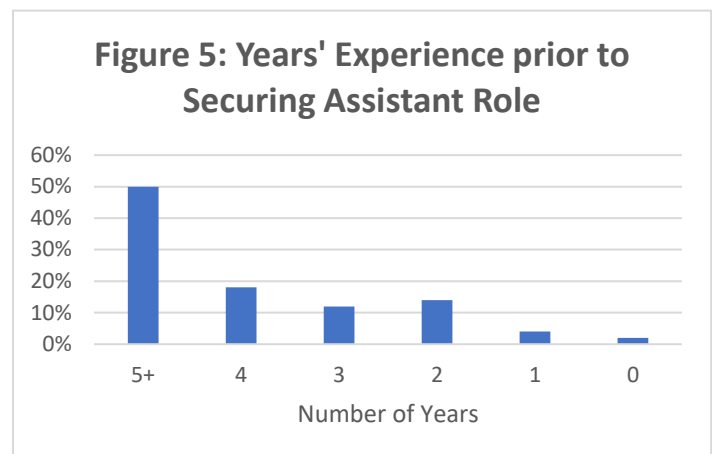
The Soulbury report (2019) suggests that 'local authorities who employ Assistant Educational Psychologists should take positive action to ensure that these employees achieve qualified status as soon as possible'. 91% of assistants were encouraged by their employer to apply for doctoral training courses and 47% had a place on courses beginning in 2022. This suggests that EPSs are committed to the current training model and continue to view assistant roles as temporary and as opportunities to upskill and prepare candidates for doctoral training. Given the total overall success rate for courses in 2021 was 17% (AEP, n.d.) this also highlights the advantages the role offers applicants, although assistant experience is not essential for further training.

Favourite aspects of the role

Within our research we wanted to capture some of the tasks assistants enjoyed as part of their roles. We used thematic analysis to interpret the responses and established three strong themes.

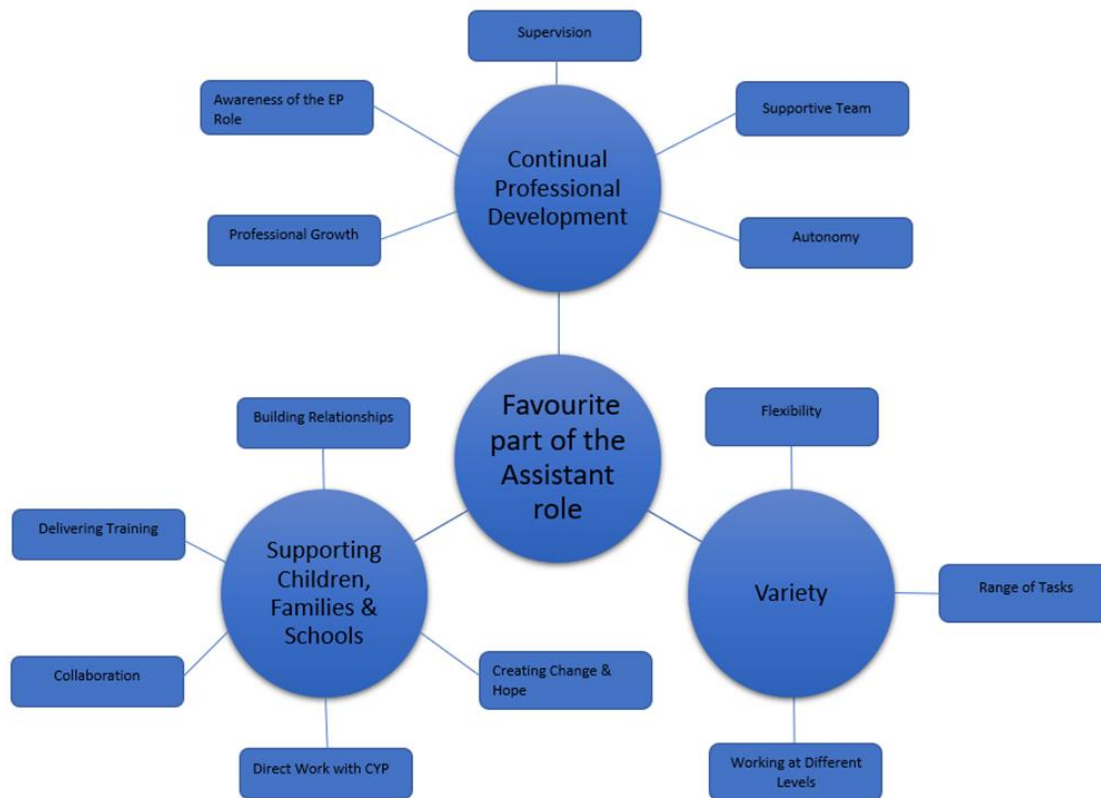
The first theme was professional development. Respondents referenced awareness and understanding of the EP role, professional growth, autonomy and support. Assistants mentioned how much they had learnt from their teams and how this influenced their practice and decision-making. Supervision was referenced frequently with responses such as *'having access to support networks and supervisory relationships that ensure I am developing my own competencies'* and *'I also have really benefited from supervision myself and have developed my reflection skills through this'*. Assistants spoke of enjoying challenge which supported their professional growth *'there is so much scope to learn, challenge yourself and pursue areas of interest'* and appreciated *'being in an environment where my interests are encouraged'*.

The second theme we identified was supporting children, families and schools. Participants referenced creating hope and change, relationships, collaboration, delivering training and direct one-to-one work with children and young people. Some of the responses were emotive and this aspect of the role seemed to provide a high level of job satisfaction. A number of responses commented specifically on working directly with children, *'doing all of the lovely things that the EPs don't have time to do and the CYP would miss out on'*. Others spoke about interventions such as LEGO club, anxiety workshops and gathering pupil views. Respondents commented on how being an influence for change was a favourite aspect of the job; one respondent enjoyed *'engaging with and empowering potentially marginalised children, young people and adults'* whilst another explained *'working with children and young people who others have written off. Taking the time to build a rapport and watching them blossom as a result'*.



Variety and the scope of the role was the strongest theme. Comments included ‘no two days are the same’ and ‘the variety of the role – being able to work at a whole school level through staff training but also working with individual children or small groups’. Assistants seemed to appreciate the range of activities, gaining experience in different areas and the flexibility within this.

Figure 6. Map displaying themes and subthemes of the favourite part of the assistant role



Implications

This research aimed to provide a starting point for developing a deeper understanding of the role of assistants in EPSs and for further debate around their remit. We hope that it highlights positive aspects of assistant roles and some areas for development.

With many assistants undertaking casework independently, working within multiple functions of the Currie matrix, and completing assessments with children and young people, it would appear that the remit of the assistant is growing compared to previous research. Lyons (1999) illustrates the distinctive roles within an EPS by categorising the responsibilities of EPs and AsEPs. However, such distinctions are not immediately evident from our data. Whilst there have been changes into requirements for assistant roles and often those in post have significant experience prior to the role, training routes may potentially be devalued through increasing the scope of the assistant role. Monsen et al. (2009) state that AsEP roles should not be viewed as a replacement for university training which provides rigorous academic knowledge around methods of assessment and interventions. Furthermore, independent casework is an area that divides opinion (Collyer, 2012). It may be beneficial for the wider profession to establish clearer guidance on assistant roles, particularly around which tasks are appropriate and ethical solely for a qualified EP to complete.

Within EPSs, the induction process of new assistants is fundamental to creating clear expectations for both assistants and the EPs they work alongside. It is important that conversations around prior

experience are held to avoid over- or under-expectation, allowing input to be maximised. The scope of the assistant role also has implications for supervision. Guidance set out by the British Psychological Society (BPS, 2017) states that 'supervision provides a space for psychological support to maximise the supervisee's responsibility for appropriate self-care'. Supervision should, therefore, be offered to all assistants regularly. Research into supervision models and formats provided to assistants could be beneficial to further explore this topic.

In contrast with previous studies which found research to be a focus of the assistant role (Collyer, 2012), our study identified research as the least common function of the Currie matrix in which assistants gained experience. EPSs might wish to consider how they can provide opportunities for assistants to gain experience across all areas of the Currie matrix, including research, within their roles to provide strong foundations for subsequent university training.

EPSs should consider how they can encourage diversity and remove barriers to the profession when recruiting assistants. Roles could be promoted to underrepresented groups. Existing staff from underrepresented groups could share their experiences on social media or at recruitment events such as open evenings to increase visibility. The potential for reasonable adjustments to be made could be highlighted. Services might also consider the potential impact of short-term contracts and lower paid roles on diversity; they may constitute a barrier for parents, older applicants, homeowners, or those with caring responsibilities.

Limitations

The researchers are all AsEPs. As such, we have not received specific training in research methods and therefore anticipate there may be aspects of methodology and analysis in which we have made errors.

We were unable to find data on the number of current assistants in EPSs in England. This makes it difficult to say how representative our sample is, although we recruited through multiple channels to endeavour to reach as widely as possible.

Future research

The current research gathered predominantly quantitative data; future research could seek to gather qualitative accounts of assistants' experiences and the perspectives of PEPs and qualified EPs on the role of assistants and appropriate responsibilities.

Further research into the differences between AsEP and AP roles and experiences in both could clarify any variation in responsibilities and the reasons EPSs employ the different roles. Greater transparency in this area and in job descriptions of these roles could prevent assistants in lower paid roles feeling exploited.

Conclusion

In summary, we identified many positive aspects of the assistant role. Assistants enjoy the variety and feel they are having a positive impact on the lives of children and young people whilst gaining valuable experience working towards doctoral training. However, there are also areas for development for the wider profession, namely working towards a more representative demographic and further debate on the role and responsibilities of assistants.

We would like to thank our supervisor, Maxine Caine, and Gateshead Psychological Service for supporting us with this research, Dan O'Hare and the EdPsy team for sharing our study and excellent advice, and all of the assistants who took the time to complete our study - we are very grateful.

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