



The New Zealand Psychological Society

Te Rōpū Mātai Hinengaro o Aotearoa

The New Zealand Psychological Society's

**BRIEFING TO THE
MINISTER OF EDUCATION**

May, 2009

Executive Summary

The most important issues the New Zealand Psychological Society (the Society) would like to engage with you in relation to psychologists and the delivery of services in education are:

- Access to and quality of Group Special Education services
- Educational psychology practice issues
- Educational psychology workforce development issues
- Shortages of Māori and Pacific educational psychologists

Internationally, educational psychologists play an important part in working with children who have an intellectual disability, learning disability, developmental disabilities (e.g. autistic spectrum), physical disabilities, sensory impairment, social, emotional or behavioural difficulties and family or community issues.

The Society is committed to assisting with the issues identified in this paper by providing timely, contestable advice and expertise when you request it. We are able to offer you:

- Access to the knowledge and expertise of psychologists in education and other areas
- Feedback on what is working well in the Group Special Education sector in relation to psychological services and constructive suggestions in addressing areas of concern.

The Society welcomes opportunities in the future to engage with you about new policy and service delivery initiatives, quality issues and the management of risk.

This briefing relates to:

- The key issues identified above
- Actions which could be taken to address the issues identified

Introduction

The New Zealand Psychological Society is the largest professional association for psychologists in New Zealand with over 1000 members and subscribers. The Society aims to improve individual and community wellbeing by supporting psychologists in their work and advancing the scientific discipline and practice of psychology.

The purpose of this briefing paper is to provide the Minister with information about the educational psychology workforce and the ways in which it contributes to the delivery of educational services. The paper also outlines a range of workforce development and professional concerns and suggests ways to address these issues.

The Society is committed to assisting the Minister in any way that is helpful to resolve the issues discussed below and any other issues which impact on the provision of education psychology services.

Context

Psychologists require post-graduate qualifications in psychology and must be registered with the NZ Psychologists Board. There are currently two specialist scopes of practice, clinical psychology and educational psychology.

Psychologists make a valuable contribution across the health, welfare, justice, education and local body sectors. They are employed by a range of public sector organizations including District Health Boards, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Education (Group Special Education and the RTLB Service), ACC, Dept of Corrections, Child Youth and Family Services amongst others. A significant number of psychologists are self-employed and the majority of these are registered under the clinical scope. Relatively few educational psychologists work outside of GSE which is an important factor in this brief.

Improving Access to and Quality of Psychological Services Provided Through GSE

The Society is concerned that the services that educational psychologists provide to children and young people are seriously limited by firstly a shortage of psychologists and secondly the limitations placed on their functional scope of practice through GSE contractual and service arrangements.

The latter results in only the school-aged children with more extreme needs receiving services from an educational psychologist (e.g. ORRS funded pupils and behaviourally challenging pupils) whilst those who have lesser or different but equally important needs (e.g. literacy and numeracy problems or family or emotional problems) are not able to be referred under the current special education funding arrangements. In a recent survey which the New Zealand Psychological Society conducted of its members, psychologists involved in the provision of GSE services noted that some children were “not getting an appropriate service” as is their right under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Children.

Educational Psychology Practice Issues

In the survey noted above, many educational psychologists also commented on the practice of GSE hiring experienced teachers as 'Special Education Advisors' (often because no psychologists were available for appointment) who are expected to carry out identical work (i.e. with ORRS funded and behaviourally challenging pupils) to themselves. Since some of this work is with families who are known to other agencies (i.e. through care and protection and mental health concerns) or with children having complex developmental disorders, this can result in some Special Education Advisors working outside of their knowledge and expertise.

Since Special Education Advisors have no agreed formal qualifications, receive minimal training within GSE (e.g. 'Effective Interventions for Behaviour Challenges' only) and are not registered under the HPCA, there are risks for both the public and the Ministry of Education. It almost goes without saying that many psychologists feel marginalized by such practices and we believe that this is one reason why GSE has difficulty in recruiting psychologists in some areas.

Suggested Solutions

Our response to the shortage of educational psychologists available for employment within GSE is detailed in the following section. In this current section we will address the second and third concerns, namely the functional restriction placed on the scope of practice of Psychologists currently working in GSE and the employment of Special Education Advisors who undertake work that is properly within the educational psychology scope of practice.

We believe that the Government should review the structure of the current funding policy (Special Education 2000) and include as a GSE output or contractual service, the provision of services to children who have a significant problem in accessing the curriculum and children with emotional or family problems. We note that one of the four goals of the Government is to improve the literacy and numeracy skills of pupils and that the Ministry of Education has formally 'recognised' dyslexia (or learning disabilities). In addition – putting aside the issue of causality – research suggests that pupils with severely challenging behaviour very often also have literacy and numeracy issues and again very often there are family and community issues.

The occupational group who has the greatest acknowledged expertise in addressing literacy, numeracy, learning difficulties / disabilities, emotional problems and family problems (including parenting and child protection issues) is educational psychologists. We feel that these skills should be utilized in addressing what are said to be Government priorities. In addition the Government may like to consider parents of school aged children having access to educational psychologists just as the parents of preschool children currently do.

It would also be helpful if Group Special Education were to provide a proper career structure including formal qualification requirements for Special Education Advisors and tailor their job description to this.

Workforce Development Concerns

The Society wishes to draw your attention to workforce development issues related to educational psychologists and the services they provide to children and young people.

General Workforce Development Issues

The New Zealand Immigration Service has both clinical psychologists and educational psychologists on its “long-term skills shortage list”. There is a general shortage of educational psychologists in New Zealand and an ageing workforce. Another area of considerable concern is the continuing lack of psychologists from culturally diverse groups. Workforce development data points to a particular shortage of Māori and Pacific psychologists.¹

Educational Psychologist Workforce Issues

The shortage of educational psychologists is not only impacting on access to services but also on the quality of services. A number of educational psychologists responding to the recent NZPsS survey noted that in the GSE area they worked in there were long waiting lists resulting in children not receiving the services they needed. Others noted that staff were overburdened and were leaving for less demanding or non-client based roles. Continually working with clients with the most severe issues (e.g. challenging behaviours) tends to lead to a higher burnout rates amongst staff was an issue also noted in the survey. These workforce shortages have also resulted in a shortage of educational psychologists being available to offer supervision for trainee psychologists.

Māori and Pacific Psychologists

The shortage of Māori and Pacific psychologists is a particular issue when considered alongside the evidence that Māori and Pacific pupils are over-represented in terms of rates of referral (i.e. for challenging behaviours) and negative school outcome statistics (e.g. pass rates in NCEA).

Suggested Solutions

- *A workforce development strategy needs to quantify the shortage of educational psychologists in New Zealand and ensure that current and future GSE needs are met.*
- *This workforce strategy needs to urgently address the lack of university courses specializing in educational psychology; at present there is just one. As noted above,*

¹ He Pa Harakeke: Maori Health Workforce Profile-Selected Regulated Health Occupations, 2007

the functional role of psychologists within GSE also needs to be expanded in line with their 'scope of practice' as defined under the HPCA and for this to be reflected in their training.

- *Barriers to Māori and Pacific students participating in psychology need to be addressed and incentives for these students need to be provided for postgraduate training in all areas of psychology²*
- *The cap on undergraduate university places (which includes psychology) needs to be lifted to ensure "pipe-line" growth of the psychology workforce*
- *Providing student loan relief for psychologists who take up positions in areas of need such as GSE would assist the workforce shortage and increase the pool of New Zealand trained psychologists who are culturally competent and knowledgeable about local communities.*
- *We believe that it is important for GSE to recognize the importance of educational psychology as a discipline and promote professional identity by developing a career pathway, a healthy community of practice and professional leadership roles for educational psychologists. By recognizing, utilising and promoting the professional expertise of its psychologists, GSE would be a healthier and more effective organization. Rather too often educational psychologists feel that GSE contracts in an external body to provide professional in-service training to its workforce including psychologists, when that role could comfortably be undertaken by its own employees. It is our view that these changes would assist in alleviating the attrition rate and shortage of educational psychologists for GSE.*

Access to Ethics Committees

The Society is very concerned that psychologists undertaking research who are not affiliated with a university or whose research is not deemed to be health or disability related research are not able to have their research reviewed by an accredited ethics committee.

Health and Disability Ethics Committees (HDECs) are currently the only accredited non-institutional ethics committees and are the responsibility of the Ministry of Health. Lack of access to ethics committees creates a significant difficulty for psychologists and those participating in research. It impacts on a broad range of psychologists including those who work in education.

For those receiving psychological services; there can be a constraint on available interventions and it is less likely that interventions developed overseas can be safely tested and adapted for local conditions. It also reduces the opportunities for clients to affect wider psychological practice.

We also believe that it is important for educational psychologists to have the same

² Levy, M. (2002). *Barriers and incentives to Maori participation in the profession of psychology*. Wellington: New Zealand Psychologists Board

access to an accredited ethics committee as currently enjoyed by their clinical and health colleagues. The preferred model of psychological practice is that of the scientist-practitioner in that psychologists need to deliver evidence based interventions and also have the ability to collect evidence (research) to validate these interventions. Educational psychologists currently face a double jeopardy in that they may face complaint action if their interventions are not evidence based and would also be penalized if they were, in the absence of ethical approval to conduct research in order to collect this evidence. We note the importance of developing a body of New Zealand based research appropriate to the local context. This is particularly apposite in respect to services for Māori for the reason that there is no international research on their needs. In this example, the Ministry of Education cannot be said to be meeting its obligations under the Treaty of Waitangi if Māori-focussed research cannot be undertaken by practicing psychologists.