# An exploration of the role and impact of Assistant Educational Psychologists in Local Authority Educational Psychology Services in England

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**Student Declaration and Word Count**

I, Emmeline Buchanan, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

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**Abstract**

Educational Psychology Services in England are facing pressure due to the current context of a Special Educational Needs and Disabilities system in crisis, with shortages in the Educational Psychologist workforce combined with increased demand for their services. Assistant Educational Psychologists are being employed to promote recruitment into the profession, and to build the capacity of Educational Psychology Services. However, the role and impact of Assistant Educational Psychologists has been under-explored in academic and professional literature. This study aimed to develop further insight into the Assistant Educational Psychologist role in the current context, exploring how the role is understood, the contributions Assistant Educational Psychologists make to service delivery, the impact of the role, and its supports and challenges. A qualitative methodology was adopted, using semi-structured interviews with twelve Assistant Educational Psychologists and seven qualified Educational Psychologists, from sixteen Educational Psychology Services in England. The data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis, through which seven themes were developed. These themes indicated that the Assistant Educational Psychologist role is understood as one that varies to support local needs, and as a learning role. Following intensive training, Assistant Educational Psychologists develop the competence and confidence to fulfil a range of tasks with increasing levels of autonomy, and Assistant Educational Psychologists are highly valued, impacting positively in the EPS and beyond. Participants highlighted challenges including the uncertainty that is experienced in the role, the importance of safe practice, tensions in the profession regarding the permanency of the role, and the high turnover of Assistant Educational Psychologists. This study suggests that to ensure that Assistant Educational Psychologist capacity is deployed in an effective, safe, and meaningful way, Educational Psychology Services need to engage in local and national discussions to inform their decision-making. Strengths and limitations of the study, directions for future research, and implications for the Educational Psychology profession are highlighted.

**Impact Statement**

This study provides new and up-to-date knowledge and understanding of the Assistant Educational Psychologist (AsEP) role in the current context. It is a unique contribution, as the only study to explore the views of both AsEPs and Educational Psychologists (EPs) from Educational Psychology Services (EPSs) across England. The study sought to explore the role and impact of AsEPs by considering how the role is understood, the contributions of AsEPs to EPS delivery, the impact of the role, and the supports and challenges of the role. The study considered how AsEP and EP views on the AsEP role and its impact can inform policy and practice.

Key findings in the current study were that AsEPs are valued and that they impact positively on EPSs, service-users, and AsEPs themselves. When strategically designed and appropriately supported, the AsEP role has the potential to improve EPS functioning by building EP capacity and extending the psychological offer. The findings of this study also suggest that AsEP deployment can support EPSs to address needs identified in the SEND system (Department for Education [DfE], 2022) by focusing on early intervention and preventative work. This has implications for EPSs *not* currently employing AsEPs, suggesting that they could review whether an AsEP role could support local needs.

The current study also found that planning the AsEP role is not a straightforward endeavour. Myriad systemic factors influence the role, reflecting the complexity of the eco-system, and resulting in difficult decision-making for EPS leadership. This has implications for EPSs, as time and effort must be dedicated to introducing and supporting the role. A further implication of the current research for EPSs is that to experience the benefits of the AsEP role, and to ensure safe and meaningful practice within the expectations of the regulating bodies (Health and Care Professions Council [HCPC], 2023), EPSs must plan and implement robust processes and structures, including for role development and supervision. These processes and structures are also important for mitigating against the role's challenges highlighted in this research.

In terms of implications to policy, the current study supports the continuation of the flexible, locally responsive models of AsEP deployment currently presented in policy (AEP, 2024a). However, the current study also highlights the need for further specific examples in policy to inform EPS decision-making and provides these examples. This

study also has implications for wider policy: the study reported that AsEPs are involved in traded work, but current ethical trading guidelines (BPS, 2018) do not provide specific advice regarding AsEP deployment in traded work.

The current study positions the AsEP role as a valued role, responsive to needs in local contexts, but as an ethically complex role. Due to the limited existing research, and the variation in local role decisions, this research highlights the need for the EP profession to engage in local and national discussion and debate regarding the AsEP role, so that it continues to contribute to the development of prospective EPs, to build capacity and broaden EPS delivery in the current challenging context.

# Table of Contents

## List of tables

## List of figures

# Abbreviations

**AEP –** Association of Educational Psychologists

**AsEP –** Assistant Educational Psychologist

**BPS** – British Psychological Society

**CYP –** children and young people

**DfE** – Department for Education

**EHCP** – Education, Health and Care Plan

**ELSA** – Emotional Literacy Support Assistant

**EP** – Educational Psychologist

**EPS** – Educational Psychology Service

**EYFS** – Early Years Foundation Stage

**HCPC** – Health and Care Professions Council

**LA** – Local Authority

**PEP** – Principal Educational Psychologist

**SENCo** – Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Co-ordinator

**SEND** – Special Educational Needs and Disabilities

**TEP** – Trainee Educational Psychologist

# Glossary of terms

**Alternative Provision (AP)** – education arranged for children and young people who cannot receive suitable education in mainstream schools. It offers tailored support in settings such as Pupil Referral Units (PRUs) or off-site programmes, aiming to meet learners' needs, and reintegrate learners into education or training pathways.

**Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP)** - a legal document in the UK for children and young people who require more support than is available through standard educational needs provision. The EHCP outlines the individual's special educational, health and social needs, alongside the support required to meet those needs.

**Non-traded service** – An EPS where services are delivered to schools with no cost to the school.

**Partially-traded service** – An EPS where some services are delivered with no cost to the school, and other services are paid for by schools and other commissioners. For example, some EPSs sell ELSA training and ELSA supervision but offer EP time to support schools with no cost.

**Preventative work** – EP involvement with children and young people or schools to put in place effective provision for all children and young people before difficulties arise and to prevent difficulties from escalating to the point where an EHCP is needed.

**Statutory assessment** – A legal process whereby a child or young person's needs are assessed by professionals and recommendations made for the support required to meet those needs. This happens so the Local Authority can decide whether an EHCP is required to meet the needs.

**Supervision** – This is a reflective process where EPs / Assistant EPs engage in discussion with a supervisor to discuss their work. The focus is on the individual's personal and professional development

**Systemic work** – EP involvement aimed at improving systems, such as the school system.

**Traded service** – An EPS where schools, and other commissioners such as other Local Authority departments, pay the EPS to deliver services.

# 1. Introduction

This research into the role and impact of Assistant Educational Psychologists (AsEPs) is situated within Local Authority Educational Psychology Services in England. This chapter broadly introduces the current context in which EPSs operate. It is necessary to understand the key aspects of the context, as it impacts greatly on the AsEP role.

## 1.1 Context of this research

### 1.1.1 What can Educational Psychology Services offer?

Educational Psychology Services (EPSs) offer a range of services to education settings, families, children and young people (CYP). A recent review of the Educational Psychologist (EP) workforce (Atfield et al., 2023) highlighted the importance of the functions of the EPS. These functions include the statutory role in Education, Health and Care needs assessments ('statutory assessments'), support provided to education settings, support for CYP and their families, and strategic work with agencies across the LA. The broad areas that EPSs can support with have also been highlighted and detailed in research, for example, the EP role in supporting teacher well-being (Ferguson, 2022), in supporting policy development (Carpenter et al., 2023) and in supporting children's mental health (Lee, 2016). EPSs have the potential to have far-reaching impact across the education sector.

However, EPSs are currently battling several significant challenges due to the current context in which they operate. These challenges pose a threat to the ability of EPSs to deliver a full range of services. This means that EPSs need to act, as a matter of urgency, to operate effectively despite these challenges. To better understand the context in which EPSs operate, and in which the current research is situated, four areas of challenge will be discussed: the current 'SEND crisis'; EP shortages; the Covid-19 pandemic, and uncertainty due to change. An overview of the challenges is presented – a more detailed exploration is beyond the scope of this thesis.

### 1.1.2 The SEND Crisis as a challenge to EPS delivery

Firstly, England is currently experiencing what has been described as a 'crisis' in Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) provision (Education Committee, 2024). In 2019, the government's SEND review (Department for Education [DfE], 2019) was launched due to rising concerns about the SEND system. The resulting

SEND and Alternative Provision (AP) green paper (DfE, 2022) identified three key issues: poor outcomes for CYP with SEND; adversarial experiences for CYP and their families, and a failure to deliver value for money. These three challenges will be considered in turn. The government's planned response to the 'SEND Crisis' (DfE, 2023) is described in section 1.1.5.

**Poor outcomes for CYP with SEND**

The SEND review green paper (DfE, 2022) highlighted that outcomes for CYP with SEND are poor in a range of measures. Looking at attainment data, at Key Stage 2 in 2024, 22% of pupils with SEND reached the expected standard in reading, writing and maths combined, compared to 72% of those without SEND (DfE, n.d.[b]). The latest KS4 data shows a similar picture with 30.8% of children with SEND achieving a Grade 4 (pass) or above in GCSEs, compared to 72.3% of children without SEND (DfE, n.d.[a]). This data is for children attending state-funded mainstream or specialist settings. It is interesting yet concerning to note that national attainment data for private schools is not available, even though 7% of children with SEND and 7% of children with EHCPs attend private specialist settings funded by the LA (DfE, 2022). It is therefore not possible to evaluate this public spending on a national scale.

**CYP and their families experience the SEND system as adversarial**

The SEND Review (DfE, 2022) captured the stakeholder view that the needs of children with SEND are not being effectively met. Parents and carers expressed that children's needs are not being identified early, that inconsistent practice amplifies the challenges caused by late identification, and that there is confusion about what can be expected from mainstream settings. As a result, parents and carers have lost confidence in mainstream settings and feel that applying for an EHCP, and sometimes specialist provision, is the only way to have their child's needs met. Due to huge increases in the number of requests for EHCPs (Marsh, 2023), and demand for specialist provision, families then experience frustrating delays (DfE, 2022). Consequently, the whole system is viewed as adversarial by CYP and their families. This parental dissatisfaction with the SEND system is reflected in the 210% increase in appeals to the SEND first-tier tribunal from 2011 to 2022 (Administrative Justice Council, 2023) and in increased requests for specialist provision placements (DfE, 2022).

**The system is not delivering value for money, despite high investment**

Another aspect of the 'SEND crisis' is the concern that despite substantial financial investment in SEND provision (Roberts & Macdonald, 2024), funding is not delivering value for money, including in relation to outcomes for CYP as described above. Government SEND spending has increased to the highest it has ever been (Roberts & Macdonald, 2024), however, councils argue that the investment is inadequate, as the demand for EHCPs is rising annually (Local Government Association, 2024). Between 2017 and 2022, EHCP requests rose by 77.3% and the number of EHCPs issued grew from approximately 42,100 to 66,700 (DfE, 2024b), increasing the costs associated with the professional assessments, decision-making panels and delivering the provision. While government funding has increased overall, per-EHCP funding has fallen by around one-third (Sibieta & Snape, 2024) and consequently, LA high-needs budgets are estimated to be at a £3.3 billion deficit (Sibieta & Snape, 2024) posing a threat to LA solvency. Thirty-eight LAs in England are now under the government 'very high deficit intervention' (safety valve) (DfE, 2024a), up from twenty-three LAs in 2022. Estimates suggest that school spending per pupil in 2024-2025 will be 3% lower than in 2010 (Sibieta, 2022). This stretched funding at all levels of the SEND system is affecting provision for CYP and is unsustainable, emphasising the need for systemic change.

### 1.1.3 EP shortages as a challenge to EPS delivery

The second challenge posing a threat to EPSs is shortages in the EP profession. An EP workforce shortage was identified in 2019 (Lyonette et al): 68% of the Principal EPs (PEPs) surveyed reported difficulties filling vacant EP posts. Promisingly, an increase of forty funded EP training places per year (to 203 places) followed in 2020 (AEP, n.d.). However, more recent DfE-commissioned research (Atfield et al., 2023) indicated that the EP recruitment and retention difficulties reported in 2019 have not only persisted, but worsened, with 88% of PEPs reporting difficulties recruiting EPs. More recently still, it has been reported that almost a quarter (546) of the 2304 LA EP positions in England and Wales are vacant (AEP, 2024b).

Government documentation refers to the critical role played by EPs (DfE, 2023) and reports investing a significant £21 million to train two cohorts of EPs in 2024 and 2025, aiming to increase EP capacity. However, it is not known how many EPs are reducing

their hours, leaving the profession to join private practice, or retiring each year. Therefore, the impact of the government investment in EP training on the EP workforce shortages is unknown. A key measure of EP workforce sufficiency in the literature is whether EPSs are meeting the statutory demand (Haycock and Woods, 2025). However, this ignores the EP preventative role, whereby EPs intervene early, and systemically, to prevent difficulties from escalating. Hooper's (2023) study estimated the EP workforce required to deliver a 'good' level of EP service and suggested that LA EPSs would need to double the workforce to meet demand. The current investment to train EPs does not appear to be enough to fill the vacancies in EPS LAs, let alone to provide the workforce required to fulfil a preventative role in addition to meeting statutory obligations.

Atfield et al. (2023) explored the EP recruitment and retention difficulties and identified the perception of a high workload for LA EPs as a key factor. A link has been made between this perceived high workload and the increase in statutory assessment requests (see section 1.1.2) due to the EP role in statutory assessments being enshrined in law (Children and Families Act, DfE, 2014). Atfield et al. (2023) identified a vicious cycle within LA EPSs directly related to, and further exacerbating, the SEND crisis. In this cycle, EPs are leaving LAs for private practice due to the high statutory workload, which leads to a smaller number of LA EPs meeting a higher level of demand. This in turn leads to a greater proportion of EP time committed to statutory work, a lack of variety in EP work, and the experience of limited opportunity to apply their full skill set. The work is then viewed as less attractive, and difficulties recruiting to LA EPSs ensue (Atfield et al., 2023; AEP, 2024b). The shortages in the EP profession present a great challenge for EPSs that needs to be addressed.

### 1.1.4 The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic as a challenge to EPS delivery

The third challenge posing a threat to EPSs is the impact of the Coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic. The Covid-19 global health pandemic, starting in March 2020, has impacted on CYP and the systems influencing their development, including the SEND system. Consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic include increases in children's mental health difficulties (Royal College of Psychiatrists, 2021, cited in Holt-White et al., 2022), impact on children's early development (Tracey et al., 2022) and a disproportionate impact on children with SEND (Department for Education, Training and Skills, 2021).

In addition, the Covid-19 pandemic caused further financial strain on local government when budgets were already stretched. Covid-related measures led to huge costs (£11bn) for LAs over the course of the pandemic (Atkins & Hoddinott, 2023), resulting in 73% of district councils either needing to or planning to draw on their reserves by the end of 2020 (Atkins & Hoddinott, 2023). The combined impact of these consequences of the pandemic are increased demand on the SEND system, and increased financial strain, further exacerbating the challenges described in 1.1.2.

### 1.1.5 Uncertainty in the face of change as a challenge to EPS delivery

Following the 2022 SEND Review (DfE, 2022), the government introduced the SEND and AP Improvement Plan (DfE, 2023), aiming to improve outcomes for CYP with SEND, restore parents' confidence, and ensure financial sustainability. Operationalisation of these aims included the delivery of evidence-based targeted support for CYP, improved high quality teaching in mainstream settings, and effective deployment of local resources in LAs, focused on early intervention. Through a series of planned actions, the plan sought to meet children's needs earlier, reducing the need for EHCPs, and to make the EHCP process, where needed, more positive for parents. The Improvement Plan (DfE, 2023) acknowledged the stakeholder view that the 2014 reforms failed due to inattention to implementation. It therefore highlights the commitment of £70 million to the 'Change Programme' focused on implementation (DfE, 2023). The Change Programme aims to publish practice guides for mainstream settings to improve provision, new National SEND Standards, and a digitised EHCP template by the end of 2025 (DfE, 2023). These reforms will impact EPS delivery, requiring careful planning by LAs and EPS leaders.

However, a new government assumed power in July 2024, creating uncertainty about whether they will commit to the 2023 reforms. Although the new government have acknowledged the need for SEND transformation, there is little transparency regarding their plans (Hayes, 2025). Commitment to the 2026 national roll-out of reforms has not been confirmed, and currently no proposals to make the necessary legislative changes exist, adding to sector-wide uncertainty.

### 1.1.6 The impact on EPS delivery

This combined high demand for services, the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and the national shortage of EPs leads to a situation where demand for EP services far

outstrips supply, resulting in capacity issues within EPSs. Therefore, many EPSs are currently unable to provide the broad service they have the potential to offer (see 1.1.1). Some EPSs are providing a restricted offer, prioritising statutory obligations (Atfield et al., 2023). Even so, low EP capacity is still impacting statutory timeliness, with half of EHCPs issued taking beyond the legal limit (DfE, 2025). CYP, their families and school staff have reported great difficulty in securing timely access to an EP (DfE, 2023), whether for statutory or preventative involvement. In one survey, 69% teachers reported that the waiting time for an EP was too long, and a further 25% of respondents reported not having any access at all to an EP or not knowing if they had access (IFF Research, 2023). This adds a further strain to the relationship between CYP and their families, schools and the EPS.

## 1.1.7 The employment of AsEPs as a response to these challenges

In the face of these challenges to the education system, action to improve the situation is recognised as imperative. Whilst it is acknowledged that large-scale, national change is required for sustained improvements to the SEND system (DfE, 2022; DfE 2023; Stanbridge, 2024), individual LAs are under pressure to act to improve their SEND systems for immediate local impact. This pressure to act is reflected in the high number of LAs with written statements of action, indicating significant weaknesses, following SEND local area inspections (DfE, 2022). The pressure to act is also captured in government recommendations for effective provision of education, and management of LA budgets, (DfE, 2021; DfE 2022a; Gray et al., 2022), and in the safety-valve agreements currently in operation (DfE, 2024a). Case studies focused on improving LA SEND systems have emphasised embedding ordinarily available provision (Marsh, 2023), intervening early, and increasing the offer at SEN support (DfE, 2021). Lamb (2019) argued that it is crucial that the non-statutory SEN offer is strengthened so that parents feel more confident in the SEND offer in schools, leading to the number of EHCP requests reducing, releasing funding to further boost in-school SEND provision. LAs and EPSs have a key and urgent role to play in increasing the SEN support offer and strengthening the SEND system.

Atfield et al. (2023) found that to address the EP recruitment and retention difficulties, so that LAs can work on strengthening local SEND systems, one of the main strategies EPSs have deployed is employing Assistant Educational Psychologists (AsEPs). Atfield et al. (2023) do caution that the employment of AsEPs as a strategy, focuses

on the EP supply issue, which may not be the most effective approach. For meaningful change in education, the whole system must be reformed, rather than targeting isolated parts (DfE, 2023; Stanfield, 2024). However, Atfield et al. (2023) also concede that addressing the supply side, including through the employment of AsEPs, may be the most immediate action available to LAs in the current context.

In light of this current context of EPS service delivery, the current research focuses on the role and impact of AsEPs working in LAs in England.

## 1.2 Theoretical Framework

The current study is underpinned by Bronfenbrenner's (1979; 2005) bioecological model of human development. This section will outline the theory, and how it is applied in this research.

In Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model (2005), development is defined as the "phenomenon of continuity and change in the biopsychological characteristics of human beings both as individuals and as groups" (p.3). Early versions of the model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) emphasised that human development does not happen in isolation, but rather, is influenced by the contexts in which development takes place. This is conceptualised in the model by four interrelated systems that influence human development, presented in a nested form with the developing individual at the centre. The closer the system is to the individual, the greater and more direct their influence on development.

The four interrelating systems are as follows: the microsystem comprises the environments immediate to the individual; the mesosystem contains the interactions between different elements of the microsystem; the exosystem contains environments that influence development but indirectly; the macrosystem comprises the cultural values, laws and societal norms, and lastly, the chronosystem is the dimension of time. These systems interact with each other, and with the developing individual at the centre, as shown in Figure 1.

Early versions of the bioecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) received criticism for presenting the individual as passive in their own development, as a 'receiver' of environmental influences (Christensen, 2010). The latest version of the model, the

Process-Person-Context-Time model (Bronfenbrenner, 2005), addresses this criticism, stressing the active role of the individual, and the impact of biological factors on development. This refined version emphasises the interplay between individual characteristics ('Person'), the dynamic reciprocal interactions between an individual and their environment ('Process'), the environmental layers in the nested systems ('Context') and changes over time ('Time'). Time refers to the chronosystem (how the person and environments change over time) as well as the frequency of interactions and developmental timing. The model emphasises the importance of proximal processes as central drivers of development (Tudge et al., 2009).

Core to the 'person' component of the person-process-context-time model are the person characteristics that individuals bring – demand, resource and force (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007). These person characteristics play a central role in shaping how an individual interacts with their environment, and how the environment responds to them. Demand characteristics are elements of a person's personality related to the extent to which they invite or discourage responses from the social environment, that can support or hinder development. Resource characteristics refer to internal assets and skills that influence an individual's capacity to engage in proximal processes and include past experiences, knowledge and skill, as well as access to external resources like education or healthcare. Force characteristics are behavioural dispositions (e.g., motivation, temperament, persistence) that influence how proximal processes emerge and operate and so influence how individuals engage with their world. Together, these characteristics interact with environmental systems to shape individual development over time.

Whilst Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems theory was developed in relation to the developing child, the theory can be applied in other contexts, including with adults, or organisations at its centre (e.g. Doughty & Moore, 2021; Ferguson, 2022). Application in this way is useful, as the model facilitates the consideration of myriad factors that may influence the development of the central figure and this can enhance understanding and planning for their development. The model acknowledges the complexity of real-world systems and aligns well with calls for contextually-sensitive research (Yardley, 2008; 2017).

**Figure 1**

*Bronfenbrenner's (2005) bioecological model of human development*
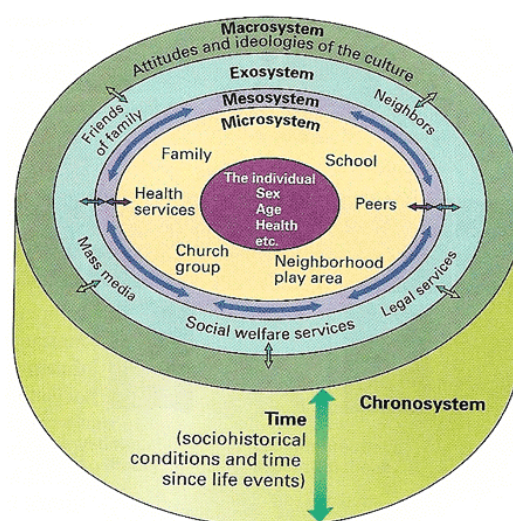


*Note.* Image from *Opening eyes onto inclusion and diversity in early childhood education,* by Turner, M. (n.d.)

In the current study, the model will have AsEPs and their role as the central figure. Depending on the AsEP's role, their microsystem might include other AsEPs, EPs, their supervisor, CYP, school staff, parents and carers, and other LA agents. The mesosystem contains the interactions between different elements of the microsystem, for example how the schools interact with the EPS, and how EPs and AsEPs interact. Elements of the exosystem that AsEPs are not in direct contact with, but that nonetheless influence AsEPs and their role include AEP (2024a) and BPS (2024) policies on AsEP employment, the universities providing EP training programmes, and legislation (e.g. Children and Families Act - DfE, 2014). The macrosystem for an AsEP includes cultural contexts such as dissatisfaction with SEND support and the financial climate. My adaptation of the framework can be found in Figure 2. In Chapter 5, the framework will be presented again, incorporating the findings of this study (see section 5.4.2).

In the application of this theory, the current study does not aim to test Bronfenbrenner's (2005) theory. This would present a methodological challenge, requiring multiple interacting variables to be accounted for due to the model's comprehensive nature (Lerner, 2006) and requiring constructs to be measured when no method of measuring exists (Valsiner, 2007). Rather, the application of the theory enables the AsEP role to

be considered within the wider socio-political context. The model promotes the consideration of factors influencing the development of AsEPs and their role, across a number of systems, leading to implications for practice for individual AsEPs, EPs, the EPS and wider systems. This thesis will argue that through consideration of the systems that influence the AsEP role, EPSs can strive to create an AsEP role that effectively contributes to EPS service delivery.

The current study therefore aims to explore the employment of AsEPs as a strategy being used to address challenges in the education and SEND systems (Atfield et al., 2023). This study will explore the role and impact of AsEPs, applying an ecosystemic lens (Bronfenbrenner, 2005) to consider factors influencing the development of the role in the current context, as set out in this chapter.

## 1.3 Structure of this thesis

This chapter has explained the context in which the current research is situated and the relevance of the topic to practice in EPSs. It has outlined the theoretical framework underpinning the research. The next chapter provides a review of the literature relevant to the study. Chapter 3 describes the study's methodology and Chapter 4 details the findings. Chapter 5 discusses the findings and considers their implications for research, practice and policy.

**Figure 2**

*Adaptation of Bronfenbrenner (2005) with AsEP as central figure*



Chronosystem

Change in government - change in political views and focus

Macrosystem

Shifts in education and SEND policy - e.g. SEND and AP improvement plan

EP private practice

Changes to EP training route

High needs budget deficit

Exosystem

Marketisation of education

HCPC

LA Director

High EHCP numbers

Mesosystem

Trading EP services

Interactions with school staff

Interactions with CYP and families

LA policies

Microsystem

BPS

Schools

SENCo

parents / carers of CYP

EP shortages

LSAs / TAs

CYP

Teachers

Assistant EP

Statutory backlog

Dissatisfaction with SEND support

LA

EPS policies

Assistant EP skills and knowledge

Assistant EP personal attributes

LA policies

high demand for EP services

SEND team

AEP

EPs

Assistant EP experience

LA policies

Media coverage on SEND and education

Interactions with others in EPS

SEND crisis

dominant discourses - medical model

Supervisor

EPS ethos, culture, values

Line manager

Interactions with LA

Soulbury Committee

SEND CoP

Safety Valve agreements

DfE

Change and growth in EPS and LA

University doctoral training programmes

Children and Families Act (2014)

SEND and AP improvement plan (DfE, 2023)

SEND and AP review (DfE, 2022)

Changing views and discourses on SEND

Impact of the Covid-19 pandemic

*Note.* Own work.

# 2. Literature Review

In this chapter, I will present a review of the literature related to the Assistant Educational Psychologist (AsEP) role. The introduction (Chapter 1) set out the broader context in which AsEPs currently operate; this chapter delves into the AsEP role itself. After defining what an AsEP is, I will discuss the functions of the role, what AsEPs do, claims regarding their impact, and debates surrounding the role, as presented in the literature. I will set out the rationale for the current study in relation to the existing literature before sharing the aims and research questions.

For the literature review, I conducted a systematic search of a range of databases (for further details on the search, including databases searched, see Appendix A). The search was concerned with exploring research that documented the deployment of AsEPs, and issues pertinent to the role in the educational psychology context, rather than the health context. I made this decision because previous research has prioritised the clinical psychology context, leading to policies centring on the clinical assistant psychology role (e.g., BPS, 2024) without specificity for educational psychology. Literature from the clinical context was included when a clear parallel could be drawn with the education context (e.g. with regards to how Assistant training is structured – Collins, 2022). Literature from the Irish, Welsh and Scottish educational contexts was included, even though the educational contexts do differ, again to prioritise the educational psychology context. Three papers were identified that are most pertinent to the current educational psychology context following the 2014 legislative changes (DfE, 2014): Neal (2024), Woodley-Hume (2018) and Harland et al (2022). Although literature pre-dating these legislative changes is also reviewed, these three papers are drawn on in depth in the literature review to explore the role in the current context.

## 2.1 Definitions

The post of AsEP has existed in England for at least 25 years (Lyons, 1999) and is defined as a non-qualified Educational Psychologist (EP) role (Soulbury Committee, 2019). The Association of Educational Psychologists (AEP) state that the role is "intended to complement the work of Educational Psychologists within Educational Psychology Services in delivering high quality services to children and young people" (p.1, AEP, 2024a).

Varying role names exist in EPSs, including Assistant Psychologist and Psychology Assistant (Harland et al., 2022). As the most common title (80% of participants) in a recent national survey (Harland et al., 2022), and in line with the AEP (2024a) policy, 'Assistant Educational Psychologist', abbreviated to 'AsEP', will be used in the present study.

## 2.2. Limitations in the existing literature

At the outset of this literature review, it is worth acknowledging that there is a paucity of research into the role and impact of AsEPs: few research studies exist and there are limitations in those studies. Much of the research in this area is dated: only three studies focused on AsEPs have been published in the past decade (Woodley-Hume, 2018; Harland et al., 2022; Neal, 2024). In the research since 1999, all but two studies took place in a pre-Covid context, without the additional financial, social, and psychological impact of the pandemic that is influencing the SEND system now (see section 1.1.4). In the research in English EPSs between 1999 and the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, only five EPSs are represented, with two single EPSs conducting five of the studies (Essex - Lyons, 1999; Lyons, 2000; Counsell & Court, 2000, and Kent - Monsen et al., 2009; Davies, 2007). Most of the research also pre-dates the 2014 legislative changes (DfE, 2014; DfE, 2015) which significantly impacted EPS operation, again making the findings hard to transfer to the current context. Woodley-Hume's (2018) thesis provided useful insights to the deployment of AsEPs after the 2014 legislative changes, and in traded contexts, but was limited to two EPSs.

The two AsEP studies since Covid have been national studies, expanding the diversity of the research. Harland et al. (2022) conducted a survey which provided useful information for the current context, but did not aim to capture the depth of information required to explore experiences of the role and its impact. The only study to take place in the current context of the 'SEND crisis' (Education Committee, 2024) was a national Grounded Theory study (Neal, 2024) of ten AsEPs from ten EPSs. In line with a Grounded Theory method, this study delved into one 'problem area' to develop theory. Whilst offering insights into AsEPs experience of work meaning, this study did not provide further knowledge on the full range of considerations for the AsEP role, due to its nature as a Grounded Theory study, and as it did not seek the views of EPs who have more insight into wider EPS processes.

The following literature review draws on some research from Irish and Scottish contexts, which limits the extent to which the findings can be transferred to the different English context. Assistant research in the clinical psychology context is also referred to where useful to draw parallels between the roles, although again transferability is limited due to the differences between health and education contexts.

## 2.3 Functions of the AsEP role

Three main functions of the AsEP role appear in the literature: the AsEP role as a pathway to EP training; the AsEP role as a recruitment strategy and the AsEP role as a strategy to build EPS capacity and extend the psychological offer.

### 2.3.1 Pathway to the doctorate

Firstly, the literature highlights that the AsEP role is intended to be a step on the path to becoming a qualified EP (AEP, 2024a). The aim set out by the AEP is that AsEPs gain "relevant experience, prior to applying for a place on a recognised Doctorate EP training course" (AEP, 2024a, p.1), alongside complementing the work of EPs. Therefore, AsEPs must hold a psychology undergraduate degree or conversion qualification. As the role is designed to lead to EP training, the intention is that AsEPs remain in post for no longer than four years (Soulbury Committee, 2019). The literature reports AsEP success in securing doctoral training places (e.g. Kimber & Cleary, 2011; Monsen et al., 2009; Harland et al., 2022).

The most recent (2024) AEP policy on the employment of AsEPs acknowledges that whilst the role is intended to lead to EP training, some AsEPs "may wish to continue in the role as a career option, bearing in mind the very low bursaries for Trainee [EPs]" (AEP, 2024a, p.2). This acknowledgement did not appear in the previous version of the policy (AEP, 2022), highlighting new recognition of a current challenge to accessing professional training. This study is well placed to explore current views on the progression from AsEP to Trainee EP (TEP).

### 2.3.2 Recruitment strategy

A second function of the AsEP role presented in the literature is as a long-term strategy for EP recruitment difficulties. This function has been identified in various research (e.g., Atfield et al., 2023; Woodley-Hume, 2018) with EPSs hoping to "grow [their] own EP" (Collyer, 2012, p.166). Indeed, the AEP (2024a) policy states that one reason to employ AsEPs is to foster relationships with future potential applicants to qualified

posts. The rationale for this function is to address the current challenge of high demand and low capacity within EPSs resulting from shortages in the EP workforce (see section 1.1.3).

Whilst previous research indicates that the role supports AsEPs to secure EP training places (e.g. Monsen et al., 2009), it is not known whether EPSs are then able to recruit their previous AsEPs on completion of training. Atfield et al. (2023) suggest that rather than returning to EPSs where they were AsEPs, newly-qualified EPs tend to take up employment in the EPSs where they were on placement during their training. Additionally, the creation of the AsEP role in itself does not necessarily lead to positive outcomes for future recruitment. Rather, AsEPs need to have a positive experience, and to want to return to that EPS. Therefore, AsEP roles need to be well operationalised. Studies in clinical psychology caution that roles can be created to address recruitment difficulties, without being well thought-out (Pratt, 1998), especially when pressure exists due to the "presence of funds that must be spent" or lost (Collyer, 2012, p.162) and a need for an extra pair of cost-efficient hands in an understaffed service (Pratt, 1998; Rezin & Tucker, 1998). The difficulty recruiting EPs means that there are funds, and EPSs are currently understaffed (Atfield et al., 2023). To avoid the creation of a role without the intended positive impact on EPS recruitment, AsEP roles need to be carefully planned and operationalised. The current study is well placed to explore views on AsEP employment as a recruitment strategy.

### 2.3.3 Build EPS capacity and extend the psychological offer

A third function of AsEP employment in the literature is as a strategy for supporting and complementing the work of qualified EPs and the EPS (AEP, 2024a). To achieve this in the context of EP workforce shortages (Atfield et al., 2023), EPSs have focused on designing the AsEP role to build capacity and extend the EPSs psychological offer (Woodley-Hume, 2018). Some AsEP roles in the literature were created specifically to provide increased psychological support to schools or to build EPS capacity for project-work (Monsen et al., 2009). Sometimes, AsEPs worked on discrete EP tasks that they were deemed able to complete, increasing EP capacity to work on tasks that an AsEP could not (Farrell et al., 2006). Other times AsEPs have been involved in tasks that EPs do not have capacity to fulfil but that improve provision, for example following up EP involvement (Woodley-Hume, 2018) through supporting the implementation of recommended interventions, or supporting the development of

Individual Education Plans (Lyons, 1999). Another model to extend the EPS offer is to deploy AsEPs to provide the preventative work (pre-statutory) when the EP focus may be on statutory work (Lyons, 1999; Kimber & Cleary, 2011). Although these examples have been raised in the literature, the extent to which AsEPs are building EPS capacity and extending the psychological offer in the current context of high statutory demand (see section 1.1.2), and the impact, is unclear.

## 2.4 What do AsEPs do?

### 2.4.1 The AsEP role in policy

One crucial decision facing EPSs when employing AsEPs is which tasks they should fulfil. Turning to the literature, there is limited guidance for EPSs to consult. The AEP (2024a) policy on AsEP employment states that AsEPs "can be occupied in a variety of ways to complete a variety of duties, with appropriate supervision and support" (AEP, 2024a, p.1) which may be received as lacking specificity. Within the policy, examples of tasks that AsEPs could be involved in include: supporting the delivery of defined projects; assisting the work of an EP on casework, including assessment; delivering training; completing administrative tasks; completing research tasks and supporting the delivery of specific interventions.

The rationale for the AEP's (2024a) limited and unspecific AsEP role guidance is that the role depends on local need, and on each AsEP's previous experience and skills, and so the possible role is broad (AEP, 2024a). Recent research supports the notion that the role will depend on local need: in research based in two EPSs in England, Woodley-Hume (2018) found that the tasks fulfilled by AsEPs vary in response to local needs and that the local context is constantly changing. AsEP participants in recent research (Neal, 2024) also commented on a variation in role, but this was not the focus of the study so illustrative examples were not given. Whilst the limited specificity in the AEP guidance is intentional due to this variation, there has been limited research confirming or exploring this variation. EPSs are left with a paucity of evidence on which to base their decisions.

Additional policy from the British Psychological Society (BPS, 2024) is aimed at Assistants generally across all fields of psychology, where duties vary, although it states that Assistant duties should reflect the work of qualified psychologists. In

educational psychology, qualified professionals operate at different levels: at the individual, group, whole-school and LA level (Farrell et al., 2006). However, the examples of duties listed in the BPS (2024) policy are largely focused on the individual level, including '…*preparing and administering psychological tests and assessments, observing and recording behavioural observations'* (p.10). This reflects the broad application of this guidance to Assistant Psychologists across all sectors, including health services where the role may be more within-child focused. Further detailed guidance specific to AsEPs is needed, reflecting all levels at which qualified EPs operate.

### 2.4.2 The AsEP role presented in research

Recent research has begun to explore the current role of AsEPs and found that they do fulfil a variety of tasks within EPSs. A national survey of AsEPs (Harland et al., 2022) found that 73% of the 96 participating AsEPs fulfilled tasks in each of the five qualified EP functions listed in the Currie matrix (Currie, 2002) - training, consultation, intervention, assessment, and research. This aligns with the BPS (2024) guidance that Assistant duties should reflect the work of qualified psychologists. In the survey, the most common activities undertaken by AsEPs were observations, training, and consultation with school staff: over 90% of respondents reported that they carried out these tasks. It should be noted that this survey asked respondents to specify which tasks they fulfilled, rather than how much of their time was spent on the tasks, so the proportion of their time spent on each function is not clear and limits comparability to other studies with different measures (e.g. Monsen et al., 2009).

The different types of work that AsEPs are involved in, as presented in the research, are summarised below. An exploration of the debates surrounding these tasks is given in section 2.7.1.

**Project work** - The research suggests that AsEPs are involved in project work, with 55% of respondents in the national survey (Harland et al., 2022) indicating that they contributed to LA initiatives. In one EPS, the largest chunk of AsEP time (42%) was dedicated to project work (Monsen et al., 2009). Project work was not defined in these research papers, so it is not clear what this comprised.

**Individual casework** - Much of the research highlights that AsEPs work on individual casework (Monsen et al., 2009; Kimber & Cleary, 2011). AsEPs are sometimes

involved in individual statutory assessments (Atfield et al.,2023) and they undertake observations, assessments, and "consulting" (Harland et al., 2022, p.4). Although the research suggests that AsEPs carry out consultation (e.g. Harland et al., 2022; Kimber & Cleary, 2011), 'consultation' is not defined, so whether this is psychological consultation (Wagner, 2017) is unclear.

**Intervention** – The literature suggests that AsEPs conduct direct intervention work (e.g. Maddern et al., 2004). 73% of AsEPs in the national survey (Harland et al., 2022) indicated that they carried out therapeutic interventions with CYP on a 1:1 basis and 73% also reported that they carry out group work with CYP. Examples of group interventions, from Davies' (2007) include social skills groups and the Circle of Friends (Pearpoint et al., 1992).

**Direct work with schools** - AsEPs carry out a range of tasks directly with school staff. For example, 93% of the national survey (Harland et al., 2022) respondents reported they were involved in delivering training. The survey also indicated that 54% of the AsEP participants worked on action research in schools (Harland et al., 2022). Examples of action research from other studies include evaluating the effectiveness of a sensory room and researching managed moves (Woodley-Hume, 2018). In one EPS, AsEPs worked on whole-school systems by advising and supporting school staff with the development of Individual Education Plans (Lyons, 2000). In cases where AsEPs carry out direct work with CYP, consideration is also given to wider impact: Davies (2007), aimed to build school capacity by inviting school staff to observe an intervention group so that the school could continue the intervention independently.

**Research** - The literature suggests that AsEPs have a role in research (Kimber & Cleary, 2011; Monsen et al., 2009; Woodley-Hume, 2018). Different studies have named research differently, suggesting varied conceptual understanding of 'research.' Terms include 'applied research to inform practice' (Monsen et al., 2009), national research, LA level research and action research (Harland et al., 2022, Woodley-Hume, 2018). Harland et al. (2022) reported that research was the "most common function that was not undertaken by [AsEPs]" (p.4). However, it was only research at a national level for which participants reported low levels of involvement (9%). 55% of respondents reported involvement in LA-level research, and 54% in action research.

The literature reviewed in this section, notably the national survey (Harland et al., 2022), is useful for understanding that AsEPs *each* fulfil a variety of tasks. However, it does not enable conclusions to be drawn about variation in AsEP deployment *between* EPSs. Other studies focus on just one or two EPSs at any one point in time (e.g. Woodley-Hume, 2018; Monsen et al., 2009), making comparison difficult. Further research exploring role variation across England would be useful for EPSs to understand how parts of the AsEP role may be prioritised in different contexts.

## 2.5 Training and support for AsEPs

The literature highlights the crucial role that induction, supervision, and training play in supporting AsEPs to fulfil their role. AsEPs place a high value on the quality of their induction programme (Harland et al., 2022; Woodley-Hume, 2018). Kimber & Cleary (2011) describe a comprehensive induction programme including shadowing opportunities in multi-agency contexts. The duration of their induction was unspecified, but they reported that it "equipped [them] with the necessary skills and confidence to carry out [their] roles to the highest possible standard" (Kimber & Cleary, 2011, p.8). Similarly, Lyons (2000) outlined a structured induction and training programme in one EPS, including a two-week induction block, monthly training days, and 'quality circle' meetings (assumed to be similar to supervision). This comprised training on the local context, professional skills, and content related to the specific tasks they would be fulfilling, designed to support AsEPs to quickly develop knowledge and skills. These studies took place when AsEPs were required to have been a teacher. Thus, the induction could assume a more consistent skills baseline than now, when AsEPs come from a wide range of backgrounds.

In the Irish clinical psychology context, Collins' (2022) study pointed towards some common modules that all Assistant Psychologists require, and additional specialised modules for certain contexts. This is in line with Lyons' (2000) description but goes further towards the 'skills mix' concept from healthcare (Davies et al., 1998). The 'skills mix' acknowledges that Assistants have diverse existing skills and experience, and developmental needs, so training must target a mix of skills to account for these. Such core modules in educational psychology could include ethical and professional issues,

reflective practice, supervision, conducting research and report writing, similar to those generic modules listed in policy documentation (BPS, 2024).

As well as valuing induction, Assistants place high importance on supervision for success in their role (Collyer, 2012; Woodley-Hume, 2018), for their confidence (Collins, 2022) and for their professional growth (Harland et al., 2022). AsEPs particularly value learning from other AsEPs through peer supervision (Woodley-Hume, 2018). Frequency of supervision varies from weekly to fortnightly sessions (Kimber & Cleary, 2011; Monsen et al., 2009). A structured model of supervision is described by Monsen et al (2009), involving weekly individual supervision, and monthly peer supervision, with dual supervisory roles – one EP guiding daily tasks and one Senior EP taking a strategic overview, supporting both AsEP developmental needs and EPS operational needs. It seems that the style of supervision can depend on whether the supervising EP is a line manager, perhaps with leadership responsibilities, or whether the supervising EP oversees the casework (Collyer, 2012; Woodley-Hume, 2018).

The need for guidance on the induction and training of Assistant Psychologists has been recognised in policy (BPS, 2024). However, the content proposed is purposefully general, as it is aimed at Assistants across all sectors of psychology and skewed towards clinical contexts. Collins (2022) makes the point that learning from other services with experience in the employment of Assistants is invaluable. With the constantly changing context, even those EPSs with prior experience in employing AsEPs may benefit from learning about models of support in other EPSs to continue to update and evolve their practice. This research hopes to contribute valuable information to this.

## 2.6 The impact of AsEPs

### 2.6.1 Benefits to AsEPs

Personal anecdotes (Counsell and Court, 2000; Davies, 2007; Kimber & Cleary, 2011) and small-scale research (Woodley-Hume, 2018) indicate that a benefit of the role for AsEPs is support to progress onto EP training, with the role considered to be "ideal to facilitate career progression" (Woodley-Hume, 2018, p.68). A large proportion (47%) of Harland et al.'s (2022) participants had secured training places for the following

year. However, given AsEP contracts tend to be short-term and linked to the expectation to get onto the course, it is not known how many AsEPs leave their role after unsuccessful applications.

AsEPs also benefit from the role as their skills and confidence increase (Woodley-Hume, 2018; Harland et al., 2022; Collyer, 2012) through the range of learning opportunities experienced. By accessing training and support, including reflective supervision, AsEPs feel the role contributes to their growth and development (Woodley-Hume, 2018; Neal, 2024). For example, Davies (2007) describes a "lightbulb moment" (p.16) on her learning journey where she saw in action the systemic change she had discussed in supervision.

## 2.6.2 Impact on service-users

The existing research suggests that service-users also benefit from the AsEP role. The direct intervention work that many AsEPs conduct with individual or groups of CYP is reported to be effective (Maddern et al., 2004). Monsen et al. (2009) evaluated impact and reported that the mean outcome ratings were significantly higher following intervention than at baseline, although this was restricted to just one EPS.

AsEPs increase school capacity by supporting schools to implement approaches (Counsell & Court, 2000) and training school staff to deliver interventions, which facilitates systemic change (Davies, 2007). Even through individual casework, AsEPs can increase the confidence of school staff, empowering adults involved with individual children, through training and planning discussions (Woodley-Hume, 2018). Stakeholder feedback gathered by Lyons (1999) showed appreciation of the AsEP role, with 76% of schools rating the AsEP's contribution as either 'helpful' or 'very helpful'. Although these findings are promising, they are anecdotal, from a very small number of EPSs and AsEPs.

## 2.6.3 Impact on EPs

There are limited recent research findings related to the impact of the AsEP role on EPs. There are suggestions that the AsEP role can lead to reciprocal learning processes, enabling qualified EPs to deepen their own knowledge and expertise through ongoing interactions (Woodley-Hume, 2018), and supporting EPs to make better-quality decisions through collaboration (Lyons, 1999). Lyons (1999) sought EP feedback in one EPS: 70% EPs rated working with an AsEP as helpful or very helpful.

However, this means that eleven of the thirty-seven EP participants did not find working with an AsEP helpful. The study did not explore why, raising questions about the EP experience of working with AsEPs. More recent research has made limited reference to EP views, highlighting the need to explore their perceptions, given the role they play in allocating work to and supervising AsEPs (AEP, 2024a).

In some cases, AsEP capacity targets EP workload, aiming to reduce it. This includes AsEP involvement in statutory casework (Atfield et al., 2023). However, limited research has explored the impact on EP workload. Some research has suggested that AsEPs can have a beneficial impact: Lyons (1999) described a model where schools were given an increased total number of EPS visits, and some visits were delivered by an AsEP, reducing the EP's contact time and workload. It is interesting to note that the EPS in this case provided regular liaison time for the EP and AsEP, emphasising that the effectiveness of the AsEP's work was only sustainable through this support, and so enabling it through time allocation. Whilst Lyons' (1999) research took place before the development of traded models of service delivery (Lee & Woods, 2017), the provision of a set number of EPS visits is similar to a traded context, and so similar approaches as described above could be applicable now.

More recent research has questioned the impact of AsEP capacity on EP workload: EPs from two EPSs indicated that any time gained was lost due to supervision costs (Woodley-Hume, 2018). A possible antidote could be the additional liaison time referred to in Lyons (1999), but in the current climate of EP shortages and low capacity (Atfield et al., 2023) it is not clear that EPSs can allocate this additional time. Woodley-Hume's (2018) study sought the views of just two EPSs, so it is not clear whether this finding is similar in different contexts.

From the existing research, the impact of AsEP time on EP workload is unclear. Lightening EP workload could have significant consequences for the EPS and wider SEND system. If EP time could be freed up by AsEP capacity, there could be opportunity to dedicate EP capacity to address the challenges facing the SEND system, for example through increased preventative involvement (Atfield et al., 2023; DfE. 2023). Lyons' (1999) view of AsEPs focusing on time-consuming, technical tasks, enabling EPs to focus on higher-order psychological tasks seems pertinent here. However, even if the AsEP role could free up EP capacity, research in other fields has

suggested that where time is made available by Assistants, professionals use that additional capacity to take on more of the same individual casework, rather than providing a broader offer or a more strategic approach to target change in the system (Nancarrow & Mackey, 2005). This finding needs to be explored within Educational Psychology.

Tension has been reported in situations when AsEPs are considered to be doing the 'interesting' work, at a time when qualified EPs have a high level of statutory involvement (Woodley-Hume, 2018). Additionally, EPs are used to a solitary way of working (Lyons, 2000), so working alongside an AsEP may change their work practices. For these reasons, the current research seeks to explore perspectives of qualified EPs as well as AsEPs, and to consider processes that facilitate successful working relationships.

### 2.6.4 Impact on Educational Psychology Services

There are suggestions that AsEPs bring a range of benefits to EPSs. For example, AsEPs are viewed to bring new ideas, knowledge, and energy (Woodley-Hume, 2018), and can promote creative and innovative thinking (Lyons, 1999). Also, AsEP capacity has enabled EPSs to deliver services they may otherwise have struggled to due to capacity issues, such as individual casework (Kimber & Cleary, 2011) and information gathering to feed into training (Counsell & Court, 2000).

However, there is a dearth of recent research into the impact of AsEPs on EPS service delivery. Researchers have made the call for a creative use of AsEP capacity to complement the work of qualified EPs and enhance the EPS psychological offer (Lyons, 1999; Woodley-Hume, 2018; Harland et al., 2022; Carpenter et al., 2023). However, as can be seen by the limited findings related to benefits for EPSs, not much is known about the current views of AsEPs and EPs on their impact in the EPS, or about the practices and structures in EPSs that maximise the potential AsEP contribution. The current research aims to explore this, advancing the knowledge on effective AsEP use, and the benefits for EPSs.

## 2.7 Considerations for the AsEP role

### 2.7.1 Debating the AsEP remit

The Soulbury Committee (2019) remind employers that AsEPs are '…*not qualified to carry out the full range of duties and responsibilities of fully qualified [EPs]…*' (p.9) and as such, the role should be carefully managed. The AEP policy on AsEP employment (AEP, 2024a) emphasises the need for safe practice, highlighting that all duties should be undertaken with support and supervision from a qualified, experienced EP. This sets the challenge for EPSs to decide how AsEPs can effectively contribute to EPS delivery whilst practising safely within their remit. Debates have ensued and are reflected in the literature: the debates related to AsEP involvement in statutory assessments, individual casework and consultation are discussed here.

**Debates: Statutory involvement** - The most recent AEP policy (2024a) includes an update from the previous version (AEP, 2022) highlighting that it is "not… appropriate for AsEPs to carry out a statutory assessment, but they could gather and collate information…" (p. 1). However, the policy wording adds ambiguity by stating that "as a general rule, AsEPs can be involved in gathering information towards an assessment, but the interpretation of this information should be carried out by a qualified EP." (p.1). It is not clear whether "as a general rule" relates to the gathering of information, or the interpretation, and it also suggests that there can be exceptions to this rule, leaving decisions on the AsEP role to EPSs. Earlier research indicated that statutory work was considered beyond the AsEP remit (Counsell & Court, 2000; Lyons, 1999; Kimber & Cleary, 2011). Conversely, recent research suggests that there *is* a role for AsEPs in statutory assessments: Woodley-Hume (2018) reported that in one EPS, the AsEP scribed the meeting notes for statutory assessments, and in the other EPS, the AsEP gathered pupil views and carried out post-16 statutory assessments following a surge in requests. Although these were described as exceptions, Atfield et al. (2023) and Harland et al. (2022) also indicate that AsEPs are involved in statutory assessments.

**Debates: individual casework** - AsEP involvement in individual casework has also been questioned. Monsen et al. (2009) captured debates at that time: some EPSs believed this work was beyond the AsEP remit and so deployed them to applied research, training, and project work instead. In contrast, recent research indicates that

most AsEPs are involved in individual casework: in the AsEP national survey, only 6% reported that they were not involved in casework (Harland et al., 2022). Where AsEPs are involved, the level of responsibility AsEPs should be given, and the independence at which they should be operating (Collyer, 2012) has been debated. Lyons (1999) describes a model of AsEPs supporting EPs with their casework. Conversely, the majority (57%) of AsEPs in the national survey reported that they had full individual responsibility for their casework (Harland et al., 2022). However, this was not defined, so it is not clear how 'full responsibility' is understood. The literature has highlighted that EPs retain responsibility for the casework allocated to AsEPs, with a PEP in Woodley-Hume's (2018) study reminding EPs, "It's your piece of work, you own it" (p.69).

One part of individual casework is assessment. AsEPs have a role in the assessment of CYP, administering dynamic or play-based assessments as well as standardised assessments such as the British Ability Scales (Harland et al., 2022; Monsen et al., 2009). Standardised assessments were not included as an example of an AsEP task in the original AEP policy (2022) but this has since been added (AEP, 2024a), implying a need for this clarification. Although research and policy indicate that assessment activities are within the remit of AsEPs, emphasis has been placed on requiring adequate training to practice with competence (Collyer, 2012; Lyons, 2000).

**Debates: consultation** - Consultation is another contested role for AsEPs. Some studies report that AsEPs carry out consultation (Lyons, 2000; Monsen et al., 2009; Kimber & Cleary, 2011; Harland et al., 2022). Others report views that it lies beyond their remit (Collyer, 2012). Psychological consultation can involve parents or carers (Dowling, 1994), but some EPSs judge even gathering parental views independently as beyond the AsEP remit, as it potentially puts AsEPs in a vulnerable position (Woodley-Hume, 2018). Home-school consultation would certainly be viewed as beyond the AsEP remit in those EPSs. Safeguards for AsEPs working with parents include supervision to discuss casework and plan feedback to parents (Kimber & Cleary, 2011).

It could be that differences in the definition of consultation impact the findings. The "consulting with school staff" that 92% of AsEP participants in the national survey reported they do (Harland et al., 2022) evokes a non-psychological meaning, a

meaning more akin to a "meeting for deliberation or discussion" (Oxford University Press [OUP], n.d.[a]). This is as opposed to the noun 'consultation' which in the EP world has connotations of psychological consultation. This is a collaborative approach underpinned by psychological theory, to support systems to improve (Wagner, 2017). So it could be that the AsEPs in Harland et al.'s (2022) study considered they were 'consulting' school staff on their views, without it being psychological consultation. When discussing the role of AsEPs, a shared understanding of language matters.

The current research is well-placed to explore EPS decisions regarding statutory involvement, individual casework, and consultation and to capture the current debates in the profession, to feed into EPS decision-making.

### 2.7.2 AsEP competence and autonomy

A further area for consideration in the AsEP role, that links to the remit debate in section 2.7.1, is related to competence. Concerns have been raised regarding tasks perceived to be beyond AsEP levels of competence. This concern is captured in the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) Standards of Performance, Conduct and Ethics for qualified psychologists: "*4.1 You must only delegate work to someone who has the knowledge, skills and experience needed to carry it out safely and effectively*" (HCPC, 2022).

This concern is echoed in other fields with over-expectations of paraprofessionals reported, for example in teaching (Hall & Webster, 2023), clinical psychology (Rezin & Tucker, 1998) and health care (Thornley, 2000). Rezin and Tucker (1998) raise a possible reason for this over-expectation of competence arising with clinical Psychology Assistants. They suggest that Assistants feel a sense of pressure to enhance their experiences in preparation for doctoral training applications. This feeling of pressure leads to Assistants being keen to take on extra work, that may extend beyond their levels of competency. Collyer (2012) applied this to the AsEP context. It is possible that in the current times of high demand and low capacity (Atfield et al., 2023), and in the absence of policies that specify the AsEP role (AEP, 2024a), managers could be tempted to allow enthusiastic AsEPs to take on tasks beyond their remit. For this reason, clear guidelines on the specific tasks that fall within the AsEP role should be developed and communicated in every EPS. It is hoped that the current research will contribute useful information and considerations for this task.

Autonomy can be defined as having the "liberty to follow one's will; control over one's own affairs; freedom from external influence, personal independence" (OUP, n.d.[b]). In the context of the AsEP role, this translates to making decisions on how they do their work, and independence from an EP for some of their role. The existing research does not provide a consistent picture regarding AsEP autonomy. Much of the research, especially earlier studies, suggests that AsEPs do not work autonomously, describing models of working jointly with EPs, or assisting EPs, with the EPs making the decisions (Lyons, 1999; Lyons, 2000; Counsell & Court, 2000). Even when AsEPs appear to be working independently in a school, they describe daily contact with the EP and regular supervisory conversations, suggesting that whilst there is independence, decision-making is limited (Kimber & Cleary, 2011). There are examples of more autonomous working, for example training Teaching Assistants on an approach (Counsell & Court, 2000), where there would be in-the-moment decision-making. Counsell and Court's (2000) personal account was from a time when AsEPs had been teachers: given the teaching background, EPSs may have felt confident that tasks such as training were within the competence of an ex-teacher and so could be completed autonomously.

In contrast, recent research indicates that AsEPs work with greater autonomy. The majority of AsEPs (57%) in the national survey (Harland et al., 2022) reported that they had full individual responsibility for casework, with EP oversight. As this was a quantitative survey, no further information was available regarding the type of casework, the support structures, or perspectives of whether this was within their competency: this would be useful information for considering the appropriateness of individual casework in different contexts. There are some indications that autonomy is valued by AsEPs, and that autonomy develops through support. This support includes supervision, where autonomy is promoted through empowering AsEPs to reflect on and make decisions about their work (Neal, 2024). This aligns with other research indicating that AsEPs build autonomy through peer supervisory support as they use this space to discuss and evaluate their case decisions (Woodley-Hume, 2018).

In many cases in the existing research, the levels of autonomy with which AsEPs are working is not clear. The national survey (Harland et al., 2022) collected information on whether certain activities were carried out by AsEPs but not whether they worked independently or in collaboration with a qualified EP. Similarly, Woodley-Hume (2018) gave examples of AsEP organisational involvement, but did not specify whether this

work was collaborative or autonomous. Therefore, further exploration of how autonomously AsEPs work is needed to inform EPSs decisions on models of AsEP deployment.

### 2.7.3 Distinct roles and role communication

The literature contains examples of clearly-defined tasks for AsEPs, distinct from the qualified EP role (Lyons, 1999). Collyer (2012) argued that the AsEP tasks should relieve EPs of time-consuming, "burdensome" tasks (p.161), enabling EPs to focus on core activities. Although in the different Scottish context, Collyer's commentary and findings contribute useful insights into issues for the AsEP role in England. Collyer's (2012) AsEP participants described their research roles as requiring more technical skills than clerical staff, but not the psychological skills of a fully qualified EP. Bach et al.'s (2007) research suggests that such distinction between AsEP and qualified EP activity requires decisions to be made about which tasks are considered core for EP professionals, and which are 'non-core' and so can be taken on by AsEPs. The knowledge base required for each task is considered as key for making this decision. See Collyer (2012) for a detailed discussion. In line with Bach et al. (2007), the AsEP roles developed by Lyons' (1999) EPS were designed to enable qualified EPs to become involved in higher-level psychological work as their 'core' work. Projects, training, and multi-disciplinary work were given as examples of higher-level functions.

Once clear roles are decided upon, a question then arises about how these roles are communicated within the EPS and beyond (Collyer, 2012). One possible implication of poor communication and transparency regarding the AsEP role is feelings of frustration amongst EPs and feelings of uncertainty about the role (Woodley-Hume, 2018). To mitigate against this, some EPSs clearly define the distinct AsEP and qualified EP roles in school planning meetings (Counsell & Court, 2000) and create leaflets detailing the AsEP role for school staff (Monsen et al., 2009). Such communication can support schools to understand the AsEP role (Lyons, 1999) and can support AsEPs to reinforce the remit of their roles with school staff (Counsell & Court, 2000). These accounts are dated: approaches may have evolved, especially since the introduction of EPS trading (Lee & Woods, 2017). It is not clear from the existing research whether clearly distinct roles exist within EPSs currently, whether these roles are based on the psychological content of tasks, or what mechanisms are used to communicate them. The current study aims to explore this.

## 2.7.4 Impact on the profession's status

Section 2.7.3 considered the creation of distinct AsEP and EP roles (Collyer, 2012; Bach et al., 2007; Lyons, 1999). However, researchers have cautioned that dividing the qualified role into core and non-core tasks could lead to a fragmented profession, where the professional's traditional role is lost, and so status challenged (Collyer, 2012; Rezin & Tucker, 1998). This is because when roles and boundaries are dynamically negotiated (Abbott & Meerabeau, 1998) paraprofessionals can 'encroach' into areas of expertise formerly in the professional domain. This is reflected in Collyer's (2012) study: an EP described how the AsEPs were fulfilling roles that were considered the EP's '*bread and butter*' (p.172). Collyer (2012) foresees scenarios where if role delegation is not well managed, with AsEP skill expansion and encroachment, more and more EP functions could be provided by AsEPs. This could lead to a loss of professional status, with service-users potentially requesting AsEPs for certain tasks.

This could be especially likely in the current context when EPs may not be available due to high statutory demand and EP shortages (Atfield et al., 2023). Even in cases where EPs are available, with school and LA budgets being stretched, AsEPs could present a more cost-effective option. This has been seen in the teaching profession with Teaching Assistants stepping into teaching roles, with school systems making the most of this cost-efficient resource (Warhurst et al., 2014). The effective management of the process of deciding roles is therefore crucial to whether the profession becomes fragmented and devalued (Collyer, 2012). Recent research into the roles of AsEPs (Harland et al., 2022) gathered information on what activities AsEPs were carrying out, but did not specify whether AsEPs worked autonomously or by supporting a qualified EP, which has implications for fragmentation. With regards to the dynamic role negotiations (Abbott & Meerabeau, 1998), Woodley-Hume (2018) found that in two EPSs, some AsEP work was allocated by the Senior EPs, and some was allocated by other EPs. The research did not report the experience of negotiations, encroachment or devaluation. The current research hopes to explore how AsEP roles and tasks are decided upon and the perceived impact of these decisions.

## 2.7.5 Experiences of uncertainty

Another consideration in the AsEP role highlighted in the literature is that AsEPs experience a great deal of uncertainty. Woodley-Hume (2018) relates this uncertainty

to there being a lack of clarity, with one AsEP participant describing, "I think when you first start you're a bit like 'What am I actually supposed to be doing? What is my actual job?'" (Woodley-Hume, 2018, p.71). Collins (2022) reports a similar experience in his study of assistant roles in the Irish healthcare system and adds that the Assistants' confusion "…may mirror the confusion of others within the organisation about their role" (p.17-18). This is in line with research in the English system which suggests that EPs are also uncertain about the AsEP role (Neal, 2024).

This is not a new phenomenon, with Counsell and Court (2000) indicating that the purpose of the induction was to clarify the role. However, whereas Counsell and Court's AsEP cohort felt that induction resolved their uncertainty, Neal's (2024) thesis findings suggest that uncertainty persists into the role and shapes both the way the role is experienced, and AsEP actions. In the substantive Grounded Theory created, Neal (2024) theorises that AsEPs initially experience a lack of meaning in their roles. The resulting uncertainty motivates them to seek opportunities to develop their understanding of their 'Work Meaning', and they go on to create new meanings of AsEP and EP work.

Expecting and understanding these experiences of uncertainty and considering how AsEPs may need to act to create 'Work Meaning' will be useful for EPSs when planning the AsEP role. Interestingly, and in contrast to previous studies (e.g. Lyons, 1999), Neal (2024) suggests that it may not be helpful to attempt to reduce uncertainty by "giving meaning directly (for example, designating specific activities to Asst EPs)" but instead, services "could work creatively to adapt the role to each Asst. EP's personal context and focus on providing support in a way that develops Asst. EP's skills to navigate uncertainty in a way that facilitates meaning-making" (Neal, 2024, p. 99). Adapting the role to AsEPs individual contexts, at the same time as aligning the role to the service's priorities, could pose a challenge to EPSs. EPSs will need to consider wider aspects of the system, and other perspectives within the EPS, to decide how to support this experience of uncertainty. The current study aims to add further insight into EPS contextual factors that can be considered when supporting AsEPs to create meaning around their work.

### 2.7.6 The AsEP role in traded models of service delivery

The existing literature suggests that the AsEP role in traded services is a key consideration for EPSs. In traded contexts, income is generated through charging the "customer" (in most cases, schools), to cover some, or all, of the costs of the service. Lee & Woods (2017) suggest that many EPSs moved to a fully- or partially-traded model of service delivery following The Localism Act (Department for Communities & Local Government, 2011), which promoted the development of decentralised service structures to respond to local needs. EPSs have reported increased demand for traded services (Lee & Woods, 2017; Atfield et al., 2023) but EP recruitment and retention difficulties poses a challenge to meeting the demand for traded services.

There have been just three studies focused on the AsEP role since trading has become an established practice in EPSs (Woodley-Hume, 2018; Harland et al., 2022 and Neal, 2024). Only one of those (Woodley-Hume, 2018) makes any reference to AsEPs delivering traded services, stating that the two EPSs studied deploy AsEPs to traded work to meet the demand. The BPS ethical trading guidelines for EPs (BPS, 2018) names the involvement of AsEPs in trading as an area of concern but makes no further reference to AsEPs. The current study is well positioned to explore the AsEP role in relation to traded models of service delivery, including shining a light on EPS charging practices for AsEP work.

## 2.8 Rationale and significance

### 2.8.1 Research

There is a paucity of research into the role and impact of AsEPs and there are limitations in the existing research (see section 2.2). This presents a significant gap, in a context where LA EPSs are employing AsEPs as a strategy for building EPS capacity (Atfield et al., 2023; Woodley-Hume, 2018). Over a decade ago, Collyer (2012) described there being little transparency to AsEPs' role, remit, function and how they are supported, supervised, and developed. The situation has not significantly improved. The profession of educational psychology values evidence-based practice (Frederickson, 2002) and the efficient use of public resources (DfE, 2024a; Delivering Better Value, 2022; Gray et al., 2022; DfE, 2020). However, there is limited research evidence on the AsEP role and its value as a public resource. The current research

aims to contribute a deeper level of understanding to the knowledge base on the deployment and impact of AsEPs, gleaned from a national sample in the current context of EPS operation. As a national qualitative study, gathering perspectives of both AsEPs and qualified EPs, this study has the potential to make a unique contribution to the field.

## 2.8.2 Practice

The AsEP role has now been formally established in the Soulbury scales (Soulbury Committee, 2019), so it seems that this grade of professional will increasingly become part of the EPS. The current study has the potential to inform practice in EPSs. Mackay (2002) argues that 'stuck' systems need innovation to find solutions. To support 'stuck' local SEND systems, EPSs need to make innovative changes to their own systems (Marsh, 2023), with one such change potentially being the development of the AsEP role (Atfield et al., 2023; Woodley-Hume, 2018). However, the lack of research into the AsEP role and impact in the current context means that EPS leadership teams currently have limited evidence on which to base their decisions regarding AsEP deployment. The current research aims to provide insight into the creative deployment of AsEPs to support change in the SEND system. Exploring the facilitators and barriers to AsEP impact will also support EPSs to plan effective AsEP roles.

## 2.8.3 Policy

The current research aims to impact at a policy level, seeking to report findings that can be drawn on by EPSs in their AsEP policy development. This research could also contribute to LA policy focused on improving local SEND systems. At a national level, the current research aims to provide further insights into the role and impact of AsEPs to inform future versions of AEP and BPS policy and guidance. The BPS (2024) expected standards on the recruitment and employment of Assistant Psychologists is currently heavily focused towards those working within the health sector, referring to a BPS survey indicating that 84% of Assistant Psychologists work within clinical psychology. Throughout the document, 'clients' are referred to, with this terminology suggesting a health-based focus rather than an educational focus. This highlights the need for policy and guidance related specifically to the different context of Educational Psychology.

## 2.9 Aims and research questions

The current research aims to develop insights into the AsEP role, the contribution that AsEPs make, the support that is required to enable this contribution, and challenges to the role.

The literature review leads to the following four research questions:

1) *How is the role of AsEP understood?*
2) *What does the AsEP role contribute to Educational Psychology Service delivery?*
3) *What is the perceived impact of the AsEP role?*
4) *What supports the AsEP role and what are the challenges?*

# Chapter 3: Methodology

## Introduction to Chapter 3

This chapter sets out my methodological approach. First, the philosophical underpinnings of the research will be presented, followed by reflections on my context, as this informs the rest of the chapter and study. Then, I will describe the qualitative design adopted and ethical considerations. I will detail my recruitment and sampling procedures, before sharing information about the group who participated in the study. I will describe how I developed the interview schedule, and my procedures for data collection and data analysis. Finally, I will discuss the steps I took to assure the study's quality.

## 3.1 Ontology and Epistemology

The philosophical assumptions that researchers hold impact on every part of the research process, from study design to data analysis (Cresswell, 2025). Here I will set out the philosophical assumptions that I bring to this research.

Ontology considers beliefs about the nature of reality. A critical realist ontological position is held in the current research. This reflects my alignment with the view that there is a real and knowable world, although this can only be accessed through

subjective knowledge located within social relationships (Madill et al., 2000). Acknowledging the existence of some 'authentic' reality enables researchers to strive to produce knowledge that might make a difference - an aim of real-world research (Stainton Rogers and Stainton Rogers, 1997). A critical realist stance holds that the real world can only be *partially* accessed, because knowledge is socially influenced. Social reality is complex and made up of different layers: individual, group, organisational and societal (House, 1991). Therefore, at any time, a researcher is only able to access parts of this complex reality.

The setting of real-world research is in open systems, such as schools and LAs, which cannot be 'sealed' from external influences (Robson, 2024). In these open systems, structures and processes are in a constant state of change. This means that researchers can attempt to explain the past by establishing the configuration of structures, processes or 'mechanisms' in existence at the time of certain events (Robson, 2024). A critical realist stance holds that "…we will only be able to understand – and so change – the social world if we identify the structures at work that generate…events and discourses" (Bhaskar, 2011, p.2). The current study seeks to gain an understanding of the mechanisms that generate events related to the AsEP role. A critical realist stance also highlights the importance of context, seeking to understand the conditions in which these mechanisms operate, as a key influencer as to whether particular outcomes or events occur (Robson, 2024).

With regards to epistemology - assumptions about the nature of knowledge – my views align with a contextualist-perspectivist stance (Tebes, 2005). In line with a critical realist ontology, this epistemological position holds an interest in understanding 'truth' but posits that 'truth' emerges from specific localised contexts and is therefore always provisional. The central tenet of contextualism is the '…*human act in context*…' (Tebes, 2005, p.216): for studies of humans to be meaningful, humans need to be considered in the contexts in which they live and work (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

This view aligns with the theoretical underpinning of the study (see section 1.2), as in the bioecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 2005), individual development is influenced by the systems, or context, surrounding an individual. As the open systems in which the individual lives and work change, and therefore the structures and processes, so does the development of the individual. In this research, the AsEP is the central figure

in the bioecological system. The structures in the systems surrounding the AsEP will be explored and related to the events and discourses that are generated.

Owing to the range of contexts in which people live and work, multiple versions of knowledge are possible in contextualism, although some accounts may be more persuasive or be seen to hold more value than others (Madill et al., 2000). With some overlap with a pragmatic view (Weaver, 2018), contextualists evaluate knowledge based on how *useful* it is judged to be, rather than how accurate (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

As well as it not being possible to separate knowledge from the context, in contextualism, knowledge cannot be separated from the knower. As such, a contextualist approach requires researchers to demonstrate reflexivity (Madill et al., 2000) to make transparent the ways in which the researcher's own context has shaped the meaning generated in the research (see 3.2 below). A summary of my context as a 'knower', and that of the participants, from my reflexive research journal is shown in Appendix B.


## 3.2 Reflexivity

Reflexivity is considered an essential requirement for good qualitative research (Braun & Clarke, 2013), contributing to the trustworthiness of the research (Buckner, 2005; Yardley, 2008). Reflexivity means the researcher makes themselves visible, by turning the research lens back onto themselves, recognising that their own position may influence the whole research process and crucially, the production of knowledge. In reflexivity, the researcher engages in "…a continual internal dialogue and critical self-evaluation of [their] positionality…" (Berger, 2015, p.220). This can be achieved through use of a reflexive research journal, as proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1984).

As I entered into this research, I used my reflexive research journal to consider my past experiences, values and beliefs that relate to, and could potentially influence, the research. My interest in conducting this research came from joining an EPS on placement as a TEP and finding that they had a large number of AsEPs. From this perspective within the EPS system, I immediately became fascinated by the role, and the decisions on their deployment. I already had an interest in systems, organisational

development, and leadership from my previous role as an Assistant Headteacher and SENCo in a school. I therefore became interested in how AsEPs operate as part of the wider education system. I am a strong believer in finding the most effective ways of system operation, and that education services should spend public money efficiently. However, I did not enter this research with strong beliefs about what the AsEP role should look like to be effective and to be an efficient use of public resources. From the start of the research, I knew that for the research to be trustworthy (see section 3.11) I needed to keep an open mind, and a non-judgemental, curious stance to explore the AsEP role.

During the process of this research, I have regularly engaged in reflexivity through my research journal. For example, I reflected on my position as an outsider to both participant groups and the potential impact on the research (see Appendix C). As a result of these reflections, I added further interview questions to elicit a richer understanding of the participants' context, to improve the quality of the research (see refinements to context questions in Appendix D and the final interview schedule in Appendix E). Another example of my reflexivity is in my reflections on feelings of connectedness to different participants and the impact this may have had on data collection (see Appendix F). I found that raising my awareness of this helped me self-monitor (Berger, 2015), noticing times when I felt less connection during interviews. Then, I made a conscious effort to tune in to participants and ask more questions to better understand the context and experience so that I was still able to elicit rich data.


## 3.3 Study design

This study adopts a qualitative design, aiming to establish understanding rather than solely pursue causal explanations. The approach is based on "…the search for detailed…description, seeking to represent reality through the eyes of participants" and is "…sensitive to the complexities of behaviour and meaning in context" (Henwood & Pidgeon, 1994, p.227).

I designed a fully qualitative study, as opposed to a mixed-methods design, as I decided that quantitative data would not suitably address my research questions. Additionally, my qualitative design aligns with my epistemological and ontological positioning: I designed the qualitative data collection to provide rich information which

could be used to understand the social world. The data collection focused on identifying structures impacting on events (Bhaskar, 2011) and considering the social situations in which knowledge is located (Madill et al., 2000) through considering the perspectives of both AsEPs and qualified EPs.

AsEP and EP participants were recruited from across all regions of England. A national qualitative study was appropriate given the existing research: previous recent research comprises one national quantitative survey which sought to capture who AsEPs are and what tasks they fulfil (Harland et al., 2022), one qualitative study focused on understanding the AsEP role using a case study design in two EPSs (Woodley-Hume, 2018) and one qualitative national study exploring one 'problem' area from an AsEP perspective (Neal, 2024). The present study sought to gather richer information than Harland et al.'s (2022) national quantitative study, to consider Woodley-Hume's (2018) qualitative findings in a greater range of contexts, and to target broader areas than in Neal's (2024) study.

Adopting a national qualitative design for this study also aligns with my epistemological position. Contextualist researchers advocate for methodological pluralism (Tebes, 2005) as they hold that no single method leads to "truth" (McGuire, 1986, cited in Tebes, 2005). Rather, a range of different methodological perspectives can be used to advance knowledge (Jaeger & Rosnow, 1988). A range of methodologies can be appropriate for advancing the understanding of the role of AsEP. Previous recent studies have employed quantitative methods (Harland et al., 2022), a qualitative case-study design (Woodley-Hume, 2018) and a Grounded Theory study (Neal, 2024): the current study aims to complement these previous studies to advance the knowledge.

For data collection, I used interviews as they are a "…flexible and adaptable way of finding things out" and for their "…potential of providing rich and highly illuminating material" (Robson, 2011, p. 280/281). A semi-structured interview was chosen as it is more akin to natural dialogue than a structured interview, creating feelings of ease, and allowing follow-up questions to explore responses further. Careful consideration was given to aspects of effective interviewing (Stokes, 2015) to ensure sound execution and generation of relevant data.

As alternative research options, I had considered focus groups for data collection and a Grounded Theory study (Charmaz, 2014) as an overall approach. My reasons for

ultimately deciding against these methods were captured in my research journal (see Appendix G).

## 3.4 Ethical considerations

Full ethical approval was granted by the Institute of Education (IOE) Student Research Ethics Committee (Number Z6364106/2024/03/163). The research was registered with the UCL Data Protection Office in March 2024. The research observed guidelines set out by the BPS Code of Human Research Ethics (Oates et al., 2021) and Code of Ethics and Conduct (BPS, 2021).

The participant information sheet (Appendix H) informed participants that personal data would be confidential and kept securely in line with the General Data Protection Regulation. Participants were also informed that any data shared would be anonymised, that participation was voluntary, and that consent could be withdrawn at any time up until the data analysis started.

Ensuring participant anonymity was a key ethical consideration in the current study, as the EP profession is relatively small (Atfield et al., 2023) and specific aspects of the local context could make a participant identifiable. Measures I took to maintain participant anonymity include deciding not to present the contextual information separated for each participant. Instead, I shared this information grouped together, so that the information contained within illustrative quotes cannot be linked to contextual information, which could increase the likelihood of someone being identifiable. Further details of the ethical considerations made in this study can be found in an excerpt from the Ethics Application in Appendix I.

## 3.5 Eligibility

To meet the eligibility criteria for this study, participants needed to be Assistant Educational Psychologist working in a LA Educational Psychology context for at least six months, or qualified EPs who had worked directly with, or overseen the work of, AsEPs working in a LA in England. I acknowledged that different role titles exist (Harland et al., 2022), and so those who held other titles including 'Assistant

Psychologist' were included provided they worked in an Educational Psychology context.

I decided to include only participants working in England due to differences in the education and SEND systems and operation of EPSs in other UK countries (Marsh, 2023). Working in a LA context was a requirement to participate because this study aimed to explore the role of AsEPs in the current context of high statutory demands which may not be present in the private sector, and to provide insight into the deployment of AsEPs to build capacity in currently stretched LAs. AsEPs must have been in post for at least six months because previous research suggests that earlier than this, AsEPs may be unsure of their role, and still getting to know their working context, so not yet in a position to reflect and comment (Woodley-Hume, 2018).

## 3.6 Recruitment and sampling

To recruit participants, I shared the research flyer (see Appendix J) on social media (X), where it received 4,813 views. I also shared it on EPNet and emailed it to every PEP in England for distribution to their team. PEP contacts were found through a search of each EPS website. The recruitment flyer included a link to 'Qualtrics', an online survey software, where the participant information sheet and consent form were found.

Prospective participants gave consent and expressed their interest on the Qualtrics form. They also provided information detailing the region of England in which they work, the model of service delivery in their EPS, and the number of AsEPs and EPs in their service. A total of thirty-three responses were received on Qualtrics, comprising twenty-three Assistants, and ten EPs.

Participants were selected firstly purposively. Sampling started at the recruitment stage through the participant eligibility criteria (see section 3.5), to ensure that prospective participants would be able to provide relevant and rich data. I then applied stratification principles with the aim of ensuring that my sample comprised a range of diverse contexts and experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2013). I categorised the prospective participants into different strata, using the contextual information collected on Qualtrics: geographical location; model of service delivery (partially, fully or non-

traded); number of AsEPs and EPs. Participants were selected first based on their geographical location, with the aim of recruiting from all nine regions of England. Then participants were selected to cover a range of service delivery models and a range of EPS sizes. The aim was not to pursue representation, as in quantitative designs, but rather to ensure that diversity was incorporated into the sample (Braun & Clarke, 2013) to include a range of perspectives, in line with my contextualist positioning.

## 3.7 Participants

Prospective participants selected based on the stratification principles outlined above were contacted to thank them for their interest in participating, and to arrange the interview. Twelve of the fourteen AsEPs contacted to arrange an interview replied and were interviewed. They covered all nine regions of England. The sample comprised eleven AsEPs and one 'Assistant Psychologist' title. The Assistant Psychologist worked in a LA delivering educational interventions, were supervised by a Senior EP and attended EPS training days. They therefore fit the eligibility criteria of working in an Educational Psychology context, although not within an EPS. The inclusion of this participant gave insight into the multi-professional contexts in which paraprofessionals work referred to in previous research (Woodley-Hume, 2018). Eight qualified EPs were contacted to arrange an interview, and of those, seven replied and were interviewed, covering seven of the nine geographical regions of England. Of the seven qualified EP participants, only two were main-grade EPs. The other five held leadership positions within the EPS - four were Senior EPs and one was a PEP. Going into the research, I had not anticipated that it would be mostly EPs in leadership positions who would volunteer to participate in the study: I thought it would be mostly maingrade EPs as I anticipated that those in leadership positions may not have the capacity to participate. However, in hindsight, it makes sense that EPS leaders would be interested in the national picture of Assistant EP employment and sharing their practice through research. No other main-grade EPs volunteered to participate, even with further recruitment efforts, so this was the final sample, which needs to be considered in the findings. In total, the participants represented sixteen EPSs across England. Table 1 shows the participant contextual information. A summary of the AsEPs' past experiences can be found in Appendix K.

Three participants (two AsEPs and one EP) took part in pilot interviews (see section 3.8 below). Only minor changes to the interview schedule were required following the pilot interviews. These changes added further detail or prompts to the topic questions, but the full range of topic questions had been asked in the pilot interviews. Therefore, the data from the pilot participants were included in the analysis. The pilot participants are included in the final participant numbers and details given above.

## 3.8 Development of the interview schedule

The production of the semi-structured interview schedule (see Appendix E) was directly guided by the research questions. I knew that developing an interview schedule to elicit the data sought should be an iterative process (Magnusson and Marecek, 2015), so I requested feedback on my interview schedule from my research supervisors. I also conducted a pre-test and pilot tests to develop the schedule.

For the pre-test, I conducted a mock interview with a TEP colleague who pretended to be an AsEP participant. This colleague had been an AsEP previously, so was able to use her past experiences to engage in the interview. Following the pre-test interview, this pseudo-participant engaged in an evaluative discussion with me, providing detailed feedback on the draft interview schedule, and the experience of the interview.

Following the pre-test, I conducted a pilot test - this is a small number of interviews with people who meet the eligibility criteria for the study. I interviewed two AsEPs and one EP. Each interview was followed by a reverse debrief where the participant gave feedback on the interview schedule and experience. I created prompts for the evaluation (see Appendix L), which were shared with the pilot interview participants beforehand. The purpose of the feedback I sought was informed by research methods literature (Magnusson and Marecek, 2015) and so evaluated whether: the questions and my interviewing style invited participants to share rich data; the interview questions flowed to encourage a natural conversational experience and the interview schedule elicited data that would address the research questions. The refinements to the interview schedule following feedback from my supervisors and TEP colleagues, and the pre-test and pilot interviews can be found in Appendix D.

**Table 1**

*Participant Contextual Information*

| | Assistant Participants | EP participants | Assistant and EP participants combined |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Number of participants** | 12 | 7 | 19 |
| **Number of regions of England represented** | 9 | 7 | 9 |
| **Number of EPSs represented** | 11 | 7 | 16 |
| **Service delivery model** — Fully traded | 3 | 3 | 6 |
| Partially traded | 6 | 3 | 9 |
| Not traded | 3 | 1 | 4 |
| **Service size range** — EPs in service (approx.) | Ranging from approximately 4 to 50 EPs | | |
| Assistant EPs in service | Ranging from 1 to 8 Assistants | | |
| **Assistant EP: EP ratio range** | Ranging from 3 Assistants for every 4 EPs to 1 Assistant for every 17 EPs | | |
| **Time Assistant has been in post** | Ranging from 8 months to 8 years | | |
| **Seniority of EP participants:** — Main-grade EP | 2 | | |
| Senior EP | 4 | | |
| Principal EP | 1 | | |

As recommended in online interviewing guidance (e.g., Weller, 2022), an additional purpose of the pilot study was to trial the technology used for the online interviews. The researcher checked that the software (Zoom – see section 3.9) and hardware (Dictaphone) was performing as expected: no adjustments to the technological procedures were necessary.

## 3.9 Data collection procedures

The interviews were conducted and recorded on an online platform, using video and audio. I decided to conduct the interviews online to enable participants to be recruited from across England, and to encourage participation at a time when many people work remotely from home (Mutebi & Hobbs, 2022).

A review of the literature on online interviewing was conducted, to select effective procedures, aiming for a high-quality interview experience for the participants, so that rich data could be elicited. An international literature review of twenty-nine studies using digital interviews (Thunberg & Arnell, 2022) suggested that when conducting interviews online, researchers must carefully consider three aspects: ethical issues; the quality of the data collected, and the possibility of technological difficulties. These shall be discussed, then steps I took to overcome these challenges will be shared.

Firstly, in terms of the ethical considerations, confidentiality and privacy issues are regularly raised when considering online research methods (e.g., Franzke et al., 2019; Lobe et al., 2020; Thunberg & Arnell, 2022; Weller, 2022). Taking steps to ensure privacy is crucial in online interviewing, as meeting security can be compromised without certain features enabled (Duffy, 2020). Additionally, participants may not always be located in a confidential space, whether at home or at work (Weller, 2022), which has implications for the material they feel able to share and the ability of the researcher to maintain confidentiality.

Secondly, with regards the quality of the data collected, establishing rapport has been described as a key quality indicator in qualitative interviews. Weller (2022) argues that in online interviews, the initial interactions essential for rapport building are too focused on technical aspects. Conversely, Seitz (2015) argues that engaging in tests of the technology together at the start of the interview can support the researcher and participant to build positive relationships. In the current study, time was allocated at the start of the interview for both technology testing and rapport building.

The literature is mixed with regards to the impact of online interviewing on the richness of data gathered. It has been suggested that as not all verbal cues are available to the researcher in online interviews, the data collected may not be as rich as in-person interviews (Thunberg & Arnell, 2022). However, with the improved visual and auditory functions in digital communication, this is not seen to pose a large risk (Weller, 2022).

Finally, technical difficulties were reported in all but one of the twenty-nine studies in Thunberg and Arnell's (2022) literature review, which suggests that researchers using online interviews should plan for technological difficulties. Indeed, other authors suggest that guidelines for conducting digital interviews should include an emphasis on pre-testing the technological aspects (e.g., Gray et al., 2020).

I took several steps to overcome the potential difficulties outlined above. I selected Zoom as the online platform for data collection. This is because Zoom has been used extensively in research as it has a range of features that support qualitative research, making it an effective choice (see Lobe et al., 2020; Gray et al., 2020). It is also described as 'user-friendly' (Thunberg & Arnell, 2022). Measures were taken to protect confidentiality and privacy, including: requesting that participants take part in the interview in a private room; enabling the waiting room feature, and only permitting invitees to join the meeting (Duffy, 2020). Ethical guidelines related to online research were followed (Franzke et al., 2020). Time was allocated to building rapport at the start of the interview and to further support rapport-building, I actively attended to non-verbal cues from video and audio input throughout the interview. Potential technical difficulties were tested for in the pilot study phase. The in-built automatic transcription function in Zoom was used, followed by manual checking and correction to increase the accuracy of transcription. A back-up Dictaphone recording of the interview was made to mitigate against data loss.

## 3.10 Data analysis procedures

Interview data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). This was chosen as it offers a robust, systematic approach to analysing qualitative data and the flexibility to focus on and analyse data in different ways depending on the research questions and topic (Braun & Clarke, 2012; 2022).

I applied Braun and Clarke's (2012) six-phase approach to analysis (see Figure 3). The six stages of thematic analysis were not followed in a strictly linear way. Rather, I moved between phases as appropriate, applying the approach iteratively to support the analysis process. For example, when producing the written report (Stage 6), I went back to revising some of the themes (Stage 4) to add nuance that I did not feel had been fully captured.

**Figure 3**

*Braun and Clarke's (2012) Six-Phase Approach to Reflexive Thematic Analysis*



*Note. Figure is o*wn work.

Data analysis involved an inductive process at the coding stage, whereby codes were developed directly from the data to ensure that they reflected the participants' experiences. I used a mixture of semantic codes and latent codes when coding, in line with reflexive thematic analysis methodology (Braun & Clarke, 2022) (see Appendix M for extracts of coded transcripts). Semantic codes reflect surface-level meaning, for example the code 'deliver interventions'. Latent codes go beyond the surface level, applying some analytical thinking and inference, for example the code 'supervision is emphasised'. Semantic codes were used to capture specific information about AsEP deployment, to share as examples for EPSs to review when planning the AsEP role (see Appendices M & S), as this was identified as a gap in the literature review.

I continued to use an inductive approach for theme development, developing themes from the codes. I also used my overall reflections on the data to inform theme development. These reflections were captured in my research journal during the familiarisation and coding phases (see Appendix O). Braun and Clarke (2022) argue that it is not possible to be purely inductive in theme development, as researchers always bring an element of their past experiences, values, assumptions and knowledge to the data. So, although the reflections (Appendix O) did develop from engaging with the data, my context, my theoretical framework (Bronfenbrenner, 2005), and my knowledge of the previous AsEP literature will have had an influence. I captured reflexive notes in my research journal so that I could reflect on the ways in which my past experiences or approach to the research impacted on data analysis (see Appendices B, C, F, and P).

The coding phase was supported by NVivo which is software for online coding. Whilst some researchers feel that NVivo can encourage prioritisation of speed over deep engagement (Braun & Clarke, 2022), I have previously experienced NVivo as a useful tool for generating initial codes (Buchanan, 2023). I completed coding for each participant group separately: I created initial codes for the AsEP data and then created codes from scratch again for the EP data. However, as I embarked on the EP data coding, I noticed a large degree of overlap and so created codes that shared the same name as the AsEP codes where there was repeated meaning. Once initial coding was sufficiently developed and refined in NVivo (see Appendix M for extracts of coding), I transferred the codes onto physical cards, to support theme development through physical organisation and re-organisation (see Appendix Q for photographs illustrating this).

I had planned to conduct two separate thematic analyses, one for AsEP perspectives, and one for qualified EP perspectives, with a comparison between the two analyses to highlight any overlapping themes. However, as I started the theme development process, I noticed that the AsEP and EP data complemented each other, whereby some candidate themes from one participant group felt less complete without the extra nuance added by including the perspectives of the other group. For example, Theme Four 'Sitting with Uncertainty' (see section 4.4) was strong in the AsEP data, so developed as an AsEP theme initially. However, the EP data added further nuance to the understanding of uncertainty, shining a light on the reasons why, organisationally, the role might be unclear. This meant that as themes were developed in each data set, I considered how the other participant group views complemented the theme and developed mostly combined themes. My thematic map shows clearly which themes were developed from which data sets (see Appendix R). An explanation of the themes and subthemes, with accompanying illustrative quotes, can be found in Chapter 4. Examples of the codes, subthemes, themes and illustrative quotes from the data can be found in Appendix S.

## 3.11 Trustworthiness

Qualitative research concerns itself with understanding human experiences, rather than being concerned with how well the data can be generalised or reproduced, as in

quantitative research (Pilkington, 2002). The concepts of reliability and validity are therefore appropriate quality markers for quantitative research, but alternative evaluation criteria are required for qualitative paradigms (Ryan et al., 2007). One approach to evaluate qualitative research is to consider the overall "trustworthiness" (Yardley, 2008). The following criteria (Yardley, 2008) were considered in the design of the current study to improve its trustworthiness and therefore its quality:

*Sensitivity to context:* To be a high-quality piece of research, Yardley (2008; 2017) considers that researchers must be sensitive to context. In line with a contextualist epistemology, through my interview schedule and the reflexive thematic analysis, I aimed to remain sensitive to context, "…[analysing] subtle, interacting effects of context and time…and [engaging] with participants to create new understandings" (Yardley, 2008, p.265). I recruited participants from different contexts and explicitly explored different aspects of those contexts to inform the creation of new understandings. The research was designed to be sensitive to the perspectives of the participants, reporting which participant data-sets themes were developed from or illustrative quotes came from. With regards to sensitivity to the data, I have been conscious of remaining open to alternative interpretations: I engaged in discussions with supervisors and peer researchers to consider alternatives and to look for inconsistencies in the data.

*Commitment and rigour:* This is a requirement that the research has sufficient breadth and depth to provide an advancement in knowledge about a topic (Yardley, 2008). The research questions of the current study were purposefully kept broad, and through applying purposive stratification sampling principles, participants came from a broad range of contexts. The aim is that the study's findings will be relevant in many different EPS contexts. The study aimed to achieve an advancement in understanding through interviewing individual participants with a semi-structured interview schedule, enabling a deep exploration of participants' perspectives.

*Coherence and transparency:* Yardley (2008) defines this as "…the extent to which [the study] makes sense as a consistent whole" (p.267). I have carefully considered my ontological and epistemological positioning (see section 3.1), and have selected methods for participant sampling, data collection and analysis that align with this position. The findings in the study are reported in a way that is coherent with my

philosophical positioning, maintaining that 'truth' is always situated in specific contexts, and so is only ever provisional, and varies depending on context and perspective.

Transparency relates to how well the reader of the research can follow precisely what the researcher did, and why decisions were made. A detailed account of the methods has been presented in this chapter and a 'paper trail' (Ryan et al., 2007; Yardley, 2008) can be found in the appendices. This paper trail includes excerpts of coding (Appendix M) and theme development (Appendices Q & R). This paper trail supports the justification of the decisions made in the interpretation of the data, which lead to the theme and subtheme findings presented in Chapter 4 (see Appendix R for the thematic map). I have also shared extracts from my reflexive journal to support transparency (see excerpts in Appendices D, J, K and L).

## 3.12 Chapter Summary

This chapter has given an overview of the methodology of the study, including an explanation of the philosophical underpinnings of the research and a description of how the research was carried out. My approach to reflexivity has been highlighted, and my application of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The next chapter presents the findings of the research.

# Chapter 4: Findings

This chapter will introduce the findings of the research by presenting seven themes with illustrative quotes from participants. In Chapter 5, I will discuss the findings in relation to my research questions and discuss links to theory and the existing literature.

## Overview of Themes

Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022), as described in Chapter 3, was employed for data analysis. Seven themes were developed from the interview data. Four of these themes were common themes across both EP and AsEP data. One theme was developed from the AsEP data alone, and two themes were developed

from the EP data alone. The themes and subthemes are shown in a thematic map in Figure 4. This thematic map can also be found in Appendix R, for ease of reference. Appendix S shows examples of how codes were developed into themes and subthemes.

## 4.1 Theme One- Supporting a system under pressure – local needs: local choices
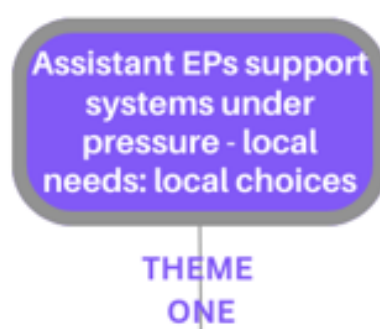


The first theme, 'Supporting systems under pressure – local needs: local choices', reflects views expressed across the interviews that the AsEP role adapts to meet the needs of local systems, which results in great national variation in the role. There is variation in local need, depending on the context, and so different choices about the AsEP role are made by different EPSs.

**National variation in the AsEP role**

The great variation in the AsEP role was captured in individual interviews, as well as through considering the roles described in the data set as a whole. The range of roles that AsEPs fulfilled in the current study are shown in Appendix T. This information was captured in the semantic codes (surface-level information) created during reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The variation includes AsEP roles being created to support statutory assessments, to deliver specific interventions, to support EPs or to meet traded demand from schools.

Participants expressed that understanding the AsEP role in one LA does not equate to understanding the role beyond that LA: "We do very different jobs, considering we have the same job title." (AsEP10). The EP data did not suggest such a strong awareness of the role variation although some of the participants acknowledged the variation:

**Figure 4** *Themes and Subthemes Developed from AsEP and EP Interviews*



- Assistant EPs support systems under pressure - local needs: local choices
  - THEME ONE
- 2.1 There's a lot of learning in this role
- Cultivating Assistant EP competence, confidence and autonomy: the power of supervision
  - THEME TWO
- 2.2 Assistant EPs can do a lot!
- ASSISTANT EP AND EP VIEWS
- THEME FOUR
- Sitting with uncertainty
  - 4.1 Uncertainty at the start of the role
  - 4.2 An uncertain future
- THEME THREE
- Value in the Assistant EP role
- ASSISTANT EP VIEWS
  - THEME FIVE
  - Our past experience matters
- The brilliant, maddening cycle: we train them to say goodbye to them
  - THEME SIX
- EP VIEWS
  - THEME SEVEN
  - Ethical limits: important and difficult decisions
    - 7.1 Safe practice at the forefront
    - 7.2 Feeling torn in search of the 'right' decisions

"Either some teams don't have Assistants and don't understand the benefit of the role, or some teams are not utilising them in a way that values the role. I think it's a relatively new role in the profession, and there is a lot of variation in how they work…" (EP5, PEP)

The interviews suggested that the national role variation could be explained by different decisions made locally about how to best meet the needs in the system, with AsEP11 summing up that the AsEP role is "need-based, by Local Authority". The introduction (see Chapter 1) explored the current context of pressures facing the SEND system. These pressures were frequently referred to in the interviews, and the participants made direct links to decisions made about the AsEP role. Some key pressures and the related decisions are outlined below.

**Staff shortages in the EP profession**

Participants raised the challenge of recruiting and retaining EPs as a local need:

"Since I've started, there has been a significant number of EPs who have left. They've gone into private practice. They've gone to other LAs. They've decided that their workload wasn't working for them". (AsEP5)

Both EPs and AsEPs made direct links between the EP recruitment and retention difficulty and the decision to employ AsEPs:

"Because we couldn't recruit, we recognised there's issues with people getting into the profession…we wanted to support people to get to know [redacted LA]. And so, we're growing our own EPs via this route, hopefully." (EP3, Senior)

The interviewees shared examples suggesting the AsEP role is addressing the recruitment crisis: "We've been extremely lucky that two of our previous AsEPs are now main-grade EPs in our service" (EP5, PEP).

**Limited capacity and high demand**

The pressure put on EPSs to deliver services, whilst battling low capacity, was raised throughout the interviews. This included the challenge of increased demand for statutory assessments:

"We have *huge, huge* numbers of Early Years assessments…[they have tripled] and not with triple the capacity of EPs. So we are, you know, still in the statutory hole" (EP3, Senior).

This high demand for statutory assessments was linked to local decisions about the AsEP role in some cases, whereby "[The EPS] hired Assistants to support EPs in the process of assessment." (AsEP3). AsEP4 explained that their role was to "almost exclusively work within the Early Years…that's what the role was created to do – to help support with statutory assessments in Early Years". This was a local choice, with not every EPS deciding to deploy AsEPs to meet this need (see Appendix T).

Participants also raised the difficulty of delivering traded work requested by schools due to EP shortages, and the resulting local decision to deploy AsEPs to traded work:

"Schools were only getting 50% of what they had bought because of the low capacity. So hopefully, this year [after deploying AsEPs to traded work], we'll be able to deliver between 75 and 100%, because the capacity is shared and not all on a link EP." (AsEP11)

Participants described a range of other AsEP role decisions made locally to support low EP capacity including having AsEPs deliver blocks of 1:1 intervention in schools, represent the EPS at multi-agency meetings and co-deliver training when an EP cannot.

**EPs under pressure**

Across the interviews, a picture was painted of EPs under pressure, whereby EPs are "completely snowed under" (AsEP5), "overly stressed" (EP 5, PEP) and "juggling too much" (AsEP9). In some cases, the AsEP role was devised to support EPs and relieve some of their felt pressure, as illustrated by AsEP11:

"I think for me that's the most important part of my role. If I notice someone in the team visibly stressed or overwhelmed, then I can be like, 'Okay, give me something off your plate'. I can take something and support their capacity."

**Local variation in the AsEP role**

As well as there being huge national variation in the AsEP role, the interviews indicated that there is variation even within one EPS: "I look at how Assistants have been used

in other teams, and they haven't necessarily used them in the same way we have" (EP2, Senior).

Additionally, participants reported that EPs work in different ways, and view the AsEP role in different ways, so consequently the AsEP role will vary if EPs allocate the work:

"Some EPs are much more comfortable working in parallel. So…the EPs take the traditional casework, and the Assistant will deliver training and interventions. Other EPs have taken the model to work much more closely together, and they do shared casework with their Assistant EPs." (EP7, Senior)

The two EP styles described above would result in different role experiences for AsEPs. AsEP1 shared that their role experience had been determined by the style and preferences of the EPs they worked with:

"How [EPs] want to use me is how I experience this role. I think I've been quite lucky. I've been able to do some really brilliant pieces of work and really be involved in their work, and I've felt lots of meaning and purpose."

There was a sense in the interviews that every AsEP is different too, as experienced by EPs: "working with one AsEP might not be the same as your last experience working with an AsEP" (EP3, Senior). Differences were due in part to varying AsEP past experiences and personal working styles, and this could influence the role. AsEP8 described their approach to their work and the difference it made: "So I went into this job with the mindset of, 'I'm just going to say, 'Yes' to everything, even if inside, I'm like 'Oh!' Yeah, I think if I'd turned things down, my job would have been slightly different".

**Constant state of change**

Participants indicated that as local and national contexts are constantly shifting, so too is the AsEP role, as it "shifts and changes…. with the priorities of [the EPS], the priorities of different [teams], the priorities of different EPs…" (AsEP7). In an EPS where AsEPs were employed to support with reducing the statutory backlog, EP1 (Main-grade) described that "as the statutory demands have been more manageable, there's more of a shift to being able to think about how we are using AsEPs at a wider level". This means that the role may not stay stable for long. The constant state of change contributes to uncertainty experienced in the role (see Theme Four).

## 4.2 Theme Two – Cultivating Assistant EP competence, confidence and autonomy: the power of supervision
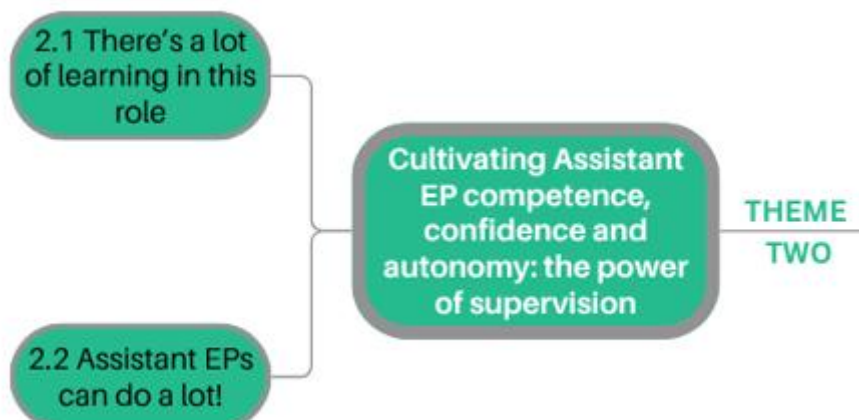


This theme captures the view that the AsEP role is a journey of development, where the EPS supports AsEPs by cultivating their competence, confidence and autonomy. A supportive element to the EP developmental journey deemed to be crucial is the opportunity to experience regular supervision, both formally and informally, with EPs and with AsEP peers. The subthemes are 2.1 'There's a lot of learning in this role' and 2.2 'AsEPs can do a lot!'

### Subtheme 2.1: There's a lot of learning in this role

Subtheme 1 'There's a lot of learning in this role' captures the view that AsEPs are given lots of support to learn, developing their competence, confidence and autonomy so that they can carry out their role.

**Support to cultivate competence and confidence**

Both participant groups emphasised the range of support given to AsEPs to promote learning and development, filling gaps in competence and boosting confidence. Planned and structured support included induction programmes, ongoing training, and supervision. Induction programmes aimed to get AsEPs up and running in their role as quickly as possible: "We have quite an intensive training program. It's front-loaded. What I realised was that I couldn't space it beautifully, evenly, across the across the year, because most of what they need, they need right now just to get going!" (EP7, Senior).

Participants mentioned bespoke induction and training programmes created in their services to introduce them to key knowledge, skills and understanding of the local context. Programmes included stepped induction activities, for example shadowing a task first, then completing it jointly with an EP, before working with more autonomy. Bespoke training to enable AsEPs to fulfil a specific role included Early Years development training for AsEPs involved in EYFS statutory assessments, person-centred psychology to develop report-writing and Video Interactive Guidance training when the role involved working with Family Hubs. Participants described ongoing training in a range of skill areas such as dynamic assessment, observations, and content such as meta-cognition.

**Increasing autonomy over time**

Participants' use and understanding of the term 'autonomy' was in line with the definition given in the literature review (see p.39), referring to decision-making and independent working. The interviewees indicated that autonomy built up over time, after competence and confidence had started to develop through the induction programme and early practice experiences. A lot of thought went into this, to ensure safe practice (see Theme Six). EPs recounted supporting the gradual build-up of autonomy when an AsEP was working with them, for example:

> "For statutory assessments, we've done joint observations. And then following a school consultation, they've done observations on their own, but with really clear templates of what they're looking for, like a structured observation schedule". (EP1, Main-grade)

In my position as a Trainee EP, I find this recount very relatable as I too have experienced a similar gradual build-up of autonomy through joint work, then independent work supported by frameworks and supervisory discussions. Furthermore, exploring these findings has enabled me to reflect on my own experience, and to consider that the gradual build-up of autonomy was at times imperceptible, until I was supported to notice through supervision that I was working on cases fairly independently and making decisions myself that had previously required support.

**Supervision support**

Participants felt that supervision was a key part of the AsEP's learning journey, both for the impact on their development, and for safe practice.

> "I think supervision is super important…the supervisor can support them in thinking about further work that needs to be done, or conversations that need to happen with the qualified EP. And that helps the Assistant be clearer hopefully and think deeper about the cases." (EP5, PEP)

AsEPs showed appreciation for the supervisory space, making clear links between their supervision experience, and their personal development journey. AsEP1 described their experience of group supervision passionately:

> "We share lots together. We go through different experiences in that room together. It's not just a place where people turn up and talk about their week. Ours has been so much deeper than that...That is where I attribute lots and lots of my learning to, being in that space. And not only learning psychology but learning about myself and growing as a person too." (AsEP1)

**Informal support**

As well as structured and formalised support, the participants felt that informal support opportunities also cultivated AsEP competence, confidence and autonomy. AsEPs described connecting with different members of the EPS to seek advice. There was a sense of individual EPs going above and beyond and taking AsEPs 'under their wing'. AsEPs appreciated this support:

> "[My supervisors] always make sure they have time set aside to have those talks with me, and to flesh out anything that I may not be too sure about, or nervous about. Them making time for me means a lot. That really helps me." (AsEP2)

This informal support was echoed in the EP interviews:

> "I sort of just check in with them and say, 'Well, I had this idea. What do you think? Do you think you can do that?' And I offer regular meetings. Say with the research project, she would go away and do the literature review, and

then we would meet up and just process it, and develop the next stages, next ideas". (EP4, Main-grade).

In the description above, EP4 was not an EP who had any responsibility for AsEPs, but was keen to work with them, and took the Assistant under their wing.

**Feeling supported through connection**

Across the interviews, there was a feeling that connections matter, influencing the AsEP's developmental journey. Both participant groups reflected that there was a benefit to having more than one AsEP, so they can connect together. This was especially important at the start when AsEPs may feel unsure about the role (see Theme Four): "…having other Assistants to bounce off has made an absolute world of difference for me and my role…I think the main thing that's helped me to understand the role is the other Assistants" (AsEP5). Having other Assistants to connect with also supported them when they were still developing competence:

> "We have such a lovely little Assistant team. We go to each other and are like, 'Okay, I've been asked to do this. Can we look at it together?' And then if nobody there feels competent, then we would speak to our supervisor." (AsEP11).

EPs also recognised the value of connections between AsEPs: "I think them having other people in the same role who they can talk to and check things out with really helps. I think it would be a very different picture if we only had one AsEP." (EP5, PEP). Descriptions by interviewees of the importance of connections with peers particularly resonated with me: as a Trainee EP, I have found the opportunities to connect, both formally and informally, with other Trainee EPs in my placement EPS to be invaluable. Like Assistant EP11 above, I too have sought to connect with my TEP peers to build my feelings of competence and feel it would have been a very different experience had I been on a solo placement.

### Subtheme 2.2- AsEPs can do a lot!

Subtheme 2.2 firstly captures the great variety of tasks that AsEPs fulfil, across each of the five functions of EP practice (Currie, 2002). The range of tasks, with specific examples, are presented in Appendix N. This information was captured from the semantic (surface level meaning) coding of the interviews during reflexive thematic analysis (see section 3.10 for the data analysis process).

Subtheme 2.2 also reflects the view that because of the support put in place, AsEPs develop competence to fulfil this range of tasks: "they become increasingly skilled, and they become increasingly autonomous" (EP7, Senior). AsEPs reported that training and having experience supported them to feel competent: "[Emotion Coaching training is] one that everyone has delivered a billion times. So, in terms of professional competency, Assistants feel, and the rest of the team feels, that we're competent enough to deliver that training" (AsEP11). After intensive bespoke training focused on Early Years statutory assessments, EP3 (Senior) felt that "some of our Assistant reports are as good as…an EP's who's maybe not so interested in Early Years, and doesn't do that work very often, particularly when [the AsEP] has [past] experience".

Once AsEPs had developed competence and confidence, participants reported that their levels of autonomy increased. This was valued by both AsEPs and EPs.

> "I do get quite a lot of freedom over the work, which is really nice…At the beginning, there's a lot more support from the EP, so they probably join you in the observation. But now, it's nice just to go off by myself and have a bit of freedom." (AsEP4)

Not only was autonomous practice valued, it was deemed essential for AsEP development:

> "We try very hard for EPs to understand that [the Assistants] need their own responsibility, because that's what allows them to grow, with the supervision of the EP at all times." (EP5, PEP)

EP5 here alludes to the careful balance between the need to create opportunities for AsEPs to work autonomously and grow, and the need to ensure safe practice (see Theme Six). AsEP3 described what they were able to achieve when given autonomy:

> "And then I created an action plan myself, for schools to go off and do themselves. So, from there on, the PEP just said, "You plan it, and just show me at the end what you think".' (AsEP3)

This illustrates the trust placed in the AsEP to work with competence and autonomy, and through this trust, their ability to contribute something useful to service delivery.

## 4.3 Theme Three – Value in the Assistant EP role

THEME
THREE

Value in the
Assistant EP role

This theme reflects the view expressed by both participant groups that the AsEP role offers a lot to EPSs and has positive impact within the EPS and beyond.

**AsEPs value the role**

Firstly, AsEPs expressed how much they value the role. They find their role interesting and enjoyable, for example when interacting with children:

> "I get to go to nurseries and play with little children. I'll often come home with sand on me, or gloop, or whatever, and I can't believe I get to call it a day's work, because it doesn't feel like work a lot of the time." (AsEP4)

AsEPs shared that they felt lucky to have secured an AsEP post, as there can be many applicants for one role. They described the role as a "brilliant opportunity" (AsEP8) and expressed gratitude for the opportunities to learn about psychology and the EP role. AsEPs also indicated that they value the role because they feel a clear purpose, supporting EPs to meet needs, even when fulfilling what may be seen as a small task: "I feel lots of meaning and purpose in my work, because I'm drawn into not just feeling like a notetaker, but like an active participant." (AsEP1).

**AsEPs are valued by others**

Both EP and AsEP views indicated that AsEPs are seen as an asset to EPSs. AsEPs had been told first-hand that they are valued:

> "[The PEP] was like, 'I can't believe we literally didn't know how to use you in the beginning. And now, you create this whole thing, which is brilliant!'" (AsEP3)

EP participants expressed that AsEPs are valued at different levels: "hopefully for the services users, children and young people, families and schools that we work with, but for myself as well, for my practice" (EP1, Main-grade). EPs also valued the way that

AsEPs impacted on how they could operate, "allowing us to be a bit more flexible and creative than we would otherwise be." (EP4, Main-grade).

Some participants shared feedback from other stake-holders, showing positive impact beyond the EPS:

> "I've certainly had several of our SENCos say, 'I was an outspoken critic of this at the start. I thought this would never work. But now I love our Assistant, and don't you dare take her away from us!'" (EP7, Senior)

**AsEPs are a benefit to the EP team**

AsEPs are considered valued members of the EP team, bringing fresh ideas, energy and enthusiasm and boosting the workforce.

> "What I'm really passionate about is the impact for the service. I think Assistants make our service better. Their energy, their enthusiasm…" and "I don't just mean getting things done…but when we're in the room together, learning together, thinking together, the Assistants bring a layer of richness that I think we all benefit from." (EP7, Senior)

Participants felt that AsEPs enter into partnerships with EPs, promoting collaborative learning and reflective practice. AsEP participants felt they offer EPs connection in what can be an isolated profession: "I do think that us Assistants add real value, whether it's working with an EP or offering that sense of connection and a better working experience." (AsEP1). EPs also reflected on the benefits of being able to work alongside an AsEP:

> "I like working with other people. I feel calmer and more confident when someone else is there. It gives me a bit more brain space - if I'm sort of going a bit blank, [the Assistant] does something, and I take a breather! [laughs]." (EP4, Main-grade)

**Building EPS capacity and extending delivery**

The interviews suggested that AsEPs impact positively on EPS capacity and service delivery. Participants shared examples of AsEPs building EPS capacity by filling gaps, enabling service delivery that would otherwise not be possible:

72

"And it was like, 'We desperately need an EP to go and observe this child'. And my manager is like, 'We don't have an EP. However, we have an Assistant, and they can go'…They're quite happy for me to go, because they would rather have somebody go than nobody go." (AsEP8).

EPs in leadership positions expressed that AsEPs play a crucial role in getting EPS initiatives (e.g., ELSA, MELSA, Sandwell Charter Mark) off the ground, and this was echoed by AsEPs:

"[Our manager] said that having a team of Assistants has really helped with…the LA-level work…She said that as a service, we've been able to do so much more than they would have been able to do without us." (AsEP5)

AsEPs sometimes carried out more administrative roles to keep EPS systems working, for example with involvement in Service Level Agreements and caseload tracking.

Sometimes capacity issues arose when two people are needed, but two EPs are not available: "You would never send two EPs to do training, there just isn't capacity, but an Assistant can add capacity to training" (AsEP7). Other examples when a second person was needed were: home visits; graphic facilitation in a PATH or when a remote locum EP was carrying out a statutory assessment, but an in-person observation was needed.

The interviews also suggested that AsEPs have been effective in extending the delivery of early intervention work, including supporting schools to implement training and interventions. A gap was identified whereby "training is offered, and then it's not embedded within school practice" (EP1, Main-grade). The interviews suggested that AsEPs build school capacity by supporting implementation, for example by "observing the interventions, meeting with the individuals who are delivering it…troubleshooting, giving the next level of support…just giving lots of confidence basically to the TAs about what they're doing" (AsEP6). EP2 (Senior) shared that once this implementation support has happened, "then we see impact". AsEP3 also received positive feedback about their implementation support:

"The SENCo was so happy. She said, 'This is really good support. We're really lucky to have this time with you. You taught us a lot.' And now they can go on and plan different interventions as well." (AsEP3)

AsEPs are impacting positively through other preventative work, supporting schools with their graduated response:

> "Our schools are telling us that the Assistants have really strengthened their assess-plan-do-review process. They feel…that the Assistants have built the capacity of the school with their training, that they have done really skilled intervention work, and that they often bring a unique perspective on the voice of the child." (EP7, Senior)

**AsEPs build relationships with service users**

Participants suggested that AsEPs build relationships with schools and children, where EPs have not had capacity for this, and that AsEPs are valued as the 'face of the EPS'.

> "When we started doing the trainings, we started seeing the ELSAs, and then we see them in the conferences. Then we might go to a school to do direct work with a student, and we might also see that teacher in one of our trainings." (AsEP3).

> "[The AsEPs are] showing up for these children, they're listening, they're centring the child's voice…And there's power in that. So, I think they make children feel listened to and understood." (EP6, Senior)

As the 'face of the EPS', AsEPs provide consistency where EPs cannot. In a few EPSs, AsEPs are the consistent person from the EPS in particular projects such as ELSA training, with other EPs joining for just one session: "My line manager…noted that I had rapport with the ELSAs, and they would come to me with their problems because they knew me. So, she's like, 'Oh, it's working really well, isn't it?' (AsEP8).

**AsEPs alleviate pressure**

Participants shared the view that AsEPs support the alleviation of pressure in the system (see Theme One). One EP in a leadership position expressed, "For me, [the Assistants have] just been invaluable. That's how I've managed to keep [EPs'] heads above water really." (EP2, Senior). AsEPs shared examples of how they have alleviated pressure:

"We take a lot of things off the EPs' hands when they're juggling too much, or when the statutory work is getting a bit heavy. There's been a few EPs who've been off on long-term sick and we've covered the work that has needed to be done. So, I think we take quite a lot of the pressure off the surface a lot of the time". (AsEP9)

Most participants talked about AsEPs reducing EP time spent on particular tasks. Often, this was through administrative support, such as arranging school visits or preparing resources for training. In some cases, AsEPs support long-term projects, freeing up EP time. For example, AsEP8 organises the ELSA training groups so books rooms, communicates with delegates and prints resources. As a result, "originally the ELSA lead [EP] had a lot more days allocated for ELSA, and in the end they ended up saying they didn't really need them, because of what I do." (AsEP8).

The impact of AsEPs on the amount of EP time spent on statutory work was raised frequently in the interviews, with most participants saying AsEP support in statutory work reduced the amount of time EPs spent on this work. AsEPs completed tasks like summarising the paperwork accompanying assessment requests for the EP who would be carrying out the assessment. The impact of this was described by EP6 (Senior): "It's a big task. And often I was doing that in the evening before a visit, if I'm totally honest. So, to know that's going to be done and emailed to me just makes a huge, huge difference."

Participants also described AsEPs accompanying EPs for home-school assessment meetings, making notes into statutory report templates, editing the notes and sending them to EPs. The impact of this was felt by EPs: "It cuts down our statutory work from two-and-a-bit days to literally about 4 hours" (EP2, Senior). Where AsEPs carried out and wrote the statutory assessment, but the work was overseen by an EP, this time-saving was also reported: "On average, we are supposed to take about four sessions to do an assessment as an EP. And with our Assistants working with us that drops down to two, or maybe even one when they're experienced." (EP3, Senior)

In contrast, one EPS did not find that AsEP involvement in statutory assessments was saving EPs time:

"We've ceased the Assistant's involvement in statutory work, because while it was successful in that it was safe, it was high quality….it wasn't saving EPs any

time. And our bottom line was, if it's not saving EPs time, we're just topping up. So, if an EP still needs 12 hours to do an assessment, the Assistant time may make the assessment even *better*. But it's over-delivery of statutory, essentially." (EP7, Senior)

Participants in other services felt that their experience of time saved may not be reflected in EPS data. EPs felt this was because they had previously been spending *more* than the allocated time on statutory work, working outside of the working day to complete reports:

"If I speak honestly, absolutely having the AsEPs work with me on statutory assessments has definitely saved me time. But I think I always went over the two days anyway. So, I think now it feels like, 'Oh, actually, I fit that into two days'. So, although in terms of my stress levels and my work-life balance it has definitely saved me time, whether that is yet being seen on paper as me completing more statutory assessments, is maybe a slightly different issue." (EP6, Senior)

## 4.4 Theme Four – Sitting with uncertainty
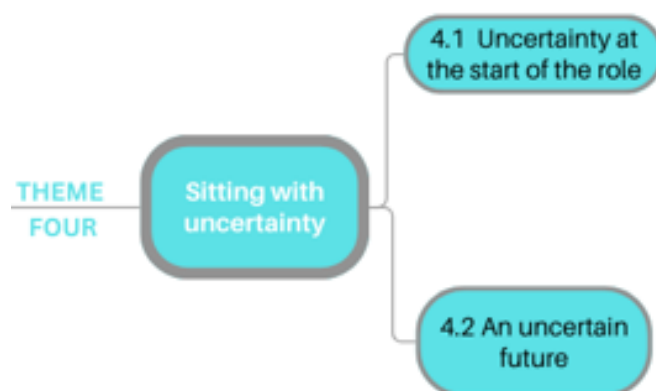


The theme 'Sitting with uncertainty' represents the feelings of confusion and insecurity experienced by many AsEPs, and within the EPS. The subthemes are 4.1 - Uncertainty at the Start, and 4.2 – An uncertain future.

### Subtheme 4.1 – Uncertainty at the start

The subtheme 'Uncertainty at the start' captures the feelings of uncertainty at the start of the AsEP role, due to limited role clarity, and unfamiliarity with the role across the

EPS. Some AsEPs suggested that their role had been created without a clear plan, with the EPS leadership not yet knowing what the role should entail: "In the beginning, [the Senior EPs] didn't really know how to use us. They knew they needed us, but they didn't know what for. So, a lot of it was, '*What do you guys think we need*?'" (AsEP3). In many cases, the role was unclear because it was new to the EPS. This meant that the role built from the ground up: "We've never had an AsEP before…so, it's been about finding our way and what works for the EPS and for us….it's been a trial-and-error thing…" (AsEP5).

EP views, generally, did not reflect this same lack of clarity. Just EP4 (Main-grade) also described the role as being "vague". Looking at the participant contextual information, I would suggest that this is because EP4 worked in an EPS where AsEPs had been employed for only six months, whereas the other EP participants had been working with AsEPs for between two and eight years.

Interviews with EPs in leadership positions gave further insight into the complexity of designing the role, and perhaps a reason why the role is not always clear at the start:

> "Working out the remit and the limits of the Assistant EP role was the most challenging part. I found it impossible to sit down and just write a simple list of what the Assistants could do in traded and statutory work, and what they couldn't do…. And I realised immediately that even if *I* felt clear about it, every decision that I made would be up for huge discussion with the schools and with the EPs." (EP7, Senior)

The AsEPs expressed that the unclear role led to feelings of self-doubt: "The first six weeks of my time in [redacted LA] was very, very quiet. It made me question myself at times, 'Have I done the right thing [taking this job]?', or 'Am I the right person [for the job]?'" (AsEP1).

Assistants indicated that EPs were also not familiar with the role and did not always know how to work with Assistants. AsEP2 remarked, "At first, I remember my EPs…would be like, '*Oh, I don't know if you could come here with me*', or…, '*I don't know if you can write this up…*?'". EP interviews echoed the point that EPs can be unfamiliar with the AsEP role and added that an ever-changing dynamic contributed to the uncertainty:

"There was a lot of uncertainty and questions. Because you've both got EPs learning what the Assistants do, and Assistants evolving in time in their own practice. So, what they need at the beginning of their journey is completely different to what they need six months on". (EP3, Senior)

This EP was reflecting on the start of their journey of employing Assistants. They felt that this unfamiliarity was no longer a challenge as the EPs now understood what the Assistants can and cannot do.

The participants reflected that clear communication about the AsEP role is crucial to overcome these experiences of uncertainty. Information about the AsEP remit was shared in policies, in EP inductions, in CPD days when there may be new members of the EPS and in team meetings: "When we have team meetings, I reiterate, 'These are the things they're able to do. If you've got work that involves this type of thing, get them involved. But they're not yet able to do X, Y, and Z'." (EP2, Senior).

Although feeling unclear about the role was a pattern across the data, there were instances where the role was described as clear from the start. As well as when the role had been operating for a longer time, these tended to be when the AsEPs were recruited for a specific role, such as to join a project team, to deliver an intervention, or to have a defined role in Early Years statutory assessments.

## Subtheme 4.2- An uncertain future

The subtheme 'An uncertain future' relates to feelings of uncertainty about securing a place on a doctoral programme and uncertainty about the permanency of AsEP roles in EPSs.

Many of the AsEP participants alluded to feelings of uncertainty about what the future holds for them. This uncertainty often related to hopes to get onto the doctoral training programme. Most AsEPs had short-term contracts, due to the expectation to secure a doctorate place, and EPSs following AEP guidance to make it a temporary post. AsEPs on short-term contracts expressed worries about what would happen if they did not secure a doctoral training place.

"Because [the post] is a fixed-term role, our role ends in September, so what will we do if we don't get onto the doctorate? I mean the Principal EP is very

open to discussing that with us, although, I think they've been pretty clear that the role will end." (AsEP4)

Interestingly, four of the AsEP participants shared that they did not intend to pursue a doctoral training place. There were a variety of reasons given for themselves, and other AsEPs they knew, such as financial or familial commitments or not living close enough to a university programme. One AsEP shared their feelings related to this:

"The main barrier for me in this role is there's no progression, and there's no certainty. This isn't a long-term role where I can just be doing it for years. It will come to an end. And that is a barrier, because it deflates me, because I just think I'm doing all of this, and I want to make all this change. But then I have to leave soon. So, what's the point?" (AsEP2)

Throughout the AsEP and EP interviews, there were reports, both first- and second-hand, of EPSs offering permanent AsEP positions. AsEP12 explained that in their service, the AsEPs "put a case forward for it being permanent and [the EPS] did, as they could see a need for it within [LA]". Other participants made the point that they could see "value in the role outside of it being a stepping stone [onto the doctorate]" (EP6, Senior) with a permanent post serving a dual purpose. A permanent post can benefit the EPS, as "the longer [the Assistants are] with us, the more they learn, and the more they can do" (EP2, Senior), as well as increasing stability and reducing uncertainty for AsEPs.

"I said, 'You know you can stay in this job as long as you want to. You get maternity pay as well'. After that she was a lot happier because there's no pressure. She's going to apply again this year, but if she doesn't get on, she's okay with that." (EP2, Senior)

As well as uncertainty experienced by AsEPs about their own future, uncertainty was reported within the EPS related to changes to the AsEP role. For example, AsEP8 has been in a permanent role for several years, but even so, was uncertain about what the next year would hold: "I am a little bit overwhelmed by the thought of September. To be honest, I'm like - oh, my goodness, so many new things!". Some participants indicated that possible future changes to the local context could lead to a changed picture of AsEP employment. In a few cases, EPSs were considering employing more AsEPs. In others, there was uncertainty as to whether AsEP roles would continue.

79

AsEP4 shared that "there have been a few people whose roles have ended this year, and [the EPS] haven't gone to recruit any more". Also, some participants suggested that AsEP posts may cease if the EPS was able to recruit more EPs: "We got rid of one AsEP post to end up having another qualified EP" (EP5, PEP).

## 4.5 Theme Five – 'Our past experience matters'



Theme Five reflects AsEP views only. It highlights their view that they do not arrive to the role as 'blank slates'. They emphasise the importance of their previous experience, and the value they place on having their past experiences considered in their role.

Some AsEPs had extensive past experience, arriving to the role with established skills and knowledge:

> "I have worked as a Learning Support Assistant, as a teacher, as a Head of school. I've worked at multiple levels within a school. So, when I'm trying to facilitate conversations between different members of staff, I've probably got a fairly good understanding of those invisible hierarchies, and how that feels." (AsEP6)

AsEPs shared examples of when their competence from previous experience had been drawn on in their current role. For example, one AsEP with over twenty years of experience in education and leadership shared that EPs sometimes contact her to seek advice. Another AsEP had previously worked in Mental Health and then worked with Education Mental Health Practitioners in their AsEP role and expressed how comfortable they had felt as she already had knowledge of that role.

Where AsEPs were very experienced in their previous roles, they expressed some frustration when autonomy was restricted:

> "I was quite happy to go and deliver training. I didn't necessarily need the handholding...I guess for me that was just a bit of a mind-shift from where I'd

come in my career to then coming back to an Assistant role. But they're also making sure that we are capable and have the right skills." (AsEP7)

This illustrated the balance that EPSs need to achieve when giving value to what AsEPs' previous experience at the same time as prioritising safe practice (see Theme Six).

In contrast, AsEPs with less past experience shared that they sometimes felt like an imposter in their new role, and unequipped to do the job. AsEP3 shared: "I was very hesitant, because I'm not a teacher, but the other Assistants were. So, in a way, I was like, 'Oh maybe I'm not qualified enough to do this project'". Some of the AsEPs with less prior work experience expressed that they felt they had too much autonomy at the start of their roles. This was especially related to managing their own time:

"I know this role has a lot of autonomy, where you're in charge of your own diary, but when I started, it felt illegal! I was like, 'How does anyone know I'm working right now? Do I need to check in with my manager?' So maybe a bit more structure [would have been helpful] for people that aren't used to that" (AsEP2).


## 4.6 Theme Six- The brilliant, maddening cycle: we train them to say goodbye to them
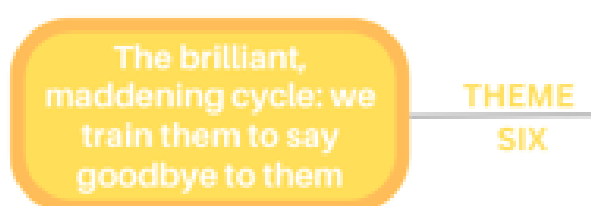


This theme captures a challenge presented in the EP data only: a "brilliant, maddening cycle" of recruiting new AsEPs, training them up intensively, saying goodbye to them when they get a place on the doctorate or leave due to short-term contracts, and starting again.

EPs spoke of a high turnover of AsEPs and felt that this presented a challenge for their own individual practice, and for EPS planning:

"We've got Assistants leaving, and I think it'll be interesting how that feels. I'm so used to having that support system and that opportunity to bounce ideas off someone" (EP1, Main-grade).

"It feels really tricky to have this rolling program of people starting with us and moving on, starting with us and moving on" (EP6, Senior).

EPs suggested that this cycle arises from the dual-role nature of the job: AsEPs are "trying to do the job for [the EPS], but…for them, it's like 'We need to get onto the course!" (EP2, Senior).

EPs indicated that the 'brilliant' part of the cycle is seeing the AsEPs grow and respond well to the training and support:

"It's lovely- you get to watch them go from…just tentatively recording some observations to being able to do a really quality piece of work…[where we] feel really confident that the [Assistant EP] understands you, understands the child, has got the skills and the knowledge to do that." (EP3, Senior)

EPs suggested that the challenge then comes when AsEPs leave soon after starting, or just as the EPs notice how competent and confident the AsEPs have become.

"We have *just* got to that stage where [AsEPs] have got that level of fluency and competency to be able to make use of supervision but be relatively independent in their day-to-day work, and then those people have moved on." (EP6, Senior)

This experience was described as a "brilliant, maddening cycle":

"You have this brilliant, maddening cycle where they come to you, and you have to teach them very quickly everything that you need them to know for them to be a safe practitioner…they become increasingly skilled and autonomous over the cycle of time that they are with you. But in a sense, you're recruiting them to say goodbye to them. Because the posts are not permanent….And then, with the experiences and the brilliant skills that they brought to us, and with everything that they acquire from the role, a lot of them very successfully leave us to start EP training, and you have to start all over again! [laughs]" (EP7, Senior)

EPs described the mixed feelings they have due to feeling pleased for AsEPs who get on to the doctoral training programme but concerned that the demand for services that AsEPs provide remains high. EPs also shared the difficulty of all AsEPs leaving at once, and so "starting from scratch with a whole batch of freshers, with no one to lean on, to guide them" (EP2, Senior).

## 4.7 Theme Seven – Ethical limits: important and difficult decisions



This theme captures the recurrent messages about safety in the EP data. The feeling was that AsEPs can be trained well to secure good levels of competence, confidence and autonomy (see Theme Two). EPs emphasised, however, that decisions needed to be made about safe and ethical limits to the role, as AsEPs are not qualified to fulfil the EP role. Two subthemes will be presented: Subtheme 7.1 'Safe practice at the forefront' and Subtheme 7.2 'Feeling torn in search of the 'right' decisions.'

### Subtheme 7.1 Safe practice at the forefront

This subtheme highlights the prioritisation of safe practice. EP participants emphasised the need for AsEPs and EPs to feel comfortable that AsEP practice is safe. For AsEPs, the need to feel comfortable often related to their developing feelings of competence and confidence (see Theme Two). EPs felt that AsEP confidence could be a challenge and that therefore, planned support is needed to enable them to "feel okay out there on their own, working in quite an autonomous way" (EP3, Senior). EPs talked about this support including formal and informal supervision with initial conversations "at the start of the working relationship and understanding…where they feel more confident…where they're feeling a bit uncertain and feeling they need a bit of support" (EP1, Main-grade), meeting together regularly throughout the course of a project and "giving scaffolding and structure" (EP4, Main-grade).

The EP interviews indicated that EPs need to feel comfortable that practise is safe because they oversee the AsEP work, and responsibility for the work lies with them. There was an emphasis that AsEP work is overseen and supervised by EPs: "The EP ultimately has to sign off on that assessment and would want to be comfortable that what's written is what they feel is an appropriate assessment of that child." (EP3, Senior). In terms of what this practice might look like, EP 5 (PEP) described,

> "You would expect that the Assistant will go off, do that piece of casework, come back to the EP and say, 'Look, I've done this. This is what I'm thinking. This is what my next steps are. This is my record – can you review it?' The EP will do that. Then the AsEP can feed back to the school."

EPS leaders also highlighted the potentially significant consequences of unsafe practice, emphasising that EPs are "the ones that we are asking to work with Assistants, and it is their HCPC registrations on the line" (EP7, Senior). In this EPS, this consideration influenced the EPS conversations about the AsEP remit, because "every decision taken as a leadership team needs to be acceptable to the EPs".

**Boundaries for safe practice**

For AsEPs and EPs to feel comfortable with the AsEP role, EPs emphasised that decisions need to be made about what comprises safe practice, and role boundaries need to be communicated effectively to the EPS team. EPs spoke of a boundaried role with clear limits, to ensure safe practice. Examples of boundaries included: AsEPs applying agreed psychological frameworks to scaffold their work (e.g. SCERTS framework – Prizant et al., 2006, or Autism Education Trust progression framework, n.d.); having a clearly communicated set of specific tasks, or working in a boundaried part of the EP role, for example:

> "We felt that although obviously [Early Years statutory assessments] are not any *easier* than other parts of EP-ing, they are quite a *boundaried* area. You can learn a lot about child development, and the Early Years curriculum, and the needs of children, in a relatively contained way. And that felt the safest way of using Assistant EPs - to give them quite a boundaried role that they could develop their expertise in". (EP3, Senior)

"Statutory work was quite clear in terms of boundaries. So, they're not report writing - they might contribute sections around pupil views or background, giving you notes which you can write up or add. They're not writing the report. There's very clear boundaries on that." (EP1, Main-grade)

The EP view was that in the face of this responsibility for AsEP work, EPs have found their own boundaries of practice. EP4 (Main-grade) explained their caution when considering involving an AsEP in report writing: "I wouldn't ask them to write [the report], because I think I will end up rewriting it. I know for sure that other people are perhaps more tolerant [laughs], and they have used the write-ups of AsEPs."

EPs hold varying personal views on where boundaries should lie and therefore what tasks they might give AsEPs. This personal difference was echoed by EP6 (Senior) in relation to the AsEP role in assessments: "Some EPs would be really comfortable getting the AsEPs to carry out assessments, elements of the WIAT, for example. Other EPs would feel uncomfortable with that". This EP went on explain that the same overall aim, such as reducing EP time spent on statutory assessments, could be achieved in different ways depending on individual EPs' boundaries.

## AsEPs must assert their remit

As part of safe practice, EP participants emphasised that AsEPs need to assert their remit to schools and EPs, and to state if they feel that a task is beyond their competence. This was deemed essential because stakeholders, such as schools and parents, are unfamiliar with the AsEP role. It is important, therefore, that AsEPs are coached to assert their remit to avoid the assumption they are a qualified EP. EP1 (Main-grade) shared that together with the AsEP, they would develop "a phrase that [the AsEP] could use if they're uncertain about something and come back to an EP rather than feel they have to answer there and then."

AsEPs also sometimes needed to assert their remit to EPs or seek support from EPS leadership. EP2 (Senior) explained,

"[The Assistants] negotiate the work with the EP, and if it's not within the remit…. sometimes I've got EPs who think the Assistants can do more than they can…and if the Assistant thinks 'This is a bit too much', they will copy me in".

Asserting their remit was also considered imperative for safety as there was the sense that because AsEPs are so enthusiastic and want to gain broad experience, there is a risk that they will slip into working beyond their remit.

> "I always explain, you know, 'All of you tend to be very eager in the role'. So, it's very difficult, I think, for Assistants when they first join to say 'No', or to ask questions. So, they tend to just say 'Yes' and go along with whatever people ask them to do." (EP5, PEP)

## Subtheme 7.2 Feeling torn in search of the 'right' decisions

Subtheme 7.2 'Feeling torn' presents views that making the 'right' decisions to ensure safe and meaningful AsEP practice is not straightforward, and that as a result, the EP profession is feeling torn and debates ensue.

One such area of debate is regarding the short-term or permanent nature of AsEP contracts. Subtheme 4.2 'An uncertain future' described the different decisions regarding contracts. Here, the participant views and debates will be presented. EP3 (Senior) considered that the AEP recommendation that AsEPs hold a temporary post is "presumably to protect the EP profession", suggesting that permanent contracts could be a risk to the profession. This EP went on to report feeling torn between protecting AsEP employment rights, and following AEP guidance:

> "I mean, it's just a really difficult issue. And I really feel for the people who financially aren't able to take on the course, or have personal circumstances, and they're great and doing a brilliant job for us. We want to keep them for selfish reasons, but we're kind of, at the moment, sticking by the AEP guidelines." (EP3, Senior)

As well as individual EPs feeling torn, the profession feels torn, as reflected by the five participants whose EPSs currently offer permanent contracts for AsEPs, despite the AEP guidance.

**Debates about AsEP remit**

The interviews reflected the EP profession feeling torn about the AsEP remit. This was represented by individual EPs having strong views about the 'right' decisions on remit

and questioning decisions made by others. For example, EP2 (Senior) shared their view on AsEP practice in another EPS: "I said to [the Assistant I know], 'You can't do that. You're not trained to be able to conduct an assessment meeting in that way.'"

EPs also wondered how the AsEP role might be being used in other places, and whether they had the 'right' approach:

"And I think 'What are other services doing?' - that is so important to us, and it has been anxiety-provoking that maybe we are out of step with the way that the rest of the country is using Assistants. Are we taking this too far too quickly? What are the risks to the profession as a whole if we try this out?" (EP7, Senior)

This EP described a long process of deciding on the AsEP remit together with the whole EPS, indicating that deciding on the remit is not at all straightforward, and subject to great debate in the profession:

"We were having these fascinating conversations within our service like, 'Can Assistants do consultation?' And some of our EPs would say, 'No, absolutely not. That's a really skilled piece of work that's taken us many years to be trained in. They absolutely can't do consultation'. So then, that brings us to 'Right, are we saying that they can't talk to schools or to parents?' 'Oh, no, we're not saying that at all. Of course they're allowed to ask parents their views, their aspirations, what's worrying them at the moment?' 'Okay. So, what makes that conversation different from consultation?'" (EP7, Senior)

**Debates about statutory involvement**

The AsEP role in statutory assessments presented great variation and debate across the EP interviews. In some cases, AsEPs carried out most of the statutory assessment, and wrote the report, with the EP being involved in meeting with parents and providing oversight.

"In those Early Years assessments, it is the Assistant that is carrying out the work. I mean, we train them well, and we [oversee] the cases they have, and there are always opportunities for whoever the link EP is to go and do a joint observation…ultimately it's the EP that carries responsibility for the assessment…But generally I would say…rather than supporting the EP, it's definitely much more like an equal partnership." (EP3, Senior)

In contrast, other EPSs felt strongly that statutory advice is a responsibility for qualified EPs, and that any tasks related to statutory assessments are therefore beyond the AsEP remit.

> "It's helping the Assistant understand that, yes, …you have the *capacity*, you have the *skills*. But it's not about that. It's about who's responsible for this piece of work. It's not [the Assistant]. It's the EP. So why would I ask you to do a piece of an activity that is my responsibility? That doesn't make any sense. And helping the EPs to understand that it's their responsibility, and therefore, they should do the complete piece of work." (EP5, PEP)

Most services fell somewhere in the middle, with AsEPs supporting EPs to carry out statutory assessments to alleviate some of the workload, but without writing the statutory advice:

> "They are *assisting* the EP. So, there will be a discussion between the EP and the AsEP. And it might be that we want the AsEP to gather some information for us. So that might be gathering the child's views, or doing a particular assessment with a child, an observation or a checklist. And then we use that information to support our formulation and to write our report. They're *not* involved in report writing at all." (EP6, Senior)

In whichever of these positions the AsEP role in statutory assessments fell, there could be 'pushback' from EPs. Reasons given for EP 'pushback' included that EPs enjoyed their work so had difficulty passing it over to an AsEP to do, or that EPs wanted AsEP support with statutory work to help their workload. EP pushback could also be related to feeling that certain tasks go beyond AsEP competence: "We spend so much time practising writing, it's a bit unfair to ask a person without experience to do that, or to do that to the standard I expect from my report" (EP4, Main-grade). Decision-making in this area can present a challenge for EPSs.

**Debates about devaluation of the profession**

Another area of 'feeling torn' in the EP data related to the impact of decisions about the AsEP role on the wider EP profession. This included the idea of 'devaluing' the EP profession, with participants giving examples of the type of concerns that may be felt in the profession, like: "Why did I do a 3-year doctorate and 20 years of work

experience if somebody who's been a school LSA until this term can come in and do similar work?" (EP7, Senior). This EP went on to suggest that challenging conversations were needed to work through similar concerns.

EPs raised further concerns about devaluation of the EP role in traded contexts whereby "if the LA and our schools realised that they could get AsEPs to do the same job for half the price, nobody would want an EP anymore" (EP7, Senior). There were reports of this happening, for example a school who requested the cheaper AsEP hours instead of EP hours, as "they were looking at their hours, doing the maths and thinking, 'Oh, instead of 18 hours, we're going to get 36 hours' and [the EPS] had to say no to that." (EP2, Senior). Some EPs described designing their traded models to mitigate against this potential devaluation, for example using a ratio model whereby packages that schools buy come with a certain number of hours of EP and AsEP time (see Appendix T). In other cases, there were distinct EP and AsEP offers of different tasks, paid for as separate packages: "If at any point [schools] choose to use AsEPs, then that is invoiced entirely separately at the end of a particular piece of work. So it wouldn't be that they can choose whether to have an EP or an AsEP." (EP6, Senior).

# Chapter 5: Discussion

This study explored the role of AsEPs working in LAs in England, to gain a better understanding of how they are deployed in the current context, their impact, and experiences of the role. This chapter will first illustrate how the findings presented in Chapter 4 (see Appendix R for the thematic map) answer the research questions. Links will be made to the literature reviewed in Chapter 2, the theoretical framework presented in section 1.2, and further theory. I will go on to discuss the implications for practice, strengths and limitations of the study, and future research.

## 5.1 RQ1 How is the role of AsEP understood?

The findings presented in Chapter 4 suggest that there are two key meanings of the AsEP role: the role is understood to be one that meets local needs and the role is understood to be a learning journey.

### 5.1.1 A role to meet local needs

Theme One, 'AsEPs support systems under pressure – local needs: local choices', showed an understanding of the AsEP role as supporting local needs. Some local

needs relate to pressures found in the SEND system nationally, such as EP shortages and high demand for EP services. Some needs were more specific to the local context, for example large cohorts of children in care, or high numbers of Early Years statutory assessment requests.

The role existing to meet local needs resulted in wide variation in AsEP deployment across England, with local decisions about the priorities of the AsEP role impacting on the main focus of AsEP activity (see Appendix T for a summary of the varying priorities and activities within each AsEP role). This national role variation is the basis for the AEP's (2024a) guidelines on the role remaining general, but no national study showing this variation has existed until this study. Harland et al.'s (2022) study showed a variety of tasks within *each* AsEP role, but not the difference *between* roles nationally, and Neal's (2024) participants spoke of national variation but without illustrating the difference in roles, as this was not the focus of the study. Therefore, the finding of national variation is a key finding in the current study. Therefore, this finding supports the AEP (2024a) decision to provide only general guidance on the AsEP role content but also contributes further information for EPSs to consider when making decisions.

One of the pressures facing EPSs is the difficulty recruiting EPs: many participants referred to this local need and linked it to the creation of the AsEP role, showing an understanding of the role as one that can support EPS recruitment. The current study found some evidence that the employment of AsEPs leads to the recruitment of newly-qualified EPs to the EPS where they had been an AsEP. However, this does not present sufficient evidence to refute Atfield et al.'s (2023) suggestion that newly-qualified EPs are more likely to return to the EPS where they were on placement as a TEP. This means that the long-term recruitment benefits for the EPS are still unclear. In any case, most EPs saw the employment of AsEPs as a benefit to the future of the profession in general, even if not to their immediate service.

### 5.1.2 A learning role

Subtheme 2.1 'There's a lot of learning in this role' showed that participants understand and value the AsEP role as an opportunity for learning and development. This finding aligns with previous research (Woodley-Hume, 2018; Neal, 2024). Participants in the current study who aspired to secure a doctoral training place understood the learning in the role as a step on the pathway to qualification as an EP.

The current study therefore supports Woodley-Hume's (2018) view that the learning in the role aims to facilitate progression onto doctoral training.

However, the current study also adds another perspective. Four AsEPs in this study had permanent contracts, and two EPs also shared that AsEPs in their EPS hold permanent contracts. This is in line with Harland et al.'s (2022) national survey where 24% of participating AsEPs had permanent contracts. Permanent contracts are not mentioned in any other AsEP research, perhaps suggesting a shift in recent times. When applying a bioecological systems lens (Bronfenbrenner, 2005), this could be due to aspects of the Macrosystem such as the current financial climate, and societal views on the importance of job security. For AsEPs with permanent contracts in the current study, the role was still understood as one of learning and development, but with the aim of continuing to be able to meet local needs as the context shifts.

## 5.2 RQ2 What do AsEPs contribute to EPS delivery?

### 5.2.1 'AsEPs can do a lot!' (subtheme 2.2): fulfilling a variety of tasks

The findings of the current study indicate that AsEPs contribute to EPS delivery by fulfilling a range of tasks competently (see subtheme 2.2 'Assistants can do a lot'). The tasks depend on the local need (see Theme One 'AsEPs support systems under pressure – local needs: local choices' and Appendix T showing varying role priorities). A summary of the range of activities that the participants were involved in, and their level of independence where indicated, is found in Appendix N. This data was derived from the semantic codes (surface-level information) in the reflexive thematic analysis (Braune & Clarke, 2022) (see section 3.10 details of data analysis). The variety of tasks reported by participants aligns with the finding in the national AsEP survey (Harland et al., 2022) that AsEPs operate across all five EP functions (Currie, 2002). The current study provides an update and further detail to that survey, and to existing examples of AsEP contributions from the two EPSs studied by Woodley-Hume (2018). It is hoped that the examples presented in Appendix N will provide useful information to inform EPS decisions on AsEP deployment.

The current study reported mixed findings related to whether AsEPs contribute roles distinct from qualified EPs, as reported by Lyons (1999) and Collyer (2012) (see section 2.7.3). Some EPSs in the current study reported clearly distinct roles. For example, sometimes delivering interventions was the core AsEP function and EPs in

the service did not fulfil this role, or sometimes AsEPs were tasked with organising projects (e.g. ELSA), relieving EPs from this task. In EPSs where AsEPs have their own casework, or when they cover gaps in EP capacity, the roles seem less distinct, for example with both AsEPs and EPs carrying out observation, assessment, report-writing and training (see Appendix N for the range of tasks fulfilled by AsEPs).

The EP-AsEP distinction was sometimes made by not expecting AsEPs to apply psychology, for example by reporting objective observations rather than a psychological formulation. In other EPSs, AsEPs do contribute psychological content, but in a boundaried way through the use of psychological frameworks in which the AsEPs had been trained (e.g. SCERTS – Prizant et al., 2006) (see Subtheme 7.1 'Safe practice at the forefront', section 4.7). Less distinct roles were not reported to pose a challenge once they were agreed upon: EPs and AsEPs did not report feelings of role encroachment as indicated in the literature (Collyer, 2012). Rather, although the role varies nationally, having clearly communicated local role boundaries seemed to protect against potentially negative implications of overlapping roles. See section 5.4.2.4 for a further discussion on the AsEP psychological contribution.

### 5.2.2 'AsEPs can do a lot!' (subtheme 2.2): extending the preventative offer

The findings of the current study indicate that it is often AsEPs who fulfil preventative work, sometimes while EPs are focused on statutory assessments, which aligns with some previous research (Lyons, 1999). Examples of preventative involvement included delivering training to schools, supporting implementation of EPS approaches (e.g. emotion coaching or precision teaching) and improving school SEND structures (e.g., Individual Education Plans). AsEPs also delivered evidence-based, targeted interventions to CYP. Sometimes the role had been designed specifically for intervention, for example when the AsEP was employed jointly with the Mental Health Support Team, or as part of the Delivering Better Value Programme. The importance of preventative involvement is highlighted in the government SEND reform plans (DfE, 2023). The findings of the current study suggest that AsEPs are well-placed to support change in the SEND system, through this preventative involvement. The finding that AsEPs often deliver the preventative work, as opposed to taking on tasks to increase EP capacity to work preventatively, is in line with research reviewed in Chapter 2 (e.g. Kimber & Cleary, 2011). EPSs need to carefully consider who is best placed to deliver

preventative work, which may depend on the psychological content (Collyer, 2012), and how to separate and allocate tasks accordingly.

## 5.3 RQ3 What is the perceived impact of the AsEP role?

### 5.3.1 'Value in the Assistant EP role' (Theme Three): positive impact on service-users

The present study found that AsEPs are perceived to have a positive impact on service-users (see Theme Three 'Value in the AsEP role'), a finding congruent with previous research (Woodley-Hume, 2018; Monsen et al., 2009). Woodley-Hume (2018) reported that AsEPs benefit individual CYP and empower staff, promoting positive outcomes for CYP. The current study extends these findings, indicating that AsEPs skilfully elicit the voices of CYP, play an important role in amplifying the voices of CYP, and impact preventatively, delivering interventions before difficulties escalate. Participants in the current study hoped that this individual early intervention would result in fewer referrals to EPs, although data was not available to evaluate this.

The current study also found that AsEPs impact positively on school systems, building staff capacity through support to implement interventions and approaches, aiming to improve the quality of SEND provision. EPs remarked that without this implementation support, interventions that schools were running lacked fidelity; with AsEP application of implementation approaches, intervention fidelity improved. It is not known whether this support drew on psychological knowledge from implementation science (e.g. Kelly, 2017) or whether it was akin to the support described in previous literature, drawing on effective teaching and learning principles (Lyons, 1999). These findings suggest that AsEPs have the potential to impact positively on individual CYP and schools when deployed preventatively.

### 5.3.2 'Value in the AsEP role' (Theme Three): alleviating EPS pressure

Theme Three 'Value in the AsEP role' also suggests that AsEPs relieve pressure in EPSs by building capacity and by directly impacting EP workload.

**Building capacity and extending service delivery**

The findings indicate that the AsEP role supports EPSs to build their capacity and extend the services they can offer. For example, the AsEP role supports EPSs to get projects (e.g., MELSA, the Sandwell Charter Mark) 'off the ground' and enables EPS

involvement in multi-agency projects they would otherwise not have capacity to participate in, extending the reach of the EPS. The AsEP role also enables EPSs to 'fill gaps' in capacity, for example when two EPS representatives are needed to deliver training, but only one EP can be allocated. AsEPs were sometimes the 'face of the EPS', providing consistent contact with CYP and schools, when low EP capacity meant that EPs were not regularly in contact with service-users. AsEPs deliver intervention sessions that EPs do not have the capacity to deliver, again extending the EPS offer. The previous literature (Woodley-Hume, 2018; Harland et al., 2022) indicated that AsEPs were fulfilling tasks that could build capacity and extend service delivery, but without exploring the impact. The current study has provided further insight into perceptions of impact.

**Saving EPs time**

One way in which the pressure in the EPS is relieved, and a key finding in the current study, is that AsEPs reduce EP time spent on particular tasks (see Theme Three, 'Value in the AsEP role'). For example, AsEPs take administrative tasks off EPs' hands, including arranging assessment visits. AsEPs are involved in project organisation, (e.g. ELSA training and supervision), taking on tasks that EPs had previously been responsible for. Most EPs expressed strongly that AsEPs saved them time in statutory assessments, but that this may not be captured in EPS data. This is because, previously, EPs had been spending *more* than the allocated time, working beyond their contracted hours. Significantly, the findings of the current study indicate that by saving EPs time in statutory work, AsEPs relieve the pressure EPs feel in their jobs.

This contrasts with Woodley-Hume's (2018) finding from two EPSs that AsEPs do *not* save EPs time, once time for supervision and support is factored in. The EPs in the current study did not indicate this: they expressed that AsEP involvement in statutory assessments was saving them between two hours and a whole day per assessment and did not speak of high supervision costs. In one case, similar to Lyons (1999), an EP described time being allocated to EPs for liaising with AsEPs, which could mitigate against this supervision cost.

This is an important area for EPSs to consider: saving EPs time could be a key indicator of effective AsEP deployment in the current context. Indeed, one EPS in the current study had decided to cease AsEP involvement in statutory assessments as

they found it was not saving EPs time. The findings of the current study suggest that individual EPSs need to review their own time data, including asking EPs about allocated versus actual time spent on tasks, to evaluate the impact on EP time. Supervision costs could also be factored into the evaluation, although the current study indicated that supervision has further positive impact beyond time costs. Supervision contributes to AsEP development, and EPs in the current study also felt that *their* own thinking and development benefitted from supervision with the AsEPs they were overseeing. The HCPC (2021) supervision guidance also attests to the benefits of effective supervision for the supervisor.

In the present study, information was not always available to indicate what EPs used any freed-up time for. However, some EPs stated that in the current context, any freed-up EP capacity would most likely be allocated to completing more statutory assessments. This is in line with findings from other professions (Nancarrow & Mackey, 2005) whereby professional capacity freed up was used for further individual casework rather than strategic deployment. It could be that Senior EPs, who may complete fewer statutory assessments, may be better positioned to dedicate any released time for strategic work aiming to improve local SEND systems (DfE, 2023).

### 5.3.3 'Value in the AsEP role' (Theme Three): a benefit to the EP team

The current study found that the AsEP role brings wider benefits to EPSs beyond relieving pressure. Collaborative learning partnerships can develop due to AsEPs coming with enthusiasm to learn and energy, and EPs being keen to interact with them. This is in line with Woodley-Hume's (2018) report of 'communities of practice' and Lyons' (1999) testament to the benefits of working in teams. Further nuance added in the current study was that EPs benefit more from interacting with AsEPs, and experience equilibrium with time costs and benefits, when they actively invest in AsEPs, taking them under their wing and offering opportunities to collaborate. This was down to individual EPs' working preferences (see Theme One).

Participants in the present study reported instances of EP 'pushback' where EPs did not engage the support of an AsEP. When applying a bioecological lens (Bronfenbrenner, 2005) and considering interactions between AsEPs and EPs in the mesosystem, it seems reasonable to conclude that there would be varying impact on AsEP development from interactions with EPs who are keen to interact, and with those

who prefer to work independently. It is important for EPSs to apply implementation science principles when introducing AsEPs, considering ways to engage EPs in the process, and unite them around the AsEP role, how it is being used, and why it matters (Sharples et al., 2024). Lyons' (1999) recommendation that the introduction of AsEPs needs to be carefully managed, considering individual EP styles, remains valid.

## 5.4 RQ4 What supports the AsEP role and what are the barriers?

### 5.4.1 Supports for the AsEP role

Three key areas of support reported in the findings were support to develop competence, support through connections and support to develop autonomy. Each of these will be discussed and then related to self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Deci et al., 2017).

#### 5.4.1.1. 'There's a lot of learning in this role' (Subtheme 2.1): support to develop competence

In line with the finding that the AsEP role is a learning journey, the current study found that induction, ongoing training programmes and supervision experiences cultivate AsEP competence, confidence and autonomy, supporting AsEPs to fulfil their role (see Theme Two, subtheme 2.1 'There's a lot of learning in this role'). EPSs design induction and training programmes suited to local needs and local role decisions, similar to Lyons' (2000) description. Induction and training programmes described in the current study seemed to be 'one size fits all', with everyone completing the same programme, irrespective of past experience. Past experience made a difference to *when* AsEPs might exercise more autonomy: as would be expected, AsEPs with more experience tended to feel more competent and confident earlier than those with less (see Theme Five: 'Our past experience matters'). The similar content of the induction and training programmes served the purpose of ensuring that everyone would be competent to practise safely, avoiding assumptions about competence, and subsequent over-pitching of expectations that has been reported in previous research (e.g., Hall & Webster, 2023). This aligns with the 'resource' person characteristic identified in the bioecological model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007). Access to both external resources (training, induction) and internal resources (past experience) impacts AsEPs' capacity to interact with their environment (e.g. undertake their work, engage in supervision, connect with their team) to support their development.

The challenge of creating suitable induction and training programmes for AsEPs has arguably increased since the change in EP training route in 2006. Before then, it was a pre-requisite that those embarking on doctoral training, and AsEPs, had been qualified teachers. As competencies achieved by the end of teacher training are clear and accessible (Training and Development Agency, 2006), EPSs could assume a baseline set of competencies for AsEP training. Now, AsEPs come from a wide range of backgrounds (see Appendix K), making it difficult to assume any common baseline for training. It seems that EPSs are not currently using the 'skills mix' approach (Collins, 2022; Davies et al., 1998) whereby training modules are selected based on individual past experience and developmental needs. An approach like the 'skills mix' could be useful for EPSs designing induction that meets training and safety needs whilst building on AsEPs' existing experience.

Supervision was valued, as AsEPs identified that it promoted their personal and professional development (see subtheme 2.1). Participants indicated that supervision supports AsEPs to think more deeply about their work, to make decisions about their work, and to feel less uncertain. This aligns with Neal's (2024) finding that AsEPs develop their feelings of agency and therefore autonomy through discussions about their casework in supervision. Participants described various models of supervision including individual supervision, group supervision, peer supervision with AsEPs and peer supervision with EPs and TEPs.

### 5.4.1.2 'There's a lot of learning in this role' (subtheme 2.1): Learning through connection

The current study found that the learning in the AsEP role (subtheme 2.1 'There's a lot of learning in this role') takes place through connections and interactions with EPs and other AsEPs. AsEPs connected with EPs through planned supervision, and regular informal supervision opportunities, especially with EPs who were overseeing their work, or who had an interest in collaborating. AsEPs valued this opportunity, and appreciated the time that EPs spent supporting their development.

The current study emphasises that the AsEP role is supported by having more than one AsEP so that they can connect with each other. Connections included peer supervision, informal check-ins, and working together on projects. This peer connection was found to have a number of functions, such as supporting AsEPs to navigate their experiences of uncertainty (see section 4.4 Theme Four: 'Sitting with Uncertainty'), and supporting each other through worries about competency by

discussing together before seeking support from an EP. EPs felt that even when their EPS was described as being non-hierarchical, AsEPs benefitted from having a peer to connect with and ask questions, rather than an EP where they may be a perceived power imbalance.

The finding that connection is an important support for AsEPs aligns with the bioecological systems theoretical underpinning of this study (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). In this theory, the importance of proximal processes in the meso-system is emphasised: the more regular the interactions, the more impact they have on an individual's development. AsEPs' engagement in connection reflects 'demand' characteristics (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007) whereby the AsEPs effectively invite responses from the social environment (from EPs and peers), which fosters their development. It can therefore be understood that the regular, supportive opportunities to interact informally with EPs, and with other AsEPs, has a great impact on AsEP development, meaning that they value these connections. It also seems that, putting the EP at the centre of the bioecological system, EPs who engage in these interactions with AsEPs also reap the benefits for their own development, and see the time spent on supervising AsEPs as an investment that pays off (see also section 5.3.3 'A benefit to the EP team' and Theme Three 'Value in the AsEP role').

### 5.4.1.3 'There's a lot of learning in this role' (Subtheme 2.1): autonomy supports growth

In this study, 'autonomy' was defined as AsEPs being able to make choices regarding their work, and to work with some independence (see p.39). This definition was aligned to participants' use of 'autonomy'. The current study found a variety of levels of independence at which AsEPs operate, as can be seen in Appendix N. In some cases, AsEPs experienced highly-scaffolded support and little autonomy, adhering to structured observation and assessment frameworks, and carrying out specific assessments directed by their supervisor. In other cases, AsEPs had more autonomy, making casework decisions (similar to Harland et al., 2022), working independently and checking in with their supervisor at planned intervals.

The current study found that autonomy is valued by AsEPs and EPs alike, but that autonomy is understood as a potential threat to safe practice (see subtheme 7.1: 'Safe practice at the forefront'). Theme Five: 'Our past experience matters' suggested that when AsEPs felt competent, they valued the autonomy they were given. However, if

they felt they lacked competence or confidence, they experienced the expectation to work autonomously as a challenge. AsEPs reported that they can feel frustrated if they are not working with any autonomy: participants reported needing to 'wait' for their supervisor to agree their work or to discuss the next steps. This suggested that all AsEPs need to have *some* more independent work, in line with their competency and safe practice, so that they can continue to work when awaiting supervisor input. Examples of this include longer-term projects, such as those found in Appendix N.

### 5.4.1.4 Application of self-determination theory

Applying self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) can offer a lens through which to consider the supports above. In the context of organisations, self-determination theory states that for benefits to be experienced by both individual employees and the wider organisation, employees need to experience high quality motivation (Deci et al., 2017). This can be achieved when three basic psychological needs are met: competence, relatedness and autonomy. These relate to the three areas of support detailed above in 5.4.1.1, 5.4.1.2 and 5.4.1.3.

A continuum of motivational quality has been identified in the self-determination literature (Rigby & Ryan, 2018). High quality motivation – where the greatest benefits for individuals and organisations occur - is experienced when the goals and values in work align with personal values and when tasks are intrinsically motivating as they are interesting and engaging, with opportunities for learning and growth. The current study found evidence of work goals and personal values aligning, and interest and engagement in the role by AsEPs in Theme Three. The current study also showed that AsEPs were aware of their role in meeting local needs, and felt they were making a difference, contributing further meaning to the role.

In contrast, low quality motivation is associated with poor well-being and poor performance (Vallerand & Bissonnette, 1992). This amotivation can occur when employees see no value or interest in their work, or when they do not feel capable of fulfilling the role. The current study, in line with previous literature (Woodley-Hume, 2018; Neal, 2024), found that AsEPs experienced feelings of uncertainty (Theme Four), and not feeling capable depending on past experience (Theme Five), especially at the start of the role. AsEPs felt that this was to be expected with a new role, and that they were supported through these feelings, suggesting that if low quality motivation was present, it was short-lived.

The findings of the current study provide examples of the positive impact of the AsEP role for individual AsEPs and for the organisation (see Theme Three: Value in the AsEP role): this success suggests that high quality motivation is experienced in the AsEP role. The current study also provides evidence that the psychological needs of competence, autonomy and relatedness are being met through the support, learning opportunities and connection offered in the role (see sections 5.4.1.1, 5.4.1.2, 5.4.1.3). This aligns with the bioecological model, as motivation is a 'force' person characteristic that can set proximal processes for development in motion and sustain them (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007): the presence of quality motivation, due to competence, autonomy and relatedness needs being met, leads to AsEPs engaging in interactions with their environment that support their development. No explicit reference to self-determination theory has been made in previous AsEP research. EPs in the current study made some implicit reference to self-determination theory, for example making the point that AsEPs need to be trusted to work with some autonomy, so that they can experience growth (EP5).

The explicit application of the theory to organisational contexts (Deci et al., 2017; Rigby & Ryan, 2018) can offer EPSs further insight into how to develop an effective AsEP role. The findings of the current study, through a self-determination theory lens, suggest that EPSs should ensure that AsEPs are supported to reduce feelings of uncertainty, and to build feelings of competence, autonomy and relatedness, so that longer-term amotivation does not set in and reduce the impact of their role.

### 5.4.2 Challenges for the AsEP role

The current study highlights that whilst the AsEP role is valued and AsEPs are having a positive impact, employing AsEPs and making decisions for the AsEP role is no straightforward endeavour. Participants in the current study highlighted that the AsEP role and development is impacted by multiple aspects of their surrounding systems. I have applied the bioecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 2005), to illustrate the complexity of the systems surrounding AsEPs that influence the role (see Figure 5). This figure includes references to the existing literature (Chapter 1) on the current context of EP service delivery (in italics), references to the findings of this study (in bold), and other contextual factors (not bold, not italic).

The current study highlights multiple factors that need to be considered by EPSs when employing and deploying AsEPs. The factors of uncertainty (Theme Four), the 'brilliant, maddening cycle' (Theme Six) and difficult decisions to be made (Theme Seven) are challenges discussed in this section.

### 5.4.2.1 The challenge of 'Uncertainty at the start of the role' (subtheme 4.1)

A potential challenge to the AsEP role is the uncertainty experienced by AsEPs at the start of employment due to a lack of role clarity (see subtheme 4.1 'Uncertainty as embark on the role'). This has the potential to negatively impact AsEP well-being and performance. This echoes findings in previous research (Neal, 2024; Woodley-Hume, 2018). The current study adds to the previous research by gathering the views of EPs where the AsEP role has been longer established, suggesting that experiences of uncertainty reduce across the EPS when the role has existed for longer, and giving an insight to the processes that take place across the EPS when role decisions are being made.

Neal (2024) suggested that to ease uncertainty in work meaning, AsEPs need opportunities for diverse experiences of AsEP work as well as opportunities to apply competencies developed in their previous roles. The current study also highlights the importance of drawing on AsEP past experiences to build competence and confidence in their new roles (see Theme Five 'Our past experience matters'), which has implications for EPSs when planning the role.

### 5.4.2.2 The challenge of 'An uncertain future' (subtheme 4.2)

The current study also extends the understanding of uncertainty by finding that AsEPs, EPs and EPSs also experience uncertainty related to the future of the AsEP role (see Subtheme 4.2, 'An uncertain future', section 4.4). Part of this uncertain future lies with AsEPs not knowing what might happen if they do not secure a doctoral training place, especially as most AsEPs have short-term contracts.

Woodley-Hume (2018) highlighted the potential future difficulty that with rising AsEP numbers across England comes greater competition between AsEPs to get onto doctorate training programmes, and probable increases in AsEPs not securing a place. The current study suggests that if AsEPs do not secure a doctoral training place, EPSs may decide to extend their short-term contract. The current study also found that

**Figure 5**

*Contextual Factors for the AsEP Role Mapped onto Bronfenbrenner's (2005)
Ecological Systems*
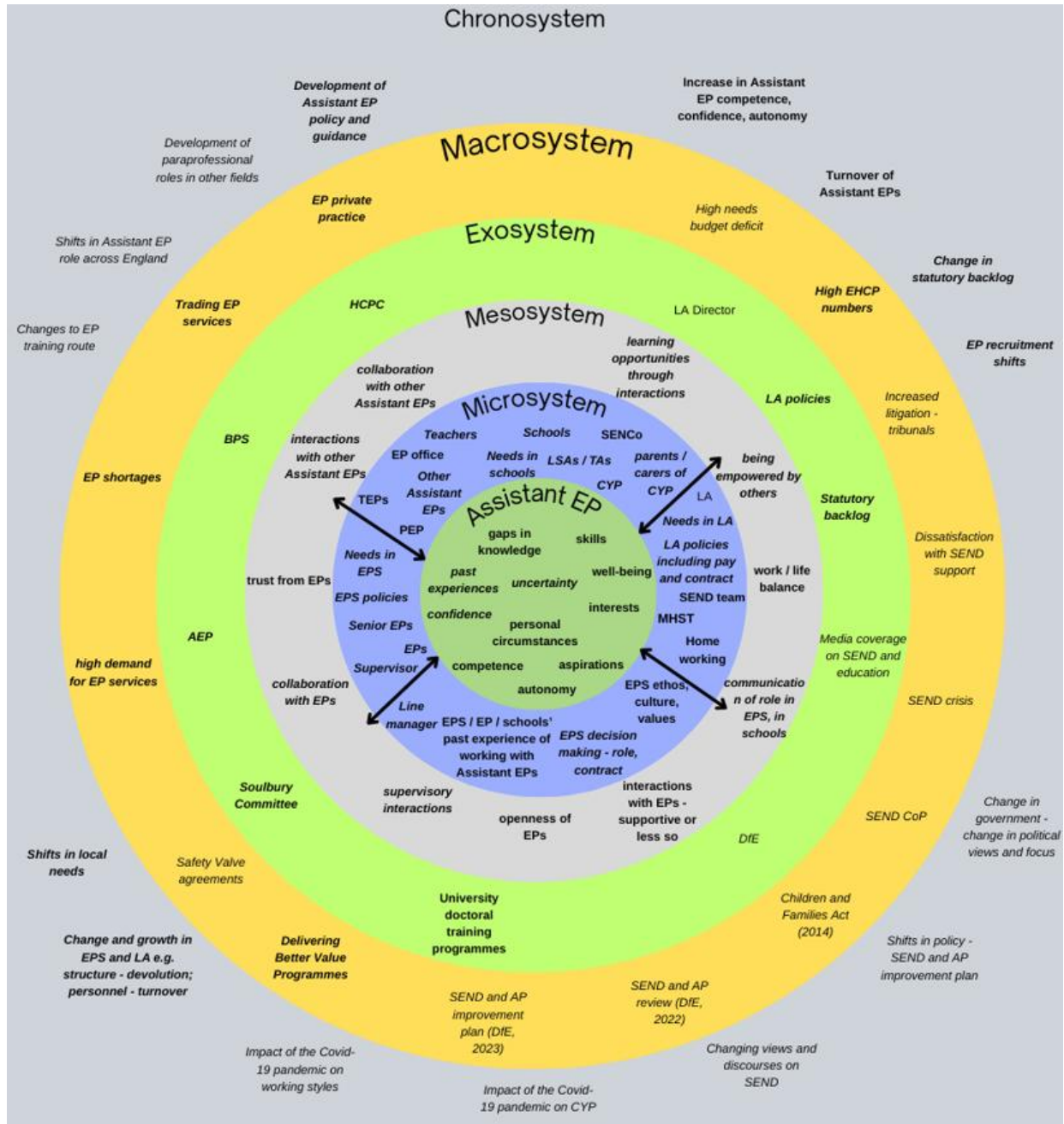


*Note.* Factors from the literature are in *italics*. Factors from the semantic codes of the current study are in **bold**. Factors from both are in ***bold italic***. Own work.

several EPSs employed AsEPs on permanent contracts. This is in line with BPS guidelines for Assistant Psychologists (BPS, 2024), but not AEP guidance for AsEPs (AEP, 2024a). Those EPSs with permanent contracts reported benefits to having AsEPs staying in post for longer (see subtheme 4.2). Therefore, a future unintended consequence of higher competition between AsEPs for doctoral places could be more EPSs extending contracts and experiencing these reported benefits of keeping AsEPs in role for longer. Depending on budgets, a situation could arise whereby more EPSs make the case for permanent contracts, increasing role stability and benefits for EP service delivery and reducing feelings of uncertainty. This could lead to the AsEP role becoming more established in EPSs across England.

### 5.4.2.3 The challenge of the 'brilliant, maddening cycle' (Theme Six)

A further challenge to EPSs found in the current study is that of managing the 'brilliant, maddening cycle" (see Theme Six) of recruiting AsEPs, training them up intensively so they can work competently, then starting the whole process again when those AsEPs leave. Previous recent research has either recruited only AsEPs (Neal, 2024) or gathered the perspectives of just two EPSs (Woodley-Hume, 2018). This means that although the need for a planned induction programme specific to the role has been captured in previous research (e.g. Lyons, 2000), and the high AsEP turnover (Woodley-Hume, 2018), the insight into the cycle and its impact from an EPS perspective has not previously been documented. The "brilliant, maddening cycle" has implications for EPSs: they need to be prepared for this cycle, create an induction programme that is ready to go, ensure there is EP capacity available to train AsEPs intensively, and communicate to EPs and service-users that there will be a gap in delivery until induction and initial training is completed. Some EPSs in the current study opted for an antidote for the cycle, in the form of permanent contracts. This meant that even when some AsEPs left to embark on doctoral training, some experienced AsEPs remained in the service to support the induction of new AsEPs, as well as continuing delivering their services.

### 5.4.2.4 The challenge of complex decision-making and prioritising safe practice (Theme Seven)
**Ensuring safe practice**

The present study identified a challenge for EPSs in deciding on safe limits for practice (subtheme 7.1) and feeling torn in the search for the 'right' decisions (subtheme 7.2). Individual anecdotes in previous research occasionally referred to EPs holding

ultimate responsibility for AsEP work (e.g. Counsell & Court, 2000), but the EPS perspective on safe practice has not been highlighted in previous research. This is perhaps expected where the participants comprised only AsEPs (Neal, 2024; Harland et al., 2022), and it is understandable that the topic may not have arisen when studies focused on only one or two EPSs (Woodley-Hume, 2018), or a specific aspect of the AsEP role (Monsen et al., 2009).

Applying a bioecological systems lens (Bronfenbrenner, 2005), the current focus on safety could also reflect a change in the way that safe working practice and litigation is viewed, as part of societal norms and the changing chronosystem. Since any of the previous AsEP research was conducted, new guidelines on the expected standards of Assistant Psychologist employment have been published, including a focus on accountability (BPS, 2024) and the HCPC standards have been updated, with safe practice highlighted (HCPC, 2024 – see standards 3.1 and 3.3 updates). The significant increases in appeals to the first-tier tribunal (Administrative Justice Council, 2023) arguably reflects an increasingly litigious society, and therefore a stronger focus on safe practice in EPSs. In line with guidance documents (AEP, 2024a; BPS, 2024) participants in the current study emphasised the role of supervision for ensuring safe practice (see subthemes 2.1 and 7.1). This also aligns with the function of supervision to secure safe and effective practice set out in the literature (Watkins & Milne, 2014).

**Debates on safe boundaries to the AsEP role**

The findings of the current study captured a debate about the AsEP role related to safety and limits to expertise (see Theme Seven: 'Ethical Limits: important and difficult decisions'). The debate relates to where the boundaries of the AsEP role should lie. Participants felt that clear boundaries were crucial to safe practice. Moreover, the boundaries supported AsEPs to remain within their remit, preventing 'role encroachment' (Abbott & Meerabeau, 1998).

The boundaries consideration overlaps with debates from the literature on whether tasks requiring higher-order psychological skills are beyond the remit of AsEPs (Collyer, 2012). The current study found some evidence that AsEPs carry out the more time-consuming, lower-order psychological tasks, (as described by Collyer, 2012), and that these tasks are considered safe practice. For example, AsEPs were involved in gathering pupil views for EP assessments (see Appendix N), using rapport building

skills and psychological tools to facilitate the child's voice. AsEPs also took notes onto report templates during consultations. These are arguably lower-order psychological skills, which participants felt AsEPs could be trained well to carry out skilfully and competently (see Subtheme 2.2). Fulfilling these tasks then enabled the qualified EP to focus on the higher-order psychological skills such as facilitating consultation (Wagner, 2017) and developing psychological formulation.

The findings of the current study suggest that, on the whole, AsEPs are not expected to use higher-order psychological skills independently, marking a role boundary. In most cases, AsEPs were *not* expected to independently facilitate psychological consultation (Wagner, 2017), respond to questions about psychological content in training, or make psychological formulations in casework. AsEPs sometimes reported objective observational comments, rather than using observations to write a psychological formulation. AsEPs and EPs alike commented that AsEPs do not have the three years of training and so are not expected to fulfil the full range of EP work. This view aligns with the consultation literature, which suggests that EPs need comprehensive training to facilitate consultation due to its complexity, positioning consultation as a higher-order psychological function. For example, Nolan and Moreland (2014) identified several discursive strategies (e.g. collaboration, wondering, challenging, reformulating) that EPs skilfully integrate within a problem-solving structure to achieve effective consultation. EPS literature suggests that EPs bring a distinct psychological perspective to consultation, bringing interactionist and narrative approaches, solution-focused questioning and systemic thinking (Royle & Atkinson, 2025) to meet consultation's aim of improving a system's functioning (Wagner, 2017). It would be difficult to develop this level of psychological skill in the time available for AsEP training.

It should be noted that in some previous research, higher-order 'tasks' rather than skills were referred to (Lyons, 1999) and included projects and training. However, the current findings, and previous research (e.g. Harland et al., 2022) shows that AsEPs are contributing across *all* five functions of the EP role (assessment, consultation, training, research, intervention – see Appendix N). Therefore, it may not be between different functions that the higher-order / lower-order distinction lies. The challenge for EPSs in securing safe practice is then to separate higher-order and lower-order psychological aspects of each function, assigning AsEP activities accordingly.

Previous research has questioned how the AsEP role is differentiated from a general assistant role (Davies, 2007) and speaks of the power of AsEPs applying and sharing psychology. Other research also indicated that school staff felt that AsEPs had "something additional to offer which staff felt they, the staff, did not have either the time or skills to execute effectively" (Monsen et al., 2009, p. 378), which again suggests a unique psychological contribution. It seems that there is a psychological role for AsEPs, but EPSs need to have detailed conversations to establish and feel comfortable with the locally-agreed limits to AsEP practice.

Previous research also referred to debates related to role encroachment and devaluation (Collyer, 2012; Abbott & Meerabeau, 1998) whereby the Assistant role risks encroaching into the professional role (EP) and this leads to devaluation of the professional role. The current study did find that EPSs were considering how to mitigate against potential devaluation in the traded context (see 'The AsEP role in traded work' below, and Theme Seven findings on p.89). The current study also found examples of AsEPs performing EP functions (e.g., delivering training, conducting assessments) which could be seen as role encroachment. However, the current study did not find a patterned response indicating negative feelings from EPs about role overlap. This could mark a shift in thinking in the current times of low EP capacity, or this could relate to characteristics of the sample in the current study. The sample comprised only two main-grade EPs and it is main-grade EPs who are most likely to experience and report feelings of role encroachment, rather than Senior EPs who fulfil a different strategic role. Therefore, future research needs to recruit a larger sample of main-grade EPs, possibly employing anonymous methods such as a survey, to capture possible feelings of role encroachment.

**The AsEP role in traded work**

A further decision to be made which could present a challenge for EPSs relates to the AsEP role in traded work. The difficulty of this decision was captured in previous research, with one EPS in Woodley-Hume's (2018) research indicating an initial decision to trade AsEP time, then a change in decision to deliver AsEP time free to schools. The current study included participants from fifteen partially- or fully-traded EPSs and found a range of models of AsEP deployment in traded contexts, based on local decisions (see Appendix T). This included AsEP time being charged at the same

rate as EPs, AsEP time being used to deliver high Service Level Agreements when EP capacity could not cover it, and AsEPs being given as free 'bonus' time to schools buying an SLA. In one case, AsEP employment was focused on delivering traded work to schools, and so each year's AsEP recruitment depended on the demand from schools. This aligns with Woodley-Hume's (2018) identification of the potential to market AsEP contributions in traded contexts. Care was taken to not devalue the profession, with EPSs turning down school requests to only buy in AsEPs at half the cost of an EP. Currently, no guidance exists for EPSs specific to AsEPs in traded contexts. The BPS Ethical Trading guidance (2018) refers to AsEPs in the introductory section as an area of concern, but there is no further mention of AsEPs, leaving EPSs with very little information and guidance on which to base their decisions.

## Discussion summary

The findings have been discussed in relation to the research questions, existing literature and theory. This discussion has highlighted the potential positive impact that AsEPs can have within and beyond EPSs. The discussion has also highlighted the complexity of decision-making for the AsEP role, due to myriad influencing factors. The implications for the profession will now be discussed, as well as strengths and limitations of the study, and avenues for future research.

## 5.5 Implications for the profession

Throughout this discussion chapter, I have highlighted the implications of the study's findings for EPSs, AsEPs, EPs and policymakers. A summary of these implications mapped onto the contextual layers of the AsEP ecosystem can be found in Appendix U. Some key implications are presented below, linked to the corresponding themes presented in Chapter 4.

### 5.5.1 Key implications for EPSs

**'Value in the AsEP role'**: In the current context of a SEND system in crisis, and reduced EPS capacity to address the challenges, the findings suggest that the AsEP role can alleviate pressure within EPSs and extend EP service delivery. Given the finding in the current study that the AsEP role is designed to meet local need, is valued and impacting positively, those EPSs not currently employing AsEPs could review the research and explore whether the role could address any local needs.

The current study found that AsEPs relieve feelings of pressure in EPSs and reduce EP time spent on particular tasks. In a profession under pressure, this has positive implications for EP well-being. EPSs needs to carefully consider how to deploy AsEPs to save EP time, whilst providing AsEPs with meaningful experiences for their development. Improving EP well-being needs to be balanced with protecting AsEP well-being through EPS processes and structures including supervision and transparent time allocation.

**'Ethical limits: important and difficult decisions':** A key implication for EPSs is that to ensure the role is effective, safe and meaningful, EPSs need to dedicate time to engaging in decision-making processes. EPSs need to have detailed conversations both locally within the EPS, and nationally, to inform decisions on the AsEP role. The current study suggests that including the whole EPS team in the discussions is beneficial as it leads to shared understanding, enabling AsEPs and EPs to feel comfortable. Seeking stakeholder views could also provide key information to factor into role decisions.

**'The brilliant, maddening cycle':** EPSs need to consider this cycle, and mitigate against the challenges described. This may include ensuring that the AsEP induction programme, ongoing training and supervision is planned and ready to go and involving experienced AsEPs in developing and supporting induction. This will support AsEPs to start practising quickly and safely, whilst ensuring that EP capacity is used efficiently and effectively in the planning and delivery of induction.

## 5.5.2 Key implications for AsEPs

'**There's a lot of learning in this role':** The findings of the current study indicate that the AsEP role is valued as a learning opportunity but that in some situations there may be fewer opportunities to grow. An implication for AsEPs is that they need to engage in reflections about their developmental journey and use supervision and connections with EPs and other AsEPs to discuss and plan their next developmental steps.

**'Sitting with uncertainty':** AsEPs should enter the role expecting an element of uncertainty, at least initially. They should consider what personal resources they have, and connections they could draw on in the role, to enable them to cope with this uncertainty. The findings of the current study, and previous research, suggest that

conversations with other AsEPs about the role, and reflective supervision, will support feelings of uncertainty to lessen over time.

**'Safe practice at the forefront':** Another implication for AsEPs is that to maintain safe practice, and to feel comfortable in the role, AsEPs need to be able to assert their remit to stakeholders and EPs. AsEPs can build their skills and confidence by practising scripts to assert their role and by being clear on EPS processes designed to safeguard against being drawn into work beyond their remit.

### 5.5.3 Key implications for EPs

**'Assistant EPs are valued':** The current study found that EPs who connected with AsEPs, offering them work and 'taking them under their wing', benefitted from the collaborative learning partnerships that developed. This has implications especially for EPs in EPSs where the decision to engage AsEPs in work lies with individual EPs. EPs should consider connecting with AsEPs, seeking to understand what they are competent and confident to contribute, and involving them in their work.

### 5.5.4 Key implications for national policy-makers

**'Local needs: local choices':** The current study supported the notion that as the AsEP role varies so greatly across England, national guidance needs to remain broad. However, policy-makers can draw on the findings of the current study to give further specific examples of AsEP deployment that EPSs can draw on for decision making. Policy-makers may also consider the findings of the current study to develop ethical trading policy for the AsEP role in traded services.

## 5.6 Strengths

Four key strengths of the current study were that the qualitative approach enabled an in-depth understanding of participants' views, that the study complements and extends previous research, that transferability of the findings was supported, and that it gave insights to the wider systems.

**Depth of understanding**

Firstly, the current study's qualitative approach enabled an in-depth exploration of perspectives on and experiences of the AsEP role. The data collected was detailed

and rich. Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) proved a useful approach for developing themes that offer insight into the AsEP role and how it is currently being operationalised across England. The inclusion of both EPs and AsEPs facilitated further insight and nuance to understanding.

**Complements and extends previous research**

The current study is one of four known studies exploring the role of AsEPs in England since legislative changes (DfE, 2014; DfE, 2015) that greatly impacted EPS operations (Atfield et al., 2023). A strength of the current study is that it extends and complements these previous studies, adding to the combined knowledge base. Woodley-Hume's (2018) case-study design explored the experiences of AsEPs and EPs, offering a range of findings, but was restricted to two EPSs. The current study supports many of Woodley-Hume's (2018) findings, adds nuance and extends them to a wider context. Harland et al.'s (2022) national AsEP survey contributed useful information to the field but was restricted to survey data, so presented a limited depth of understanding. Being qualitative, the current study enabled a deeper exploration of the survey findings, for example exploring experiences and views of short-term and permanent contracts. Neal's (2024) study contributed an in-depth exploration of AsEPs' experiences of a lack of work meaning. In line with the Grounded Theory approach employed (Charmaz, 2014), just this one problem area was explored. The current findings largely align with the views of Neal's (2024) participants and Neal's (2024) findings. As the current study also recruited EP participants, who were able to comment on EPS process for role development, further understanding of uncertainty was developed. The current study also explored themes beyond Neal's (2024) work meaning.

**Supports transferability**

A third strength of the current study was that it represented sixteen EPSs from across England, through the recruitment of twelve AsEPs and seven EPs. There has been no other qualitative study of the AsEP role representing so many EPSs. Much of the early AsEP literature focused on experiences in just one EPS (Lyons, 1999; Counsell & Court, 2000; Davies, 2007; Monsen et al., 2009). Whilst the research based in single EPSs provided a depth of understanding in that context, the extent to which findings were common themes across England was not known. In contrast, the current study offers findings derived from patterns of meaning across a range of contexts. This

supports the transferability of these findings, so they can be considered in varying contexts. It should be noted that it was not my intention to recruit a 'representative' sample, but rather to capture a range of diverse experiences.

**Gives insights into wider systems**

Finally, applying the bioecological systems lens (Bronfenbrenner, 2005) in the current study was a strength as it highlighted the importance of myriad factors in the development of the AsEP role. This focus on systems has allowed both individual and systemic factors to be considered, such as AsEPs' previous experience and personal styles, and the AEP guidance and the EPS context. This avoids a within-person focus when considering the role - a critique that Neal (2024) identified as potentially perpetuating existing difficulties created by the social and historical context, rather than the individual. A within-person approach could have ignored the importance of support mechanisms and development that EPSs are offering. To my knowledge, it is the first time that the bioecological systems model (Bronfenbrenner, 2005) has been used to explore the AsEP role, or that self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Deci et al., 2017) has been applied.

## 5.7 Limitations

In the current study, it is possible that self-selection bias (Olsen, 2008) influenced which AsEPs and EPs volunteered to participate in the study, whereby those with more positive views about the AsEP role were more inclined to volunteer. If this is the case, the full range of views on the AsEP role will not have been represented. Encouragingly, the participants did represent diverse views on a range of topics. For example, some AsEPs had secured doctoral training places, and some did not intend to apply for the doctorate; some EPs worked in services with short-term AsEP contracts and in others, contracts were permanent. However, all the participants expressed that the AsEP role had value. Some debates captured in previous literature, for example on role encroachment, did not feature heavily in the current findings. If the current study had recruited participants with less positive views, more debates and possible challenges associated with the role may have been raised.  It is possible that as the EP world is very small (approximately 3000 EPs nationally - Atfield et al., 2023), potential

participants with less positive views may have been concerned about being identifiable and therefore did not self-select for the study.

A second possible limitation relates to the use of language in the interviews and possible differences in understanding. For terms specific to the EP role, such as 'consultation' and 'assessment', one person's definition may differ from another person's. This reflection is in line with my contextualist approach, and my position as a reflexive researcher: I considered that my conceptualisation of 'consultation' as a doctoral student at the Institute of Education, could potentially vary greatly from an AsEP who has not undertaken training, or from an EP who trained at a different institution. In the interviews, some AsEPs seemed to be referring to 'consultation' as meeting with parents and asking their views, whereas other participants seemed to be referring to psychological consultation (Wagner, 2017). Whilst the use of a semi-structured interview schedule enabled some checking of meaning, it was not possible to explore every term used, and some assumption of meaning was made. Therefore, my decisions about meaning, based on my own understanding, will have influenced my data analysis to an extent. I do not feel that this made a difference to the themes developed, but that this should be considered when engaging in discussions about the AsEP role: terms need to be clarified and shared understanding not assumed.

## 5.8 Future research

This study has highlighted that further quantitative research would be useful to better understand the development of the AsEP role across England. No national data currently exists on how many AsEP posts exist, how this is changing, which EPSs do or do not have AsEP posts, and the proportions of short-term versus permanent contracts. It would be useful to know how many AsEPs move on to doctoral training each year, and how many leave short-term AsEP posts for roles in another EPS, or to leave the role permanently. This data would support policy-makers at a national level, informing discussions on the role of AsEPs in the future of the profession.

The field would also benefit from further research capturing the views of EPs on the AsEP role. This should aim to capture the full range of views, including less positive views that may exist, by using methods where participants remain anonymous. This would support EPSs and policy-makers to consider qualified EPs' views, as the current

study highlighted that EPs are often responsible for the work of AsEPs. Additionally, only two main-grade EPs were recruited in the current study, with all other EP participants holding leadership positions. This gave a useful perspective on EPS planning, but a greater number of main-grade EP participants would provide further insight into the inter-relation of work, building on previous research (Woodley-Hume, 2018).

The current study indicated that AsEPs impact positively both within the EPS and beyond. The knowledge base on the impact of AsEPs would benefit from service-user perspectives to support these findings. This is a still-needed area for research highlighted by Woodley-Hume (2018). Given that the AsEP role and interaction with service-users varies so greatly across England, it could be that this research would be most useful taking place at an EPS level. One study in the existing literature (Monsen et al., 2009) used Target-Monitoring and Evaluation (Dunsmuir et al., 2009), which provides some quantification, or qualitative approaches could illuminate service-users views. This could be led by EPSs themselves, as part of their impact indicators, to contribute to local decision-making on the AsEP role.

## 5.9 Dissemination

I plan to disseminate the findings of this study in several ways, to support EPSs and policy-makers to consider the implications for the profession in their work. Firstly, I will share a research summary with all participants who requested this. I also plan to share the research summary with all PEPs in EPSs in England, via EPS email addresses. I will seek out opportunities to present my research findings, for example through the DECP and AEP conferences, and pursue publication in an Educational Psychology journal.

## 6. Conclusion

In the context of a SEND system in crisis, EPSs are facing great pressure, with reduced EPS capacity coupled with high demand for services. AsEPs are being employed to address EP recruitment difficulties, build EPS capacity and extend EPS

delivery. However, limited research exists on the role and impact of AsEPs and very little guidance to inform EPS decision-making for this role. The current study therefore sought to explore how the AsEP role is understood, what AsEPs are contributing to EPS delivery, and what their impact is.

This study is one of only a few on the AsEP role, and the only study to seek the views of both AsEPs and EPs, from diverse contexts across England, addressing a key gap in the research. The current study offered valuable perspectives from AsEPs fulfilling the role, the EPs who interact with them, and EP in leadership positions responsible for decision-making. As a result, this study has contributed new knowledge and understanding on the AsEP role.

The findings of the current study indicate that AsEPs are being deployed in a variety of ways to meet local needs. Both AsEPs and EPs experience uncertainty about the role, due to the role being new in many EPSs and varying nationally. AsEPs value the learning opportunities in the role, which support them to build competence, confidence and autonomy. Importantly, the current study found that AsEPs are highly valued and are having a positive impact. AsEPs impact on service-users, providing consistent support to CYP and empowering school staff, building capacity in the school system. Within the EPS, AsEPs work with EPs to create collaborative learning partnerships, and, crucially, relieve pressure felt within the EPS.

The findings of the current study suggest that the impact of each cohort of AsEPs can be short-lived as they often progress onto doctoral training. Short-term contracts also mean that AsEP turnover can be high, so uncertainty in the future is experienced. This study highlights that some EPSs offer permanent contracts as an antidote to this uncertain future, although this does not align with policy (AEP, 2024a). The permanency debate reflects one aspect of the AsEP role about which the EP profession feels torn. Other debates include where the boundaries of the AsEP role lie, to ensure safe but meaningful practice.

Carrying out this study has impacted on my own practice. When working with AsEPs, I have considered how to contribute meaningfully to their learning journey, bringing psychology from my university teaching into our casework discussions. I too reaped the benefits from 'collaborative learning partnerships', being asked questions by the AsEPs which helped me to reflect on my rationale for decisions I made. This research

has also highlighted to me the importance of supervision, and connections with others (the proximal processes), in the cultivation of autonomy, competence and confidence. I will take this into my own practice as a newly-qualified EP, seeking out informal supervision opportunities with my peers and supervisors, and finding ways to connect with team-members to promote both my and their development.

The findings of the current study suggest that the AsEP role has positive impact on EP service delivery across a range of contexts. The AsEP role has the potential to address concerns in the current SEND system (DfE, 2022), through working preventatively, or freeing up EP capacity to do so. However, to ensure that AsEP deployment is effective, safe and meaningful, the profession has important decisions to make. EPSs need to engage in local and national discussions, sharing innovative practice and supporting progress in the debates associated with the role. EPSs also need to draw on the research to inform decision-making. As local and national contexts continue to flux, this is an important area for focus for EPSs and policy-makers, so that the AsEP role continues to provide valued learning opportunities, an effective and safe use of resources, and a positive impact in the EPS and beyond.

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# Appendices

## Appendix A: Literature Review Search Strategy

To find relevant literature to review, I conducted a systematic search to identify studies. I accessed the following databases: British Education Index, ERIC (EBSCO), ERIC (Proquest), PsychArticles and PsychINFO.

The following search terms were used: "Assistant Educational Psychologist" OR "Assistant Psychologist" AND role OR impact OR work OR task OR remit OR function.

Given the changes in the education system and Educational Psychology practice, articles published before 1999 were not included. I knew from previous reading that AsEP research is limited, so entries were included from Scotland, Ireland and Wales, even though the contexts do differ from England. This will be taken into account when reviewing the literature.

The UCL Libraries Explore service was also searched to access relevant books and materials from the university libraries. Relevant statistics and legislation were accessed on the GOV.UK website. Grey literature was also identified through searching the web with the above search strategy. I also used snowballing, whereby reference lists of pertinent articles were checked for additional relevant papers. In addition, my research supervisors signposted me to relevant articles, which were also included in the literature review.

This initial search returned 61 articles. The abstracts of articles returned from the search results were scan read and those with relevance to the current study were accessed. The number of relevant articles was reduced to thirteen by reading the abstracts. Six of these pertained to the role of AsEPs in England, with the other papers relating to Assistant roles in Ireland or Scotland, or Assistant Psychologist roles in clinical settings. Five further references pertaining to the role of AsEP in England were identified through the other strategies detailed above. The total number of articles accessed for the literature review was eleven focused on the AsEP role in England, and seven either not in England or in clinical Assistant Psychologist roles.

2/8/24    Context of the "knower"

previous placement
EPS AsEPs

Current
Placement
EPS

AsEPs; Supervisor
Supervises AsEPs

My education/
political views
etc.
IOE University

Interest in
the "system"
'education,
SEND,
inclusion

"outsider" - helps
me... ignorance

NOT an
AsEP

Ex teacher +
SENCo
(experience)

Researcher
'pre-reading.
growing understanding

**Interviewer's Context**

Shared
understanding?

**Interview context**

Assumed knowledge/
understanding.

model of service
delivery

EPs

understaffed?

ratio AsEPs
: EPs

location

Context of
service
delivery -
local need

reason for
AsEP role

model of
AsEP use.

**Participant's Context.**

Education,
past experience,
culture,
political views

Plans →
doctoral
training?

past
Experience
'current

pay
conditions;
employment
conditions

## Appendix C: Reflexive Research Journal excerpt – insider / outsider

*As I enter into this research, I am conscious that I have never been an AsEP so do not have my own prior experiences in this role and am not an insider of the AsEP participant group. I am not yet a qualified EP, so am not an insider to the EP participant group either.*

*Being an outsider to the groups being studied could mean having no familiarity or existing knowledge about being in that community. This could be seen as a disadvantage if it was then difficult to fully understand their context and perspective, which is a crucial aspect of a contextualist-perspectivist stance.*

*I feel that I do have overlapping experience / understanding to both participant groups, given my EP placement experience in an EPS, and my experiences working with Assistant EPs. However, I need to be careful not to see myself as an 'insider' and therefore assume shared meaning, when this may actually vary.*

*The pilot studies helped me to reflect on how to ensure that I gain as good an understanding of the participants' contexts as possible, without assuming understanding. I have added prompts and have raised my consciousness of the need to seek to understand.*

# Appendix D: Refinements made to interview schedule

*Refinements made to the interview schedule following supervisor feedback, pre-test and pilot study*

|  | Refinements made |
|---|---|
| Supervisor / TEP colleagues' feedback<br><br>(Edits made prior to pre-test / pilot-test) | 1. A question was added to find out if the EP participants had previously been AsEPs, and if so, what their experience of this had been. This was because we thought it might affect their understanding of the role and their reflections on the impact it can have.<br>2. For clarity, I named example stakeholders in the question about stakeholder understanding of the AsEP role.<br>3. For eliciting rich data, I added prompts to the interview schedule to elicit more detailed first-hand accounts of facilitators and barriers. (e.g. Can you tell me about a time when this helped?' The prompt aimed to help the interviewee to 'go back' to that time and engage more with what was helpful or unhelpful which would hopefully provide greater insight for RQ4. |
| Pre-test & pilot-test interviews | 1. A question that involved two parts was separated into two separate questions to support answering.<br>2. A question was added to find out about the overall model of how AsEPs and EPs work together in the service – whether Assistants are linked to particular EPs, whether a Senior EP takes the lead on their work, or whether they work on specific projects. This was felt to be essential contextual information that came out during the pilot interviews, so I wanted to ensure there was a question to elicit this information if it was not initially shared.<br>3. A question about how AsEP time was allocated and / or charged was added too, again to further understand the local context.<br>4. I was aware that there would be aspects of contexts that I may not know about and so may not ask about so I added a further broad question, *'Are there any other aspects of the context of your work that you think it's important to share?'* to try to make sure any relevant contextual information was shared.<br>5. I added the question, 'How did you come to understand the role in this way?' to elicit richer reflections on how the understanding of the role had evolved. In line with my critical realist approach, which encompasses pragmatism, I also included this question to unpick any useful factors for supporting the understanding to develop. |

## Appendix E: Final Interview Schedule for EPs and AsEPs

**Opening:** [Check the technology is working; rapport building over this introductory section]

- **Greet** & **introduce** myself
- **Thanks** for participating.
- **Overview** of study: My study aims to explore the role and impact of AsEPs.
- **Purpose** of interview: Explore your experiences of working as an AsEP / with AsEPs.
- **Structure** of interview =
  - Find out a bit more about your working context
  - explore how the AsEP role is understood
  - explore what the AsEP role involves
  - consider the impact of the AsEP role
  - consider what supports AsEPs
  - and what some barriers might be.
- Remind that **anonymised**, but please no **confidential** info.
- Remind **don't have to answer every question** and can stop at any time if wish to.
- Confirm **consent to record** (video on / off?) and live transcribe + notes.
- Agree **time** commitment (45 mins – 1 hour)
- Any **questions** before we start?
- Press Record

| Research Question | Qualified EP questions<br>AsEP questions where they vary |
|---|---|
| **Contextual information gathered in consent form** | So, just to confirm some of the contextual information from the Qualtrics survey:<br>English Region EPS – city? / county council?<br>Model of service delivery<br>How many AsEPs & EPs<br>[Rapport building] |
| **Further contextual information in interview / easy questions to start interview** | Firstly, I would like to hear a bit more about your context, so…<br><br>• I know the job title given for Assistants can vary – what is the job title in your service?<br><br>• Do you know how long AsEPs have been employed in your service?<br><br>• What is your understanding of the reason for the AsEP role existing in your service?<br><br>• How long have you worked there as an EP? / AsEP?<br><br>• And what's your role working with AsEP? (skip for AsEPs)<br><br>• What is the overall model of how AsEPs and EPs work in your EPS? E.g. are AsEPs linked to particular EPs, does a Senior EP take the lead on their work, or do they work on specific projects?<br><br>• Related to model of service delivery, how is AsEP time allocated / charged? |

| | |
|---|---|
| | • Were you yourself an AsEP? (skip for AsEPs)<br><br>• What was your overall experience of this? (skip for AsEPs)<br><br>• How long have you worked there as an EP / AsEP?<br><br>• What was your reason for applying for an AsEP role?<br><br>• What was your role before becoming an AsEP? How many years of experience [of working in general] do you have before becoming an AsEP?<br><br>• Is there any other aspect of the context of your work that you think it's important to share? |
| **RQ1: How is the role of AsEP understood?** | I'm interested firstly in how the role of AsEP is understood by different people<br><br>• **How would you describe the / your role of AsEP?**<br>How did you come to understand the role in this way?<br><br>• **Do you believe that Assistants in your service have the same understanding of their role as you do?** (skip for AsEPs)<br>How did this understanding come about?<br><br>• **How do you think the role of AsEP is understood in the wider EPS?**<br>How did this understanding come about?<br><br>• **How do you think the AsEP role is understood by stakeholders such as SENCos / parents / children? (split the question)**<br>How did this understanding come about? |
| **RQ2: What do AsEPs contribute to Educational Psychology Service delivery?** | Moving on to some questions about what AsEPs do…<br><br>• **Can you tell me what you know about the different activities the AsEPs undertake in your service? Or What activities does your job involve?**<br><br>*Prompt: Outline the work they / you might do in a typical week.*<br><br>*Listen out for individual, group, whole school, LA and ask about each level. E.g. Beyond statutory, do you do any work with individual CYP?*<br>*Listen out for consultation, assessment, intervention, observation, research.*<br><br>*Follow up questions for examples of work:*<br>- *How autonomous?*<br>- *How work decided on / overseen?*<br>- *What impact?*<br>- *What supported them to undertake this?*<br>- *Were there any challenges in this?* |

| | |
|---|---|
| **RQ3: What is the perceived impact of AsEPs?** | I'm really interested in the impact that AsEPs are having, so the following questions relate to that…<br><br>    • **What difference do you feel the AsEPs / you are making?**<br><br>*Prompts / follow up questions:*<br>*Can you give me an example? / Can you tell me more about that?*<br>*Where do you feel they / you can make the biggest difference?*<br>*What has changed in the EPS since AsEPs / you started?*<br>*Is anything happening in the EPS that wouldn't be possible without AsEPs?*<br><br>    • **How do you know they're / you're having this impact?**<br><br>*Prompts: Can you tell me about a time when you had some feedback?*<br>*Does your service use any formal way of gathering feedback?*<br>*And what does that feedback say?* |
| **RQ3 continued - How do AsEPs impact on the work of EPs?** | I'm also interested in how EPs and AsEPs work together and the impact this might have, so<br><br>    • **How do you work together with AsEPs / with qualified EPs in your service?**<br><br>*Prompts: If you're doing a piece of work with an AsEP / qualified EP, what might that look like?*<br>*How are tasks split up between you? Who decides that?*<br>*How well do you find that works?*<br>*How independently do they work?*<br><br>    • **How do you think having AsEPs in the service impacts on your role (/work)? / What difference do you think having AsEPs in the service makes to the EP's role / work?**<br><br>*Prompt: Can you tell me about a time when this happened?*<br><br>    • **What do you think supports EPs and AsEPs to work well together?**<br><br>*Prompt: Thinking of a when you and an AsEP / qualified EP worked well together, what helped?* |
| **RQ4. What supports AsEPs to fulfil their role?** | Moving on, I also wonder what supports the AsEP role…<br><br>    • **What do you think helps the AsEPs / you to do their / your job?**<br><br>*Prompt: Can you tell me about a time when this helped?*<br>*How did this help?*<br>*How was that useful for your role?*<br>*Anything else?*<br><br>    • **And what helps you to do your role with them? (Skip for AsEPs)** |

| | |
|---|---|
| | *Prompts: Can you tell me about a time when this helped?*<br>*How did this help? How was that useful for your role?* |
| *RQ4…and what are the barriers to the AsEP role?* | • **Thinking to any barriers now, what makes it more difficult for the AsEPs / you to do their / your job?**<br><br>• **And what can make your role with them more difficult? (Skip for AsEPs)**<br><br>*Prompt: I wonder if you can share an example of how that made it more difficult for them / you to do your job?*<br>*Now that you know about X, what advice would you give a newly starting AsEP / EPS recruiting AsEPs?*<br><br>• **Name induction / training / support –ask them to describe these if haven't mentioned, and ask if a support or barrier?** |
| *Any further comments?* | • **Is there anything else related to the role of AsEPs that we haven't covered that you wanted to comment on?** |
| *Any questions?* | • **Do you have any questions?** |

**Close with:**

- Appreciation and thanks
- Explain the value of their contribution
- What will happen next: Transcript, thematic analysis, writing of thesis and research report, possible dissemination etc.
- Would they like a copy of the research briefing, which will be a summary of the findings?

# Appendix F: Reflexive Research Journal excerpt- connectedness

**Excerpt from reflections following EP Interview:**

*This interview felt very natural. The interviewee described themselves as a 'mum' character to the AsEPs and I wonder if I also felt this 'mum' vibe towards me! She was supportive and attuned to me as well as me being conscious of my attunement towards her and making the interview space feel safe. I wondered if this made a difference to the 'flow' of the interview, as I felt that we were attuned and that lots of rich information was coming from the interview.*

*I need to keep in mind that in other interviews I may not feel this same feeling of attunement and 'flow', so need to use rapport-building, and monitor during the interview if further prompting / questions are needed to get the same richness of data.*

**Excerpt from reflections following AsEP interview:**

*I wondered if the way the interview seemed to flow naturally was also because I shared some characteristics with the interviewee. We were of similar ages, both with a background of extended time spent in teaching. The interviewee's EPS is set up in a similar way to my current placement EPS. Some of the interviewee's descriptions of not understanding the wider LA set up resonated with me – perhaps as from a school perspective in my previous experience, this was very unclear. The interviewee also shared an interest in systemic work, which they also attributed to their past school experience.*

*Whilst the interview felt natural and comfortable, I need to be cautious of making assumptions about what the interviewee meant, because of my feeling that we are similar in some ways. I can consider the interviewee's perspective in my analysis, in line with my contextualist perspectivist stance, but I need to try to remain carefully guided by the data rather than my own context. I will seek support with this by asking a peer / supervisor to review my codes and discuss with me. It's possible that my past context will make a difference to data analysis.*

<u>Commentary:</u> I found that raising my awareness of my feelings of connectedness helped me to 'self-monitor (Berger, 2015), noticing times when I felt less connection during interviews. I then made a conscious effort to tune in to participants and ask more questions to better understand the context and experience so that I was still able to elicit rich data.

# Appendix G: Reflexive Research Journal excerpt- methodological decision-making

**Should I use focus groups?**

*I have been considering whether I should use focus groups for data collection. These could be groups made up of AsEPs only, and EPs only, or a mixture of AsEPs and EPs, as in previous research (Woodley-Hume, 2018) – although I would then need to consider possible power imbalance and the impact on data collection. From reading, I know that focus groups can be a good way of eliciting a lot of information in a short session, and for sharing ideas and comparing then at a broad level across participants (Morgan, 1998).*

*However, I don't think in a focus group, I'd be able to get a good understanding of each individual participant's context, which is important in my critical realist and contextualist-perspectivist stance. Although I will be looking for common meaning across participants, I want to understand the participant views from their perspective, in their particular context. I feel like I need to prioritise depth for each individual participant therefore, and that individual interviews will enable me to do this.*

*I do also feel that participants will feel more open to comment on any challenging experiences in a private individual interview compared to a focus group. As I want to understand the national picture of AsEP deployment, the focus group would comprise AsEPs / EPs from different services, so I wonder how comfortable participants would feel to share the full range of views? The EP world is very small, so it's not easy to remain anonymous. Again, I feel that individual interviews, although time-consuming, will facilitate a more open conversation than focus groups, which is important for eliciting rich data.*

**Should I use Grounded Theory?**

*Ever since our Grounded Theory lecture at university, I have been very interested in using Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2014) for this research. This is in part because there is limited previous research into the AsEP role and impact and therefore the absence of theoretical frameworks in this area. A Grounded Theory study produces a local theory, which would be a useful contribution to this field.*

*However, firstly, I don't feel that the various versions of Grounded Theory (Glaser & Straus, 1967; Charmaz, 2014) align with my philosophical positioning which makes me feel conflicted, as I think it would be harder to be cohesive.*

*I do also feel that as Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2014) requires the researcher to narrow down a large amount of data to identify a "main concern" felt by all participants, a lot of rich data about the experiences of participants in their context would be lost.*

*Seeing as AsEP experiences do seem to vary greatly, I wonder how a Grounded Theory would be 'checked' back with participants – the theory would need to be fairly broad to fit everyone's context. I feel that this could be restrictive too.*

*I do feel that a reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) would enable me to pay due attention to the contextual factors and report broader findings by not being limited to one "main concern". I feel that this would be a more useful contribution to the field.*

# Appendix H: Participant Information Sheet

**Institute of Education**

**UCL**

*An exploration of the contributions of Assistant Educational Psychologists:*
*Assistant and qualified EP perspectives*

Interview participants information sheet

This thesis study has been reviewed and approved by the UCL IOE Research Ethics Committee.

My name is Emmeline Buchanan, and I am in my second year studying for a Doctorate in Educational and Child Psychology (DEdPsy) at the Institute of Education, University College London.

My thesis aims to shine a light on the role Assistant Educational Psychologists play in extending the offer of Educational Psychology Services at the individual, group and organisational levels.

I am seeking participants who work in Local Authority Educational Psychology Services in England. I am inviting Assistant Educational Psychologists who have been in post for half a year or more, and qualified Educational Psychologists who work directly with or supervise Assistant EPs to take part.

I very much hope that you would like to take part in this study. This information sheet aims to answer any questions you may have, but please do contact me if you have any further questions, at
emmeline.buchanan.22@ucl.ac.uk

**Who is carrying out the study?** Emmeline Buchanan, supervised by Dr Karen Majors and Dr Cynthia Pinto, DEdPsy professional and academic tutors at the Institute of Education, University College London.

**Why am I doing this study?** I hope that this study will add to the knowledge of the contributions that Assistant EPs make. The initial research questions are:

1) How is the Assistant EP role perceived?
2) What does the role of Assistant EP contribute to Educational Psychology Services?
3) What supports Assistant EPs to contribute and what are the barriers?

**Why are you being invited to take part?** As an Assistant EP or qualified EP, you will be able to contribute your view, based on your experience in your Educational Psychology Service.

**What will happen if you choose to take part?** You will be asked for some contextual information – e.g., where your EPS is based and whether you are a traded service. This will be used for sampling purposes as I am aiming for the participants to come from a range of contexts. If you are selected, there will be an online one-to-one interview conducted via a UCL Zoom account. The interview will last 45 minutes – 1 hour. It will further explore your experience of working as an Assistant EP, or with an Assistant EP, for example considering examples of work the Assistant EP has been involved in, the difference the Assistant EP is making, and what enables the Assistant EP to have an impact. With your consent, the interview will be video recorded using Zoom, with a back-up audio recording being made by Dictaphone. The researcher may also take notes. You will be able to choose to have your camera turned on or off. You will need to be in a private space for the interview.

**Will anyone know you have been involved?**
Participation in the study will be kept confidential and data will be anonymised. All data will be saved securely in a password protected format and in line with GDPR. Participants will be asked to keep identifying information anonymous and not to share confidential information.

Personal information collected will be email addresses for those interested in participating, and interested in receiving a report once the study is complete. Your email address will only be used for practical arrangements, sending my thanks, and sending the research briefing and will be deleted once the study is complete.

Once the interviews have been transcribed and anonymised, video and Dictaphone recordings will be deleted. Anonymised data will also be viewed by my supervisor and individual Trainee Educational Psychologist colleagues for the purpose of assuring the quality of data analysis. Anonymised data will be kept securely on UCL servers for 10 years in line with UCL's data retention policy.

**Could there be problems if you participate in this study?**
Involvement in this study will involve talking about your experiences in your role. If at any point during participation you feel uncomfortable, you are entitled to withdraw without needing to give a reason and without any negative repercussions. You are free to withdraw your data up until 1st September when results will be analysed.

**What will happen to the results of the study?**
The results will be written up as a thesis for submission to my university, and as a research briefing for sharing with participants and other interested parties. The findings may be written up for presentations or publication. In the reports, anonymised information or quotes from interviews may be used. Each interview will be allocated a letter, with no link to the individual. All participants will be given the option to receive a summary of the results via email.

**Consent to participate?** It is entirely your choice if you want to take part or not. I hope that if you do choose to participate, you will find it a valuable experience. There are no negative repercussions if you choose not to take part.

If you would like to participate in the interview, please complete and return the consent form.

**Contact** If you have any further questions before you decide whether to take part, you can reach me at emmeline.buchanan.22@ucl.ac.uk

I appreciate you taking the time to read this information sheet.

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**Data Protection Privacy Notice**
The controller for this project will be University College London (UCL). The UCL Data Protection Officer provides oversight of UCL activities involving the processing of personal data and can be contacted at data-protection@ucl.ac.uk.

This 'local' privacy notice sets out the information that applies to this particular study. Further information on how UCL uses participant information from research studies can be found in our 'general' privacy notice for participants in research studies here.

The information that is required to be provided to participants under data protection legislation (GDPR and DPA 2018) is provided across both the 'local' and 'general' privacy notices. The lawful basis that will be used to process any personal details: 'Public task' for personal data.

If you are concerned about how your personal data is being processed, or if you would like to contact us about your rights, please contact UCL in the first instance at data-protection@ucl.ac.uk.

# Appendix I: Excerpt from ethics application

**Section 8 of Ethics Application – Ethical Issues**

*Please state clearly the ethical issues which may arise in the course of this research and how will they be addressed.*

**Recruitment:** I plan to recruit from across England. I do not plan to exclude AsEPs / qualified EPs from the Service where I am on placement as a Trainee EP. This means that I may know some participants if they apply to participate. The benefits of their inclusion is that I know from experience that the model of AsEP deployment is interesting and would be useful to capture. However, possible ethical issues could arise if the participants from my service are critical about the service or disclose concerning information. This I would treat like any other disclosure, contacting my supervisors, and following appropriate safeguarding / malpractice policy. Another possible ethical issue is about ensuring that I keep the information confidential, which will require me to remember the information gained through interviews and not revealing this. I will do this by being professional about what I share with others, as I would following any workplace conversation held in confidence.

**Gatekeepers:** I will not be trying to match participants (AsEP / qualified EP) and will not be trying to source any EPS policy or documentation, so do not feel there is any need to go through Principal EPs when recruiting for this study. I will email PEPs the recruitment flyer to circulate to their teams, but the PEP will not have any information as to whether any of their team have contacted me to participate, unless the participant tells them.

**Informed consent:** Participants will be adults not from a vulnerable group, but BPS ethical guidelines will be adhered to, to ensure that any potential risk is minimised. Participants will be given a detailed information sheet prior to consenting to take part in the study. The information sheet includes details about what the study is about so that participants know the kind of information they would be sharing and whether they feel comfortable to do so. Participants will need to give full consent before participating. It is made clear in the information sheet and consent form that participants may withdraw at any time if they feel uncomfortable, with no negative repercussions.

**Potentially vulnerable participants:** If Assistants / qualified EPs felt that they are not doing well in their job, or are experiencing work-related stress, they might find some of the questions stress-inducing. The information sheet includes information about the content of the questions, allowing potential participants who want to avoid talking about this the chance to not take part in the study. The information sheet and consent form make clear that participants can withdraw at any time. The researcher will maintain a non-judgemental stance. If at any point the researcher feels that a participant is showing discomfort, the researcher will ask whether the participant wishes to continue, giving the option to cease the interview.

**Safeguarding/child protection:** The study involves adult participants, so the safeguarding of children is not directly related. However, if any content arises during data collection that suggests any safeguarding concern, I will discuss with my supervisor and follow safeguarding protocols as necessary.

**Sensitive topics:** If AsEPs / qualified EPs felt under pressure in their work, they might find some of the questions stress-inducing. The information sheet includes information about the content of the questions, allowing potential participants who want to avoid talking about this the chance to not take part in the study. The information sheet and consent form make clear that participants can withdraw at any time. The researcher will maintain a non-judgemental stance. If at any point the researcher feels

that a participant is showing discomfort, the researcher will ask whether the participant wishes to continue.

Anxiety, discomfort or embarrassment may be experienced as a result of me asking questions about their role and their impact if they feel that their work is not as effective as they would want or they feel is expected.

I will minimise this risk by:
- Reassuring participants that the data will be anonymised
- Giving participants the option to not answer questions.
- Ensuring that it is made clear in the information sheet, and consent form that participants can decide not to answer any question and can withdraw consent from the study at any time up until data coding.
- Careful wording of interview questions to avoid assumptions and / or judgemental language.
- Leaving enough time in the interviews for participants to reflect and talk fully about their answers which may help to ease anxiety / discomfort / embarrassment.
- Maintaining a professional and neutral stance, not exhibiting any judgement for answers given.
- In the information sheet, informing potential participants that they will be talking about their AsEP experiences of their role and impact so they can choose not to take part, knowing about possible risks.
- Monitoring for any signs of discomfort, anxiety or embarrassment and checking in with participants if they would like to continue.

**Risks to participants and/or researchers:** Given the EP workforce is under pressure, it's possible that spending time on interviews could add to the stress levels for AsEPs. This risk is minimised by being clear in the information sheet about the amount of time participation will take. The researcher will also check with participants at the start of the interview that they still have the full time available, and the researcher will be conscious of staying within the allocated time.

**Confidentiality/Anonymity:** Participants will be asked not to give any names and not to share confidential information. Transcripts of interviews will be made anonymous, with pseudonyms used and any identifying information redacted. Audio / video recordings will be deleted. Email addresses for participant recruitment will initially be saved alongside contextual information (but not additional personal data other than email addresses) but then unlinked from contextual information once participant recruitment is complete.

**Disclosures/limits to confidentiality:** See safeguarding note above – for any concerns for safeguarding / malpractice, I will discuss with my research supervisors, then follow safeguarding or malpractice protocol as necessary. The consent form will contain information about this so participants will be aware of the limits to confidentiality.

**Data storage and security both during and after the research (including transfer, sharing, encryption, protection):** Interviews will be recorded using the recording function in Zoom and a backup recording by Dictaphone. Recordings will be saved anonymously, and password protected on UCL Onedrive. They will be deleted once the transcripts have been made. Data will be accessed on my password-protected computer and / or laptop. Transfer between computer and laptop will take place using Onedrive. After

the research, anonymised transcribed data will be held for 10 years in line with UCL's Data Retention Policy.

**Reporting, dissemination and use of findings:** Any identifying information will be redacted and pseudonyms used in the reports. Participants will be aware of my plans for reporting and dissemination from the start of the study as this will be included in my information sheet and consent form. Participants will know that the data will be reported in a research write up and may be disseminated in conferences / publications.

**Institute of Education**

**ᵐUCL**

## A study exploring the role of
## Assistant Educational Psychologists and their impact

Are you an Assistant EP who has been in position for at least half a year? Or are you a qualified EP who works with or oversees the work of Assistant EPs? Do you work for a Local Authority in England?
**Research participants needed!**

Hello! I'm Emmeline Buchanan, a second-year Trainee Educational Psychologist at the Institute of Education, University College

## What am I researching and why?

My study aims to shine a light on the role of Assistant Educational Psychologists, considering how they contribute to build capacity and extend the offer of Educational Psychology Services.

I will explore the perceptions of the Assistant EP role, the ways in which Assistant EPs contribute and the impact of their work. I will also explore the support that is required to enable Assistant EPs to contribute, and the challenges of the role.

## What will you need to do to participate?

Take part in an individual online interview (45 minutes to 1 hour to complete).

## Interested in taking part?

Please find the information sheet, consent and survey here:

https://tinyurl.com/.....

If you have any questions about the study, please get in touch:

emmeline.buchanan.22@ucl.ac.uk

## Appendix K: Past experiences of AsEP participants

Information on the past experiences of AsEP participants was collected from semantic codes (surface level meaning) during reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Chunks of information were coded as 'past experience with children and young people', 'past experience in LA' and 'previous Psychology Assistant' or generally 'past experience'. The quotes for each code were used to create the overview below.

The length of past experience that AsEP participants had prior to their current role ranged from one year to over twenty years. The roles that AsEPs had previously fulfilled were varied, and most AsEPs had gained experience in more than one role. The roles included:

Roles in nursery / school / college settings

- Specialist support assistant for children with PMLD
- Secondary PGCE and teaching
- Primary school teacher
- Teacher
- Learning Support Assistant
- Head of School in secondary SEMH school
- SENCo across a Trust
- Further education teacher
- ELSA

Roles outside of school settings

- Administrative role in a therapeutic clinic
- Support worker in a hostel
- Probation Service teaching role
- Tutor for children not attending school
- Education role in Children's Hospital

Assistant Psychologist roles

- Clinical Psychology Assistant in a specialist school multi-disciplinary team working with 16–25-year-olds
- Assistant psychologist working in a special school and with children's homes
- Research Assistant
- Assistant Psychologist in a college

LA roles

- SEND Caseworker for LA
- School Improvement partner
- Tribunals expert witness for LA

# Appendix L: Interview Evaluation Prompt-sheet

**Pre-test / Pilot test Interview Evaluation**

**Created from** Magnusson, E. & Marecek, J. (2015*). Doing interview-based qualitative research: a learner's guide.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

**Purpose of pre-test and pilot interviews:**
- Help me to refine the interview guide.
- Give experience of carrying out the interviews – to become a more adept and confident interviewer.

| To consider: | Feedback: |
|---|---|
| **General Feedback:** | |
| **Wording of interview questions** | |
| Is the language used in the questions easy to understand? | |
| Do the items only ask one question at a time? | |
| What did you understand each question to mean? (Was the meaning of the question unambiguous? Was it possible to give an answer to this question?) For questions that pose problems: was the language too difficult to understand? Was the meaning ambiguous? Was the question too abstract / general? Etc.) | |
| Do the questions avoid assumptions about what participants may think, and avoid leading questions? | |
| Do the interview questions flow, to encourage a natural conversational experience? | |
| **Content** | |
| Are the number of questions suitable for the time allotted? | |
| **Data elicited** | |
| Do the questions invite participants to share rich data? (including open questions) | |
| Do the questions yield all the material I am interested in? | |
| Do the interview questions elicit information outside of my areas of interest? | |
| **Interviewing skills** | |
| How did you find my way of asking questions, asking follow-up questions, and prompting for any further answers? (How did my way of asking questions etc make you react?) | |

# Appendix M: Extracts of transcript coding from NVivo

Extract 1 of 'Participant A' coding from NVivo – Screenshot 1a showing the first set of codes



00:01:35.460 --> 00:01:41.310

**Interviewer:** Brilliant. Thank you. And what's your understanding, then, for this role existing in your service?

00:01:41.660 --> 00:02:16.760

[REDACTED] Well [laughs]. I think with any financial commitments, there is just very little predictability currently. As far- well, they are employed on the basis that they will apply for the course. So they are employed for- for them it would be one and a half years, but I think, generally speaking, it's like a yearly role from what I understand. So I haven't heard anything about them not being replaced, but equally, I completely won't be surprised if they're not replaced.

00:02:17.339 --> 00:02:24.729

**Interviewer:** Yeah, and what's your understanding of the reason that they were brought in then [REDACTED], what was communicated [REDACTED]?

00:02:25.920 --> 00:03:16.750

[REDACTED]: I mean, I think we had a very positive experience with Assistant EPs last time, and people, perhaps, I presume, have been advocating for this role to be brought back. I think we- so they haven't been- the temptation is to say that they've been employed to help cope with EHCPs. But I don't think it's true. I don't believe it's true. Because actually, we don't use them very much for this, even though they would be willing to. But we haven't figured out a way yet to do that.

So I think they have been are brought in to improve the prospects of hiring EPs in the future if they have a positive experience with us. And just to help diversify what we can do with their help.

00:03:17.250 --> 00:03:30.390

**Interviewer:** Lovely. Yeah, great, great summary. So to help address the kind of recruitment for the

CODE STRIPES

Coding Density

- part of the team
- role evolved, refined through experience
- support EPs
- Write some of statutory advice
- EPs not sure
- EPS under pressure
- EPs need to be flexible open to change
- competence not fully there
- involved in research
- confidence builds
- statutory role for AsEPs
- us and them
- collaborative partnership learning together
- overseen by EP, buck stops
- geography matters
- AsEP use by EPs varies
- not expected to do tasks if not competent
- cost-benefit analysis
- EPs dont have time
- understand context
- Senior manages AsEP programme
- flexible role
- takes a while to know how to use AsEP
- uncertainty for AsEPs
- enjoyment of role
- ethical decisions debates

- we value AsEPs
- past experience counts
- EPs, EPS not sure how to use AsEPs
- AsEPs diversify EPs offer
- AsEPs willing, keen, eager

# Extract 1 of 'Participant A' coding from NVivo – Screenshot 1b showing the second set of codes

**00:01:35.460 --> 00:01:41.310**

**Interviewer:** Brilliant. Thank you. And what's your understanding, then, for this role existing in your service?

**00:01:41.660 --> 00:02:16.760**

███████ Well [laughs]. I think with any financial commitments, there is just very little predictability currently. As far- well, they are employed on the basis that they will apply for the course. So they are employed for- for them it would be one and a half years, but I think, generally speaking, it's like a yearly role from what I understand. So I haven't heard anything about them not being replaced, but equally, I completely won't be surprised if they're not replaced.

**00:02:17.339 --> 00:02:24.729**

**Interviewer:** Yeah, and what's your understanding of the reason that they were brought in then ████████████ what was communicated █████?

**00:02:25.920 --> 00:03:16.750**

███████ I mean, I think we had a very positive experience with Assistant EPs last time, and people, perhaps, I presume, have been advocating for this role to be brought back. I think we- so they haven't been- the temptation is to say that they've been employed to help cope with EHCPs. But I don't think it's true. I don't believe it's true. Because actually, we don't use them very much for this, even though they would be willing to. But we haven't figured out a way yet to do that.

So I think they have been are brought in to improve the prospects of hiring EPs in the future if they have a positive experience with us. And just to help diversify what we can do with their help.

**00:03:17.250 --> 00:03:30.390**

**Interviewer:** Lovely. Yeah, great, great summary. So to help address the kind of recruitment for the ...

CODE STRIPES

Coding Density

- save EPs time
- produce quality work
- EPs need to trust AsEPs competence
- structured support helps
- given autonomy
- assessments
- AsEPs can be isolated
- reflect,supe for development
- personal development
- schools don't see Assistant bit
- AsEPs look up to EPs
- EP protected role in statutory
- inaccessible unsustainable role
- competition to get role
- not in remit boundaries
- gather pupil,parent views
- supervision support
- AsEPs bring energy, enthusiasm, fresh
- learn by doing on job
- statutory restricts EPS delivery
- project work
- focus on getting on doctorate
- gateway to doctorate profession
- EPS Assistant not EP Assistant
- time and space to think
- understand AsEP role through seeing it in action
- EPs not familiar with AsEP role
- EPs need confidence in using AsEPs
- build relationship EPAsEP
- dual role -do job + get on course
- settling into role takes time,finding feet
- uncertainty for EPs

- expectation to apply to doctorate
- gap in AsEP employment
- extend capacity of EPS
- no,little statutory for AsEPs
- recruitment and retention

151

Extract 2 of 'Participant A' coding from NVivo – Screenshot 2a showing the first set of codes

**CODE STRIPES**

00:04:16.779 --> 00:05:15.089

So, we have an assistant EP who is sort of loosely linked to- actually even not my team, but to a neighbouring team. Anyway, we share an office with her when we're in the office. And when she started, I think there was ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ about what she will be doing. So I well- I offered her various opportunities, first to shadow and then to like, do things like joint dynamic assessment or joint pupil view gathering, which was a lot of fun. We did a lot of joint- well, not a lot- some joint training. And I also try to involve her like in an action based research projects in one of my schools. Unfortunately, that hasn't taken off, not because of her but because of the school. But I know that she has been involved with other people in similar ways.

00:05:15.490 --> 00:05:35.499

Interviewer: Brilliant. Thank you. And yeah, so you gave a bit of a flavour of this in your last response. So what's the overall model of how an Assistant EP might work with an EP - so are they linked to you, you know, linked to a particular EP, or is it a senior who takes a lead on their role? Or do they have projects?

00:05:35.500 --> 00:06:07.199

So a senior takes lead on their role. They're not attached to an EP. Although they are associated with a team just for the purpose of supervision and line management. But other than just being, I think, that senior who oversees them, she like keeps tabs on them and helps them to find things to do. But I think a lot of that was down to EPs being asked like, 'Do you have anything you'd like support with?' And people get back in touch if they have something.

00:06:07.760 --> 00:06:16.350

**Code stripe labels (top to bottom / left to right):**

Coding Density

- loose set up
- EPs work in different ways
- part of the team
- we value AsEPs
- role evolved, refined through experience
- support EPs
- Write some of statutory advice
- past experience counts
- EPs not sure
- EPs under pressure
- EPs, EPS not sure how to use AsEPs
- EPs need to be flexible, open to change
- competence not fully there
- involved in research
- confidence builds
- statutory role for AsEPs
- us and them
- collaborative partnership learning together
- geography matters
- AsEPs diversify EPS offer
- AsEP use by EPs varies
- not expected to do tasks if not competent
- cost-benefit analysis
- EPs dont have time
- understand context
- takes a while to know how to use AsEP
- uncertainty for AsEPs

- individual EPs offer work, take under wing
- varied experience seen as positive
- joint work with AsEPs
- overseen by EP, buck stops
- flexible role
- Senior manages AsEP programme

Extract 2 of 'Participant A' coding from NVivo – Screenshot 2b showing the second set of codes

**CODE STRIPES**

00:04:16.779 --> 00:05:15.089

So, we have an assistant EP who is sort of loosely linked to- actually even not my team, but to a neighbouring team. Anyway, we share an office with her when we're in the office. And when she started, I think there was ⬛⬛⬛⬛⬛⬛ about what she will be doing. So I well- I offered her various opportunities, first to shadow and then to like, do things like joint dynamic assessment or joint pupil view gathering, which was a lot of fun. We did a lot of joint- well, not a lot- some joint training. And I also try to involve her like in an action based research projects in one of my schools. Unfortunately, that hasn't taken off, not because of her but because of the school. But I know that she has been involved with other people in similar ways.

00:05:15.490 --> 00:05:35.499

**Interviewer:** Brilliant. Thank you. And yeah, so you gave a bit of a flavour of this in your last response. So what's the overall model of how an Assistant EP might work with an EP - so are they linked to you, you know, linked to a particular EP, or is it a senior who takes a lead on their role? Or do they have projects?

00:05:35.500 --> 00:06:07.199

⬛⬛⬛ So a senior takes lead on their role. They're not attached to an EP. Although they are associated with a team just for the purpose of supervision and line management. But other than just being, I think, that senior who oversees them, she like keeps tabs on them and helps them to find things to do. But I think a lot of that was down to EPs being asked like, *'Do you have anything you'd like support with?'* And people get back in touch if they have something.

00:06:07.760 --> 00:06:16.350

Coding Density

- training to support the role
- shadowing
- trialing ways to use AsEPs
- picking up work EPs can't do
- capacity issues in EPS
- add to depth,quality,impact of work
- boundaried role is safe
- EPs give AsEPs time for supervision
- dont have confidence
- connection matters
- AsEPs linked to teams
- unclear role at start
- support schools
- schools don't mind EP,AsEP
- schools unfamiliar with AsEP role
- work on EPS,LA priorities
- defined role in statutory
- EYFS role for AsEPs
- support to get on doctorate
- changed role at times of pressure

153

# Extract 1 of 'Participant B' coding from NVivo - Screenshot 1a showing the first set of codes

00:27:41.680 --> 00:28:56.110

████ I think that - cause myself and the other Assistants were talking about this the other day - and actually, I think that our role is very, very broad. So, we cover- so if you're thinking about like the Currie matrix, we cover every single one of those as Assistants. So, there's nothing that we specifically do more than anything else. So, we'll go in, we'll deliver intervention, we'll do whole-school work, we'll do consultation, we'll do research, and we'll work at a whole-school level, we'll work at the systemic level.

So, our role is very, very broad. And that's one of the benefits, I think, of this role is that we've done so much work like in such a short period of time. It's so broad. It- it's-it's really difficult to say that, you know, *'We do- or we deliver intervention'*, or you know *'We do statutory work.'* Like we do everything pretty much.

00:28:56.330 --> 00:29:05.600

**Interviewer**: Lovely, varied roles. And how did you come to understand your role in this way?

00:29:06.530 --> 00:31:16.180

████ With difficulty. █████ ████████████████████ working in a school is very different, obviously, to working as- as an Assistant where you have a lot of autonomy, and like, you know, you can pick up a bit of work, you can put it back down, and you know, do something else for a little bit.

Whereas, like in a school, it's like, *'Okay, we have to do this at 9 o'clock. We have to* ████████████ *at 10 o'clock. We have to do this at....lunchtime's at 12'*. So, it's a very structured day, whereas this is very unstructured. And I think I struggled with that transition between the two of those kind of ways of working and it almost felt me- left me a little bit lost like, *'What, what am I doing?'* Like, *'What impact am I having*? Because a lot of the work that I was doing was very long-term work where it was like- I was used to like, kind of, *'We're going to do* ████████ *now. Okay, that's done,'* kind of thing.

---

**CODE STRIPES**

Coding Density

- Multi-agency
- Involved in projects
- involved in research
- AsEPs are well supported
- joint work with EP
- need another person feet on the ground
- Psychology Assistant or AsEP
- support from EP working with
- supporting EPs
- Geography matters
- model deliver interventions
- competence not there
- emotional support
- different opinions
- Assistants work together
- AsEPs do consultation
- Unclear on EPS system
- Practice in other areas
- seeking advice or feedback
- supervision support
- supervision is not structured
- polar views on statutory work

- Role in wider LA

- self-doubt

- Past experience counts

154

Extract 1 of 'Participant B' coding from NVivo - Screenshot 1b showing the second set of codes

00:27:41.680 --> 00:28:56.110

[redacted] I think that - cause myself and the other Assistants were talking about this the other day - and actually, I think that our role is very, very broad. So, we cover- so if you're thinking about like the Currie matrix, we cover every single one of those as Assistants. So, there's nothing that we specifically do more than anything else. So, we'll go in, we'll deliver intervention, we'll do whole-school work, we'll do consultation, we'll do research, and we'll work at a whole-school level, we'll work at the systemic level.

So, our role is very, very broad. And that's one of the benefits, I think, of this role is that we've done so much work like in such a short period of time. It's so broad. It- it's-it's really difficult to say that, you know, 'We do- or we deliver intervention', or you know 'We do statutory work.' Like we do everything pretty much.

00:28:56.330 --> 00:29:05.600
Interviewer: Lovely, varied roles. And how did you come to understand your role in this way?

00:29:06.530 --> 00:31:16.180
[redacted] With difficulty. [redacted] working in a school is very different, obviously, to working as- as an Assistant where you have a lot of autonomy, and like, you know, you can pick up a bit of work, you can put it back down, and you know, do something else for a little bit.

Whereas, like in a school, it's like, 'Okay, we have to do this at 9 o'clock. We have to [redacted] at 10 o'clock. We have to do this at....lunchtime's at 12'. So, it's a very structured day, whereas this is very unstructured. And I think I struggled with that transition between the two of those kind of ways of working and it almost felt me- left me a little bit lost like, 'What, what am I doing?' Like, 'What impact am I having'? Because a lot of the work that I was doing was very long-term work where it was like- I was used to like, kind of, 'We're going to do [redacted] now. Okay, that's done,' kind of thing.

CODE STRIPES

Coding Density

- confidence
- good relationships with EPs
- role is interesting
- Not in remit
- AsEPs complete projects
- change in EPS
- Engaged in further study
- extending contract
- increased statutory demand
- observations
- small EP team
- network meetings connect with AsEPs
- EPs request AsEP to work with them
- Clearly defined specific tasks
- getting onto the doctorate
- Tasks from Senior Leaders
- TEPs
- write statutory report
- held accountable
- role is a work in progress
- not autonomous on purpose
- Changing picture of AsEP employment
- AsEP dont do consultation
- Role in its own right
- AsEPs can do a lot
- high turnover of Assistants

- AsEPs reduce EP pressure
- AsEP role as solution to problem

- variety of work is an opportunity
- variety of work in EPS

- difficult to understand AsEP role

- Unclear role at start

155

# Appendix N: Activities undertaken by AsEPs

The table below presents the activities undertaken by AsEPs in the current study. The activities have been organised into the five functions of EP practice set out in the Currie Matrix (Currie, 2002), with additional areas of activity beyond these functions added. This information was captured in the semantic coding (surface-level meaning) during reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

| Function | Task and level of independence where indicated |
|---|---|
| **Assessment** (See separate section for involvement in Statutory Assessment) | • Observation of CYP to feedback to EP before the EP-led consultation<br>• Observation of CYP for written recommendations to setting<br>• Observation and write up using EPS scaffold – overseen by EP<br>• Observation of assessment by EP, with AsEP noting what CYP says<br>• Gather pupil views to feed-back to EP<br>• Gather pupil views and write up for report<br>• Home visit for EBSA assessment, and written recommendations.<br>• Carry out specific standardised assessments, e.g. BRIEF, WIAT (independent, following specific training from Senior EP)<br>• Carry out dynamic assessment – independent / joint with EP<br>• Observations to feedback on suitability of provision for complex needs – independent<br>• Meet with teachers to gather information using a structured interview – independent<br>• Meet with school to support assess-plan-do-review following observation. |
| **Consultation** | • Attend EP-led school planning meetings; decide together which tasks AsEP will do<br>• Shadow consultations led by EPs<br>• Contribute to EP-led consultation, including when content overlaps with AsEP past experience (AsEP purposefully invited related to experience).<br>• Use consultation skills - independent<br>• Meet with parents / carers to set outcomes – independent |
| **Intervention** | • Deliver EBSA support to individual CYP - independent<br>• Deliver interventions to individual CYP – reading, Theraplay, PALS, cognitive-behavioural approach, coping with exam stress - independent, after planning with EP<br>• Deliver group interventions – e.g. social skills / Circle of Friends - independent<br>• Support schools to implement interventions / approaches including by: planning and modelling an intervention; observing school staff delivering the intervention and giving feedback; meeting with SLT and staff to support implementation. e.g. Friends for Life, Precision Teaching, Emotion Coaching - independent, overseen by Senior EP<br>• Deliver resilience intervention - with other AsEPs<br>• Deliver long-term intervention to CYP in care - independent, overseen by EP<br>• Following intervention delivery, lead action planning meeting with home, school, multi-agency - independent<br>• Implementation support to schools following training delivered by EPs<br>• Co-deliver whole class intervention - jointly with EP, splitting the group<br>• Support whole school approach development, e.g. develop mental health action plan from audit tool - multi-agency team, overseen by MHST lead and Senior EP / whole-school approach to EBSA<br>• Contribute to multi-agency trauma-informed practice project<br>• Supporting multi-family group supervision led by EP<br>• VIG / VERP intervention with parents / school staff<br>• Support solution circles for SENCos – EP leads<br>• Offer support to carers for CYP in care - independent |
| | • Statistical analysis on SEND panel choices by demographics |

| Research | • Analysing data for LA SEND Review<br>• Focus groups and data analysis for LA mental health services research - overseen by multi-agency leads<br>• Analysis of EHCP content for EPS review to develop practice - overseen by EP<br>• Gather pupil views for an LA review<br>• Review research articles and sharing with EP team<br>• Evaluation, e.g. of trauma-informed approach project<br>• Pre- and post-intervention data analysis, e.g. resilience intervention (overseen by Senior EP)<br>• Wellbeing Charter Mark action research – school audit, focus groups, reports. Overseen by EP, delivered by AsEPs.<br>• School-based action research to develop on-site Alternative Provision – interviews, literature review<br>• Research project on attendance – jointly with EP<br>• Develop and pilot mental health audit for schools – overseen by EP<br>• Support TEPS with their thesis research |
|---|---|
| Training | • Deliver training, e.g. trauma-informed approach; Autism Education Trust Framework; Emotion Coaching; ELSA; MELSA; Zones of regulation – with another AsEP, with a TEP, or with an EP.<br>• Following EPS training delivery, support schools with implementation (see intervention above) with package of support developed by AsEPs, steered by EP<br>• Co-deliver ELSA training with EPs, with AsEP being the consistent EPS representative.<br>• Attend ELSA supervision – EP leads, AsEP contributes<br>• Present at ELSA conference<br>• Model using EBSA toolkit for school staff<br>• Create training content and resources – e.g., ADHD training; specific interventions – with other AsEPs, overseen by EP<br>• Deliver training to parents and carers in Family Hubs / Family Centres / Children's Centres – e.g. attachment<br>• Deliver Cygnet training to parents and carers |
| | |
| Other Functions | • Create EPS resources about psychological theory to share with schools – with other AsEPs, overseen by EP<br>• Write the EPS newsletter / bulletin – with other AsEPs, overseen by Senior EP<br>• Create and update content on Local Offer website, EPS website and social media platforms, e.g. X – overseen by Senior EP<br>• Attend LA Panels e.g. SEND / Fair Access / complex needs - with EP, to determine if AsEP involvement needed<br>• Feedback to EP team on projects AsEPs have completed, sharing the resources created.<br>• Attend parent and carer groups as EPS representative<br>• Represent the EPS at multi-agency meetings<br>• Contribute to multi-agency projects with MHST<br>• Traded activity to LA services e.g. MHST / SaLT / Virtual School / Youth Justice - work overseen in that agency and also supervised by EP.<br>• Join EP for home visits to avoid lone working - EP leads<br>• Graphic facilitation for EP in PATH / MAPS<br>• Gather pupil views to create LA leaflets aimed at CYP with SEND |
| Statutory assessments | • Book statutory assessment visits with school and parents<br>• Pre-populate the statutory advice template from the background information<br>• Gather pupil views – independent, feedback to EP |

| | |
|---|---|
| | - Observe CYP to feed into EP assessment, including for remote locum EP assessments - independent, using checklist or prompt questions |
| | - Conduct structured interviews with teachers. |
| | - Gather parent views and write up for the report - independent, with prompt questions from EP |
| | - Attend statutory meetings and minute - EP leads, AsEP shares notes |
| | - Attend statutory meetings and contribute (e.g. from observation) – EP leads |
| | - Write a draft of some of the statutory report (background information, pupil view, parent view, strengths) – shared with EP who makes changes as needed |
| | - Write statutory report including the psychological formulation – once experienced, overseen by EP |
| | - Proof-read statutory advice, to gain experience |
| | - Research developmental conditions / aspects of development to feed into EP formulation |
| **Administrative** (in addition to in the statutory assessments above) | - Organise ELSA training and supervision groups - overseen by EP |
| | - Complete SLA tracking on spreadsheet - overseen by PEP |
| | - Design and track booking system for consultations with SENCos |
| | - Track statutory work – allocations and deadlines |
| | - Support admin for SEND panel - triage referrals, write panel minutes, send outcome letters to school |
| | - Check EPS documentation – e.g. trading brochure |

# Appendix O: Research journal extract showing reflections on overall interview dataset

The reflections below were written at the familiarisation stage of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) and revisited during the coding stage. In line with this approach, the overall reflections fed into the later theme development.

***Time taken for statutory assessments*** *There is something around AsEPs impacting the amount of time EPs are spending on tasks. The participants are suggesting that a reason for the role existing in many places is that AsEPs are brought in to reduce the statutory backlog. Not reporting there to be concrete data that says that they are doing this though in terms of the amount of time EPs are allocated for statutory assessments. However, no data shows how much extra time EPs were spending on statutory work either (e.g. weekends / evenings). Interview data suggests that with AsEP support, the allocated time doesn't reduce to below two days, but perhaps EPs are spending less of their evenings and weekends on stat work? What might the impact on timeliness be? Again, may not show in LA data as advices may still be overdue, but EP evening and weekend times not being used to meet the deadline by the same? So impact on well-being. One example is a service where the AsEP observes the child, while the EP does the consultation. The EP then joins the observation for a few minutes, then has a joint discussion with the Assistant, combining their information, then they write the advice jointly. So that in itself saves the EP one hour (observation) and the time taken to write up the observation.*

Commentary: These were my thoughts that developed as I read through all of the transcripts and coded. This reflection during familiarisation fed into the development of Theme Three 'Value in the AsEP role', and specifically the 'AsEPs save EPs time' aspect of the theme. Theme development from the codes also supported this overall view, with codes clustering around the idea of AsEPs alleviating pressure.

***Positive experiences of being part of a TEAM of AsEPs rather than a single role*** *The interviews seem to be building a message that the AsEP role benefits from there being more than one Assistant. Both Assistants and EPs commented on this. There's a sense of connection between AsEPs, and they offer each other support. Assistants talked of being friends with other AsEPs and being in regular contact. Why then – is it to do with confidence? Maybe because the role can vary so much, and the role can be developed as they go along, there's lots of uncertainty, so having someone else in this role to talk to can ease these feelings of uncertainty?*

*The EPS hierarchical structures was raised a few times – participants suggested that the hierarchy is often perceived to be 'flat', with AsEPs feeling valued. However, there was a bit of a paradox, with AsEPs still saying they did not want to appear incompetent by asking a 'silly' question to their supervisor / line manager / another EP. EPs also talked about having an open ethos within the EPS, but still needing opportunities for AsEPs to come together as EPs appreciate that AsEPs may want to ask each other questions first before coming to an EP. Even in cases when there was currently just one AsEP, they had been an Assistant for a long time and had overlapped with other Assistants and commented on this in the interview without prompting – they said that having more than one AsEP had been a positive.*

Commentary: These were my thoughts that developed as I read through the transcripts and coded. This reflection during familiarisation fed into the development of Theme Two 'Cultivating AsEP competence, confidence and autonomy: the power of supervision'. Theme development from the codes also supported this overall view, with codes clustering around the idea of 'Connection Matters' whereby AsEP connections with each other contributing to AsEP learning and growth.

# Appendix P: Reflexive Research Journal excerpt – methodological approach

### *23.2.25 Research journal during theme development*

*When developing themes, I had most recently coded the EP data, so I was aware that this was perhaps at the forefront of my mind when entering theme development, rather than the AsEP data.*

*I was also conscious that I am probably more similar to EP participants than to AsEP participants, having never had an AsEP role, but almost being a qualified EP, and having an interest in leadership from my previous roles. This could lead to me giving more consideration or weight to EP data if I was not conscious of this.*

*So, to ensure that my theme development was not swayed by this, and to ensure I was giving the AsEP data appropriate weight and consideration, I read back through my familiarisation summary notes from AsEPs, to support theme development. From this, the meaning around uncertainty was highlighted – I felt that this was a strong theme from the AsEP data especially and so wanted to give this voice. It did appear in the EP data, but in a way that added nuance to the AsEP first-hand experiences. EP data on uncertainty at the start of the role was also retrospective as the roles were more established. This was a contributing factor to the development of Theme Four 'Sitting with uncertainty'.*

# Appendix Q: Photographs illustrating physical organisation of codes during theme development



Initial connections in meaning between codes.



Further developed clusters of meaning, with cluster labels.



Clusters of meaning developed into initial themes.

# Appendix R: Thematic Map of findings



Assistant EPs support systems under pressure - local needs: local choices

THEME ONE

2.1 There's a lot of learning in this role

Cultivating Assistant EP competence, confidence and autonomy: the power of supervision

THEME TWO

2.2 Assistant EPs can do a lot!

ASSISTANT EP AND EP VIEWS

THEME FOUR

Sitting with uncertainty

4.1 Uncertainty at the start of the role

4.2 An uncertain future

THEME THREE

Value in the Assistant EP role

ASSISTANT EP VIEWS

THEME FIVE

Our past experience matters

The brilliant, maddening cycle: we train them to say goodbye to them

THEME SIX

EP VIEWS

THEME SEVEN

Ethical limits: important and difficult decisions

7.1 Safe practice at the forefront

7.2 Feeling torn in search of the 'right' decisions

# Appendix S: Theme development- codes and illustrative quotes, clusters of meaning, subthemes and themes

The development of Theme Three 'Value in the AsEP role' and Theme Four 'Sitting with uncertainty' are shown below.

| THEME THREE  Value in the AsEP role | Cluster of meaning: *The role is appreciated* |
|---|---|
| | **EP codes** <br> • Appreciate flexible role <br> *"I think that we, as a service, design the AsEP's role in a quite an ad hoc way, which comes with advantages because it's quite flexible, and can be quite organic and sort of grow."* EP 4 <br><br> **Assistant codes** <br> • AsEPs are grateful or appreciate AsEP role <br> *"I just think I've been very lucky, I think, to get this job. I know it was very competitive. And it's- it's been massive in giving me experience of what the actual role entails. It's a brilliant opportunity."* AsEP 8 <br> • Appreciate working autonomously <br> *"So, I do get quite a lot of freedom over the work, which is really nice, and then they join me in the parent meeting. So, they kind of have a bit of oversight. I know at the beginning there's a lot more support from the EP, so kind of probably join you within the observation. But now, it's nice just to kind of go off by myself. And yeah, have a bit of freedom with that."* AsEP 4 <br> • Ownership <br> *"Eventually it [specific training] will be delivered by anybody...but for in the first instance, I think, while we figure out the real sort of logistics of it, it would be myself and one of the EPs running it and then sharing practice, and then everybody can run it. So yeah, it's quite an exciting thing to bring."* AsEP 11 <br> • Flexibility in role is a positive <br> *"What's really helpful is, though, having [a team of AsEPs] is that if it's a piece of statutory work, for example, such as the pre-population, which doesn't mean like necessary face to face work, if we haven't got capacity, we can send it out to the rest of the Assistants, and then someone else might be able to pick it up. Or if there's an assessment meeting, and the EP is happy for them to join remotely, they can join remotely and kind of do that. So, there's a lot of flexibility with that."* AsEP 7 <br> • Passion <br> *"We're all very passionate about it. And we always say, our kids, our kids, like they're ours, it's our responsibility to look after them, because if we don't, no one else is going to. And we're very passionate about that, and like I keep saying, very lucky to be able to have built the team and built the project into what it is."* AsEP 12 <br><br> **Overlap between EP / Assistant codes** <br> Follow interests <br> • Meaningful work <br> *"I feel lots of meaning and purpose in my work, because I'm drawn into not just feeling like a notetaker, but like an active participant."* (AsEP 1). <br> • Enjoyment |

| | |
|---|---|
| | *"I get to go to nurseries and play with little children. I'll often come home with sand on me, or gloop on me, or whatever, and I can't believe I get to call it a day's work. Because it doesn't really feel like work a lot of the time."* (AsEP 4) |
| **THEME THREE**<br><br>**Value in the AsEP role** | **Cluster of meaning: *Value for EPS*** |
| | **EP codes**<br>• AsEPs bring energy, enthusiasm, fresh ideas<br>*"I think they really have made a great impact in the way that having young, enthusiastic, skilful people in an organisation always will, in terms of just being really great to work with, because they're really keen to learn, they're wanting to get on the doctorate, they want to know all about the EP world, they ask interesting questions, they prompt you to think and reflect. And so that's really great."* EP 3<br>• AsEPs improve EPS / AsEP role discussions develop EPS role discussions<br>*"What I'm really passionate about is the impact for the service. I think AsEPs make our service better. Their energy, their enthusiasm..."* and *"I don't just mean getting things done...but when we're in the room together, when we're learning together, when we're thinking together, the AsEPs bring a layer of richness that I think we all benefit from."* EP7<br><br>**Assistant codes**<br>• AsEPs filling capacity issues across LA<br>*"And it was like, 'We desperately need an EP to go and observe this child'. And my manager is like, 'We don't have an EP. However, we have an Assistant, and they can go and do it'...They're quite happy for me to go, because they would rather have somebody go than nobody go."* (AsEP 8).<br>• AsEPs build EPS capacity<br>*"[Our manager] said that having four Assistants has really helped in terms of...the LA-level work...She said that as a service, we've been able to do so much more than they would have been able to do without the Assistants."* AsEP 5<br>• Benefit to EP team<br>*"I do think that us Assistants add real value, whether it's working with an EP or whether it's offering that sense of connection and a better working experience."* AsEP 1<br>• Early intervention or prevention so don't need EP / impact over time from preventative involvement<br>*"observing the interventions, meeting with the individuals who are delivering it...troubleshooting, giving the next level of support...just giving lots of confidence basically to the TAs about what they're doing"* AsEP 6<br>• Impact on CYP<br>*"[The AsEPs are] showing up for these children, they're listening to these children, they're centring the child's voice...And there's power in that. So, I think they make children feel, listened to and heard and understood."* EP6<br>• Build on AsEP work year on year<br>*"So, she'd been from the start of the project to now. So, she'd built it up and seen it develop, and all that kind of stuff. We reflect quite often and say it wouldn't be what it is now if we'd had a new set of [AsEPs] every year. So, we're quite proud that we've been able to establish ourselves and move it forward in the way that we have."* AsEP 12<br><br>**Overlap between EP / Assistant codes**<br>• Extend EPS capacity<br>*"The second reason we have AsEPs is because capacity is a real issue within the EPS. So, the existence of AsEPs allows us to be engaged in psychological work that without them we just wouldn't be able to provide locally. Yeah, cause capacity is a real issue."* EP 6 |

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| **THEME THREE**<br><br>**Value in the AsEP role** | • AsEPs diversify EPS offer / Extend reach of EPS<br>*"Some of the Early Years work that I did manage to get to do was going to do some network meetings to discuss the role of the EP and what we could offer and talk about the interventions. But again, the EPs wouldn't have had time to have gone to do that. So, you're again, you're reaching a wider audience."* AsEP 7<br>• Face of the EPS / AsEPs provide consistency<br>*"When we started doing the trainings, we started seeing the ELSAs, and then we see them in the conferences. Then we might go to a school to do direct work with a student, and we might also see that teacher in one of our trainings."* (AsEP 3).<br>• EPS Assistant not EP Assistant or Support EPS not EPs<br>*"We have had some issues in the past, around qualified EPs using AsEPs as assistants. So, taking minutes for them, booking meetings for them, and doing printing for them [laughs], things like that. Which my understanding of that is, if you can do it yourself, why are you getting somebody else to do it for you? And if that's the case, and you really need the support, there is business support to do that, not an Assistant educational psychologist."* EP 5<br>• Support schools<br>*"So, I send the Assistants in, and they go in - multiple visits – observe [interventions], provide, you know, consultation and feedback and then they [the schools] get it right. And then we see impact."* (EP 2)<br>• Build school capacity<br>*"So, the SENCo was so happy. She said, 'This is really good support. We're really lucky to have this time with you. You taught us a lot.' And now they can go on and plan different interventions as well."* AsEP 3. |

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| **Cluster of meaning: *Value for EPs*** |

**EP codes**
- Time and space to think / AsEP enables EPs to do consultation

*"I like working with other people. I feel calmer and more confident when someone else is there. It gives me a bit more brain space - if I'm sort of going a bit blank, [the Assistant] does something, and I take a breather! [laughs]."* (EP 4)
- EPs learn from reflections with / about AsEPs

*"I think the impact for the EP is around learning and reflecting about their own practice. So, like, for example, our Assistants right now, they are all new. So, you get a lot of questions about, 'Why do you do this? Why do you do that?' And that's always helpful, because it makes you think, 'Well, why do I do that?'"* EP 5

**Assistant codes**
- AsEPs share practice and resources with EPs

*"And if we have projects that we've completed, we normally present it in the team meeting when everyone's there so that the TEPs can take it to their schools or even the others can just kind of grab it and take it to other teams if they wish."* AsEP 3

**Overlap between EP / Assistant codes**
- Save EPs time [nuanced]

*"If I speak honestly, absolutely having the AsEPs work with me on statutory assessments has definitely saved me time. But I think I always went over the two days anyway. So, I think now it feels like, 'Oh, actually, I fit that into two days'. So, although in terms of my stress levels and my work-life balance, it has definitely saved me time, whether that is yet being seen on paper, as me completing more statutory assessments, is maybe a slightly different issue."* EP6

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| **THEME THREE**<br><br>**Value in the AsEP role** | •   Support EPs<br>*"But I think for myself, it's- it's been a really interesting opportunity to kind of like learn together about different things, or kind of share ideas with someone else, and reflect on kind of work that's been carried out, whilst also supporting me to do my role, so kind of support during meetings has being really helpful, to just have that head space to think and pause and reflect in moment, while someone else is there, you know, to kind of capture that, and whether that's in a consultation, whether that's in ELSA supervision. Just kind of having that other person there is really useful."* EP 1<br>•   Reflect together, bounce ideas, sounding board<br>*"Then, following that with both my EPs that I work with, we will go and talk about the case. We will sometimes formulate. We will really talk about what that felt like in the meeting and our ideas and bounce off each other. And I do feel really, really involved in that thinking."* AsEP 1<br>•   Free EPs up to do other work / AsEPs give EPs more capacity<br>*"We have huge, huge numbers of early years assessments to do every year, you know, …and so pragmatically them being able to take - not all of them, but a good chunk of them, and taking and kind of carrying out assessments that will free EPs up to do other work has been hugely useful."* EP 3<br>•   Add to depth, quality, impact of work / Joint work for more depth or development / Feed into EP work / AsEPs help EP workload<br>*"…allowing us to be a bit more flexible and a bit more creative than we would otherwise be."* EP 4. |

**Cluster of meaning:** *Valued members of team*

**EP codes**
•   The role is working
*"We've been extremely lucky that two of our previous Assistant Educational Psychologists are now main-grade EPs in our service"* (EP 5).

**Assistant codes**
•   They believe in us
*"They [EPs] believe in you. They don't say, 'You can't do it'. But, you know, it's nice that they- they- chat- when you have a project, you kind of own that. They don't say, 'Oh, this person's better suited'. So yeah, I think they've been really supportive and kind of looking at a vision and going through with it."* AsEP 3
•   The role is working / AsEP role is helpful
*"I had a bit of rapport with the ELSAs and they would come to me with their problems because they knew me. So, she's [Senior EP] like, 'Oh, it's working really well, isn't it?' So that was one of the reasonings, I think, but one of the supporting parts of evidence for keeping an assistant role."* AsEP 8
•   Gratitude shown for AsEPs by others
*"[The PEP] was like, 'I can't believe we literally didn't know how to use you in the beginning. And now, you create this whole thing, which is brilliant!' [The PEP] already thought having Assistants will be valuable. So, it just exceeded their expectations."* (AsEP 3)

**Overlap between EP / Assistant codes**
•   We value AsEPs / Valued
*"[Having AsEPs has] just been, I think, really useful from so many different levels - hopefully for the service users, children and young people, families and schools that we work with, but for myself as well, for my practice."* EP 1
•   Part of decisions / Part of conversation about role

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| **THEME THREE**<br><br>**Value in the AsEP role** | *"We are invited to be involved in everything, or nothing. It's sort of it's up to us what our role looks like, very much."* AsEP 11<br><br>• Part of the team / Respected as equals / No hierarchy in EPS<br>*"We don't separate them when we have- we have service CPD every half term for the whole service every half term, and they're involved in that as well."* EP 2 |
| | **Cluster of meaning: *Alleviate pressure*** |
| | **EP codes**<br>AsEPs alleviate workload<br>*"It's a big task. And often I was doing that in the evening before a visit, if I'm totally honest. So, to know that's going to be done and emailed to me just makes a huge, huge difference."* EP 6.<br><br>**Assistant codes**<br>• AsEP reduce EP time spent on statutory / tasks<br>*"Originally the ELSA lead [EP] had a lot more days allocated for ELSA, and in the end they ended up saying they didn't really need them, because of what I do."* AsEP 8<br>• AsEPs reduce stat backlog<br>*"The role of an AEP is kind of changing due to the sort of decrease in backlog of statutory advice, our focus has been put more on that style of work"* AsEP 1<br><br>**Overlap between EP / Assistant codes**<br>• Picking up work / slack when EPs can't<br>*"We take a lot of things off the EPs' hands when they're juggling too much, or when the statutory work is getting a bit heavy. There's been a few EPs who've been off on long-term sick. And we've covered the work that has needed to be done. So, I think we take quite a lot of the pressure off the surface a lot of the time".* AsEP 9<br>• Another person needed / feet on the ground<br>*"And if people have, for example, home visits they like them to be done kind of with 2 members of staff. So often an assistant will get to go along with those."* AsEP 4<br>• AsEPs may have the time / capacity<br>*"The fact that they are allocated- they're deployed for fewer days a year gives them this flex, where, if we want to make something happen, we can ask them, and it gets done".* EP 7<br>• AsEPs relieve / reduce EPS pressure<br>*"For me, [the AsEPs have] just been invaluable. That's how I've managed to keep [EPs'] heads above water really."* EP 2 |

| THEME FOUR | Subtheme 4.1 Uncertainty at the start |
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| **Sitting with uncertainty**<br><br>**Subtheme 4.1 Uncertainty at the start** | **Cluster of meaning: *Unclear at start*** |
| | **EP codes**<br>• Trialling ways to use AsEPs<br>*"So, some of that, some just figuring it out, thinking, 'Oh, that might be a nice project', and then thinking through like what would be appropriate, what wouldn't. Asking them, like, 'Do you feel confident doing this? Would you like doing this'? So, it's quite an organic process."* EP 4<br>• Uncertainty for AsEPs<br>*"I think by, as I say, by January, yes, they have the same understanding. I think the first term is the hardest one. It's where we normally have a few crises of identity and a few, you know, freak outs. I think, for a lot of people, they want to become an EP, but they don't quite know what that means."* EP 5<br>• Settling into role takes time / finding feet<br>*"It does take them a while to get used to the job and build their confidence and their relationships with schools..."* EP 2<br>• Uncertainty for EPs<br>*"And I think that that was the hardest bit at the start was that everybody's questions were, 'How will this work?' And we didn't know yet - we had to try it to find out what worked."* EP 7<br>• Uncertainty in EPS<br>*"I think with any financial commitments, there is just very little predictability currently."* EP 4<br>• Gradual build-up of role<br>*"We started the role just with them having that link with the early years EP, so they only worked with one EP start with or two. But over time we've spread that."* EP 3<br><br>**Assistant codes**<br>• Slow start<br>*"And I think another barrier was in the beginning, it- sometimes you'd have a lot of periods of like, 'Err...what do we do?' There was a lot of gaps because we hadn't got all that stuff chucked on us because the role was very new."* AsEP 3<br>• Uncertainty at start<br>*"We've never had an AsEP before...so, it's been about finding our way and what works for the EPS and what works for us ....it's been a trial-and-error thing..."* AsEP5.<br>• Settle into role<br>*"When you're new, you're- you kind of want that opportunity, but you maybe don't necessarily know where to find it. Yeah, well, and that's- I think having the opportunity to kind of meet the EPs and go and work with them directly, and getting out and being with them and going- seeing what they're doing, and then tapping into what they're doing and saying, 'Oh, like, actually, I can. Can I jump in on this? Do you want some support with that? I can do this? This is what my area of interest is'."* AsEP 7<br>• Guinea pigs for the role<br>*"Yeah, I mean, it was, it was kind of I don't want to say pilot, but it was. So, when I initially took the role on, it was one-year fixed term, and it was because, you know, they wanted to see whether or not it worked. Was there a need for an assistant? Did it work? And then, luckily for me, this time last year it was made a permanent position."* AsEP 8<br>• Pros and cons of slow start<br>*"So, it was nice, in a way, because we could ease into the role. But also, it was kind of like 'I don't really know where I stand'"* AsEP 3 |

| THEME FOUR<br><br>Sitting with uncertainty<br><br>Subtheme 4.1<br>Uncertainty at the start | •   Need time to get fully up and running<br>*"And the model that that works on, now that I'm kind of fully up and running, is that I'll be overseen by a main grade EP."* AsEP 4.<br>•   Low confidence at start<br>*"The first 6 weeks of my time in [redacted LA] was very, very quiet. It made me question myself at times, 'Have I done the right thing [taking this job]?', or 'Am I the right person [for the job]…?'"* AsEP 1<br><br>**Overlap between EP / Assistant codes**<br>•   Loose set up / role created without clear plan<br>*"In the beginning, [the Senior EPs] didn't really know how to use us. They knew they needed us, but they didn't know what for. So, a lot of it was, 'What do you guys think we need?'"* AsEP3<br>•   Unclear role at start<br>*"Working out the remit and the limits of the AsEP role was the most challenging part. I found it impossible to sit down and just write a simple list of what the Assistants could do in traded and statutory work, and what they couldn't do…. And I realised immediately that even if I felt clear about it, every decision that I made would be up for huge discussion with the schools and with the EPs."* EP 7<br>•   Need to hit the ground running / quickly into role or thrown in at deep end<br>*"And yeah, literally the first Monday back after October half term, I was delivering training on the Monday, you know!"* AsEP 7 |
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| | **Cluster of meaning: *Unfamiliarity*** |
| | **EP codes**<br>•   Learn how EPS works<br>*"They're [AsEPs] just happy to be in the service because they get to see the insights of how an EPS works"* EP 2<br>•   Schools unfamiliar with AsEP role<br>*"I think they [schools] wouldn't know the details of this job [AsEP]. They wouldn't really know what this role is about. Or that these people are temporary, to apply for training. So, all of that they wouldn't know. They just see it as another person who can do this particular sort of isolated piece of work."* EP 4<br>•   Takes a while to know how to use AsEPs<br>*"There was a lot of uncertainty and questions. Because you've both got EPs learning what the Assistants do, and AsEPs evolving in time in their own practice. So, what they need at the beginning of their journey is completely different to what they need 6 months on".* EP 3<br>•   Understanding role takes time<br>*"But it really, I would say, took us a full 18 months before I could sit down, and in a straightforward way write out that list of what the Assistants offer."* EP 7<br><br>**Assistant codes**<br>•   Unfamiliar with AsEP role<br>*"At first, I remember my EPs…would be like, 'Oh, I don't know if you could come here with me', or…, 'I don't know if you can write this up…?'".* AsEP 2<br>•   EP role hard to understand<br>*"There is a bit of a discourse around what the role is of an Educational Psychologist in lots of different contexts. And everyone's asking that question, 'What is my role in…?'."* AsEP 7<br>•   Unclear on EPS system |

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| **THEME FOUR**<br><br>**Sitting with uncertainty**<br><br>**Subtheme 4.1 Uncertainty at the start** | *"So, there is a model. I just don't really know what it is. So, I just sort of do what I'm asked to do until it feels like I don't have any more capacity."* AsEP 11<br>&bull;   Difficult to understand AsEP role as new<br>*"We were fully supported - I just think no one knew what it was going to look like. It was always going to be one of those things because there hadn't been Assistants in the role for so long"* AsEP 2<br>&bull;   EP may not have worked with AsEP<br>*"Because where both of my EPs had only just joined, we'd only just hired Assistants, so that kind of mixture of new EPs, one of which joined two weeks before me. Both of them had never worked with an Assistant before. The leadership hadn't worked with Assistants in years, so they didn't even know where we sort of fit. Yeah that was tough."* AsEP 1<br>&bull;   AsEPs learn how LA works<br>*"He just said, like, 'You know, it's quite nice if you get one of these roles because you can understand how the local authority works.'"* AsEP 3<br>&bull;   Hard to understand unfamiliar contexts<br>*"I think within the wider team, they probably don't really know what we do, and because we're all new to the local authority, even the senior EP, she only started, I think, last year. So, I think that has been one of the challenges, perhaps to know what is already in place within the local authority, who already has expertise in particular areas, because we're all so new."* AsEP 6<br><br>**Overlap between EP / Assistant codes**<br>&bull;   AsEP role helps understand EP role<br>*"I went to one of those - what do they call them - seminars and they would speak about the day of an EP, and every day would look different. And I really didn't understand how they look different, like 'Tell me a bit more!'. But being an Assistant, my day is different, so I mean, I've been able to see how EP days are kind of different as well."* AsEP 3<br>&bull;   Hard to describe AsEP role<br>*"I think it's a really tricky role [to describe]. I remember the first time I ever interviewed for an assistant role. The reason I didn't get it was that I didn't know enough about the role, and I remember feeling really frustrated because I thought, 'Well, I haven't done it yet. How can I know about the role if I haven't done it?' And I still think I would get that feedback now, because I think it's so different wherever you go. Having worked across two local authorities, it was massively different. But also speaking to other people who are assistants, it's wildly different, and even day to day it can look completely different. So, I think the understanding that I have of my role is that I don't understand it. In a sense it is just what it is. I don't know if that's very helpful to you."* AsEP 11<br>&bull;   EPs not familiar with AsEP role / EPs didn't understand role or EPs not clear on AsEP role<br>*"There was a lot of uncertainty and questions. Because you've both got EPs learning what the Assistants do, and AsEPs evolving in time in their own practice. So, what they need at the beginning of their journey is completely different to what they need 6 months on".* EP 3<br>&bull;   Clear comms about role, remit, expectations / Comms about role need to be clear<br>*"When we have team meetings, I reiterate, 'These are the things they're able to do. If you've got work that involves this type of thing, get them involved. But they're not yet able to do X, Y, and Z'."* EP 2<br>&bull;   EPs and EPS not sure what to do with AsEPs / how to use AsEPs<br>*"So, for example, one of our EPs just didn't use Assistant time at all. And they just- the feedback that we got was that they found the role useful, but they just didn't quite know* |

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| | *what to do with it. Which is kind of how we felt as Assistants as well. That, you know it's been tricky to understand- for the EPs to understand what we can do.”* AsEP 5<br>    • Understand AsEP role through seeing it in action / Have to do the job to understand the job<br>*“So, some of that, some just figuring it out, thinking, 'Oh, that might be a nice project', and then thinking through like what would be appropriate, what wouldn't. Asking them, like, 'Do you feel confident doing this? Would you like doing this'? So, it's quite an organic process.”* EP 4 |
| | **Subtheme 4.2 An uncertain future** |
| **THEME FOUR**<br><br>**Sitting with uncertainty**<br><br>**Subtheme 4.2 An uncertain future** | **Cluster of meaning: *Uncertainty in the future*** |
| | **EP codes**<br>    • Uncertainty if AsEP gone<br>*“We've got Assistants leaving, and I think it'll be interesting how that feels. I'm so used to having that support system and that opportunity to bounce ideas off someone”* EP1<br>    • Life plans on hold for doctorate / trapped<br>*“I've got this other one who's in their thirties. They want to buy a house with their partner. But again, I think they were hoping to get on [the doctorate] this year, and they were doing the calculations. 'Okay, if I start this year, that's only 3 years', and they are already in their late thirties. 'Then I can start'. You know, 'I can get married and have to...' you know the thinking of the body clock.”*<br>    • Leave if don't get on course<br>*“And then other people who either decided not to go on the training course, or didn't get a space, who- who've had to leave us unfortunately, because we could only- it's- it's a really tricky thing. We would always want to support people to have safe, permanent employment. We want to support employment rights. But the AEP currently recommend it as a temporary post. Because - presumably to protect the EP profession. And I think it's a tricky balance. And so, we have stuck to three years being our limit.”* EP 3<br>    • Role cease due to budgets<br>*“We got rid of one AsEP post to end up having another qualified EP”* EP 5<br><br>**Assistant codes**<br>    • Temporary nature so no progression<br>*“The main barrier for me in this role is that there's no progression, and there's no certainty. So, this isn't a long-term role where I can just be doing it for years. It will come to an end. And that is a barrier, because it deflates me, because I just think I'm doing all of this, and I want to make all this change. But then I have to leave soon. So, what's the point?”* AsEP 2<br>    • High turnover of Assistants<br>*“So, out of- there were three of us originally employed, one of them last year got onto the doctorate. I didn't get on last year. I wasn't gonna apply again, but my managers really like encouraged me to. Yes, they were great. And I'm leaving now. So, there's one kind of original left.”* AsEP 3<br>    • Uncertainty in future<br>*“Because [the AsEP post] is a fixed-term role, our role ends in September, so what will we do if we don't get onto the doctorate? And I mean the Principal EP is very open to discussing that with us, although, I think they've been pretty clear that the role will end.”* AsEP 4<br>*“I am a little bit overwhelmed by the thought of September. To be honest, I'm like - oh, my goodness, so many new things!”.* AsEP 8 |

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| **THEME FOUR**<br><br>**Sitting with uncertainty**<br><br>**Subtheme 4.2 An uncertain future** | • Posts may cease<br>*"There have been a few people whose roles have ended this year, and [the EPS] haven't gone back to recruit any more".* AsEP 4<br><br>**Overlap between EP / Assistant codes**<br>• Short-term contracts<br>*"The AEP currently recommend it as a temporary post, presumably to protect the EP profession."* EP 3<br>• Inaccessible or unsustainable role / AsEP conditions need to support mortgage or life<br>*"I was quite almost, you know, without being really brutal about it, you know I was saying that this salary wouldn't be enough for me to afford a mortgage or whatever, so I need to look kind of elsewhere, because I was in the market for like buying a property at the time, and also the contract length I was like, it's just not- it- it just doesn't really work in terms of like the mortgage, and what's going on in my life."* AsEP 5 |

**Cluster of meaning: *Permanency debates***

**EP codes**
- Future of EP profession

*"Some of the really understandable concerns amongst the EPs were that this was fundamentally devaluing the EP role. That if the local authority and our schools realised that they could get Assistant EPs to do the same job for half the price, nobody would want an EP anymore."* EP 7
- Role in its own right

*"The feeling, I think, from lots of SLTs is that the aim is to support people onto the doctorate. But actually, I could kind of see the advantage to keeping people for longer. And people who maybe - I say the word just, and I don't mean it - but people who they want to be Assistant EPs, and to continue to be Assistant EPs. Because for me, there is value in the role outside of it being a stepping stone."* EP 6
- Permanent post better for all

*"So, we felt it was more beneficial for them and we felt it was better and beneficial for the- for the service as well".* EP2
- Permanent contract takes pressure off applying to doctorate

*"I said, 'You know you can stay in this job as long as you want to. You get maternity pay as well'. After that she was a lot happier because there's no pressure. She's going to apply again this year, but if she doesn't get on, she's okay with that."* EP 2

**Assistant codes**
- Extending contract

*"I mean the fact that they're keeping- they're extending the contract of one of the Assistants shows that, you know, it's- it's something that kind of is nice for the team".* AsEP 3
- Permanent contract

*"When I initially took the role on. It was a one-year fixed term contract and it was because, you know, they wanted to see whether or not it worked. Was there a need for an Assistant? Did it work? And then, luckily for me, this time last year it was made a permanent position."* AsEP 8

**Overlap between EP / Assistant codes**
- Permanent posts created / Permanent AsEPs posts for EPS

*"They used to say, because of funding, it was a temporary rolling contract which actually didn't really matter for people who just wanted it for experience to apply for the doctorate. And then we put a case forward for it being permanent and [the EPS] did as they could see a need for it within [LA]".* AsEP12

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| **THEME FOUR**<br><br>**Sitting with uncertainty**<br><br>**Subtheme 4.2 An uncertain future** | • Contract extension at discretion of EPLT / EPS choice about contract<br>*"I was supposed to only be two years so I was coming up to my two years, but they extended it luckily because they wanted us to do some work in the summer. So, they were like, 'We'll just extend your kind of thing 'til September', and that worked well for me in the end."* AsEP 2 |

## Appendix T: AsEP role priorities by EPS

The table below shows the main priorities of each of the AsEP roles in the current study, representing sixteen Educational Psychology Services. When compared, this shows the national variation in the role. This information was captured in the semantic coding (surface-level meaning) during reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

| Anonymised EPS | Reason for AsEP employment / EPS context | Role content |
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| 'EPS A' | <ul><li>Build EPS capacity</li><li>Support entry into EP profession</li><li>Partially-traded</li></ul> | <ul><li>Support EPs with their work, but not statutory.</li><li>Support organisation and delivery of EPS projects, e.g. ELSA</li><li>Individual casework including observations and written recommendations.</li><li>Deliver training.</li><li>Traded work - schools buy AsEP time, cheaper than EP time.</li></ul> |
| 'EPS B' | <ul><li>Build EPS capacity</li><li>Support EP statutory work</li><li>Support recruitment to EPS</li><li>Raise the EPS profile by building relationships with service-users</li><li>Partially-traded</li></ul> | <ul><li>Support EP statutory work – pre-populate templates; observe CYP; note-take at statutory meetings.</li><li>Work on local priorities – projects.</li><li>Deliver interventions to CYP.</li></ul> |
| 'EPS C' | <ul><li>Support EP statutory work</li><li>Build schools' capacity</li><li>Fully-traded</li></ul> | <ul><li>Support EP statutory work – pre-populate templates; observe CYP; dynamic assessment; gather pupil views; note-take at statutory meetings.</li><li>In statutory, EPs lead consultation, write formulation and provision.</li><li>Support schools to implement interventions.</li><li>Traded work – schools buy AsEP time at half the cost of EPs, or full price when AsEP has particular expertise. Not possible to buy AsEP time without EP time.</li></ul> |
| 'EPS D' | <ul><li>Extend EPS offer to schools</li><li>Build relationships with schools</li></ul> | <ul><li>Increase EPS offer to schools - lead projects and deliver training.</li><li>EPS representative in schools.</li></ul> |

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| | • EP high statutory workload and recruitment difficulties means EPs do not have capacity to do this<br>• Non-traded | • Direct intervention with CYP experiencing EBSA.<br>• Administrative role for SEND panel.<br>• Observations for statutory assessment. |
| 'EPS E' | • Increased statutory assessment requests, especially in EYFS<br>• Difficulty recruiting EPs<br>• Partially-traded | • Main role supporting EYFS statutory assessments – AsEP observes CYP & gathers information from teachers. EP leads the consultation. AsEP writes the report including psychological formulation (once experienced). EP oversees and signs off.<br>• No traded role for AsEPs<br>• Involvement in other EPS projects and supporting EP work for experience. |
| 'EPS F' | • EP recruitment difficulties, low EP capacity<br>• High EYFS statutory assessment requests<br>• Some AsEP role funding from Charter Mark<br>• Fully-traded | • Support EPs with EYFS statutory assessments – observe the CYP while the EP runs the consultation. Joint discussion with EP, collaborate on writing.<br>• Work in EP, TEP, AsEP team to deliver traded work in schools.<br>• Schools buy a package of EPS support that is delivered by the EP, TEP, AsEP team – cost not separated for AsEP.<br>• Work on EPS projects, e.g. Charter Mark |
| 'EPS G' | • Work in LA multi-agency team, supervised by Senior EP<br>• Grant from DfE for Delivering Better Value Programme to fund role – delivering interventions in schools | • Support schools to deliver evidence-based interventions.<br>• Deliver training on interventions.<br>• Research and select interventions.<br>• Standardised assessments as pre and post intervention measures. |
| 'EPS H' | • Support recruitment to the EPS<br>• Build EPS capacity<br>• Partially-traded | • Providing traded services to schools.<br>• EPS / SEND administrative role (SLAs, allocation trackers)<br>• EYFS casework (not statutory)<br>• No / very little statutory involvement.<br>• Traded work charged at same rate as EP. If AsEP unable to fulfil a piece of traded work as beyond remit, an EP will deliver it. |

| 'EPS I' | • Recruitment difficulties in EPS, low EP capacity <br> • Build EPS capacity and promote better outcomes for CYP <br> • Support recruitment to EPS <br> • Partially-traded | • Support EPs to deliver non-traded service to schools – EP meets with schools and decides which casework is suitable for AsEP. <br> • Take on individual casework e.g. dynamic assessment, gather pupil's views, meet parents / carers to set outcomes, write records. <br> • Carry out all EP functions, including consultation. <br> • Involvement in LA projects. <br> • No admin role. No statutory role. <br> • Traded prices are not broken down into AsEP / EP time – flat rate. |
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| 'EPS J' | • Large cohort of children in care in the LA <br> • AsEP role funded by Virtual School and EPS <br> • Partially-traded | • Consultation, observation, individual assessments (including psychometrics) for CYP in care. <br> • Deliver long-term interventions and projects for CYP in care. <br> • Support schools – e.g. trauma-informed practice. |
| 'EPS K' | • Understaffed EPS <br> • Support EPS manage the demand for statutory advice <br> • Support EP workload <br> • Non-traded | • Support statutory assessments through joint work with EPs - gather parent views, observe CYP, write up those parts. <br> • No individual assessments with CYP. <br> • No casework other than statutory. <br> • Projects to support schools, overseen by Senior EP. <br> • Support EPs to deliver training. <br> • EPS communication (e.g. newsletters), EPS website |
| 'EPS L' | • Difficulty recruiting and retaining EPs <br> • High traded demand from schools and services, but low EP capacity. <br> • Fully-traded | • Support EP statutory work – e.g. gather pupils views, not conducting assessments. <br> • Support EPS initiatives and projects, e.g. ELSA. <br> • Traded work to schools e.g. deliver training and interventions, observe CYP and feed into assess-plan-do-review; shared casework, shared report writing. <br> • Traded work to partner services (e.g. Virtual School, MHST, CAMHS, Youth Justice…) <br> • Traded cost - AsEPs are part of the traded package for schools who buy higher SLA of EP time. |

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| **'EPS M'** | <ul><li>AsEP role split between EPS and MHST</li><li>Recruitment difficulties in the EPS so low capacity</li><li>Support the EPs</li><li>Fully-traded</li></ul> | <ul><li>Half of time supporting EPs with traded work in schools – working with children, on behalf of EP, and feeding back to EP</li><li>Half of time in MHST role – trauma-informed practice project</li><li>Traded work – schools get bonus AsEP time when they buy an SLA. If school buys very large SLA, AsEP time might make up some of SLA.</li><li>Deliver interventions</li><li>Work across all EP functions.</li></ul> |
| **'EPS N'** | <ul><li>Support recruitment to EPS.</li><li>Need to increase diversity of EPS offer.</li><li>Partially-traded but limited trading due to capacity</li></ul> | <ul><li>Joint work to support EPs, e.g. action research in schools, training, casework including statutory. EPs request AsEP involvement.</li><li>Some AsEPs contribute to report writing.</li><li>Trading – AsEP time not charged</li></ul> |
| **'EPS O'** | <ul><li>Increase EPS capacity for delivering traded work</li><li>No statutory backlog in EPS</li><li>Fully-traded</li></ul> | <ul><li>Involved in project work – e.g., ELSA, EBSA.</li><li>Allocated to schools who buy in EPS time.</li><li>Traded work is bought as EPS time – AsEP cost not separated.</li><li>No statutory involvement.</li></ul> |
| **'EPS P'** | <ul><li>EP recruitment difficulty, low capacity</li><li>High statutory demand</li><li>Skill people up to go onto the doctorate and support recruitment to EPS</li><li>Build EPS capacity and extend offer</li><li>Fully-traded</li></ul> | <ul><li>Support statutory work – e.g. collate information submitted with the request to assess, gather pupil views, observe CYP, assess - share with EP to feed into their assessment.</li><li>Deliver therapeutic SEMH intervention (early intervention) – cases allocated and supervised by Senior EP.</li><li>Support EPS projects.</li><li>Trading – AsEP time charged at half the rate of EP. AsEP offer distinct from EP offer.</li></ul> |

## Appendix U: Implications for the EP profession

| System | Implications for practice |
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| **Individual** | **AsEPs** should consider… <br> • Expect an element of uncertainty in the role – discuss these feelings with other AsEPs and in supervision. <br> • Connect with EPs to talk about your role with them. <br> • Discuss and repeat the remit of your role with EPs and stakeholders. <br> • Talk about your understanding of your role in supervision. <br> • Reflect on your learning experiences in the role and use supervision and connections with EPs to talk about your next developmental steps and how they can be achieved. <br> • Ask supervisors and other AsEPs about terms being used (e.g. 'consultation' or 'assessment') to develop a shared understanding. |
| **Micro-system** | **EPs** should consider… <br> • Connect with AsEPs, finding out what they can contribute, and involving them in your casework, as this can lead to collaborative learning partnerships. <br><br> **EPSs** should consider… <br><br> **PLANNING FOR THE ROLE** <br> • Employ more than one AsEP so that AsEPs can support each other and provide connection. <br> • Prepare for the AsEP role by creating a well-planned and easily repeatable induction and training programme. Induction content could be centred around local context, professional skills and psychological knowledge. It could comprise a 'Skills Mix' approach whereby training modules are selected based on AsEP existing knowledge and experience. <br> • Apply psychology of change models, and implementation frameworks, when introducing the AsEP role to develop 'buy in'. <br> • Build into time allocation models, or equivalent, that EP capacity may be needed when a new AsEP cohort starts to support the induction, and that AsEPs will not be ready to start their role until induction and initial training is completed. <br> • In traded contexts, ensure that service-buyers are aware that traded delivery for new AsEPs will not commence until induction is completed, and therefore there may be a pause in the traded delivery. <br> • Involve any experienced AsEPs in the induction of the next cohort. <br><br> **DECISIONS ON THE ROLE** <br> • Consider the range of tasks that AsEPs can fulfil, and the ways they can are deployed when making decisions for the role. Refer to recent research and connect with other EPSs locally and nationally. <br> • When discussing the AsEP role, engage in detailed conversations about terminology to develop shared meaning – e.g. what do we mean by 'assessment'? <br> • Have detailed conversations in EPSs to determine what level of psychological skills AsEPs would be expected to be involved in for safe and meaningful practice. For example, will the AsEP role include leading psychological consultation or formulating using psychological theory? EPSs need to discuss the level of psychological offer AsEPs can provide, within each of the five EP functions. <br> • Strategic use of AsEP capacity - plan for any time made available by AsEPs – can they fulfil tasks supporting preventative work, or fulfil tasks (within their remit) that would enable EPs to do so? <br> • Consider whether AsEPs in your service have an administrative role and what the limits to this are. Considerations could be how much EP time might be saved, whether another person in the service could provide this role, how AsEPs feel about fulfilling administrative roles, the balance of administrative and more meaningful work. |

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| | <ul><li>Consider different models of AsEP involvement in trading to inform EPS decision-making, using examples in the research, and from connecting with other EPSs locally and nationally. Consider how to mitigate devaluation of the EP profession when making decisions about trading.</li></ul>**SUPPORTING THE ROLE**<ul><li>Allocate EPs who work alongside AsEPs additional time to connect with the AsEP, as taking AsEPs under their wing takes time, but has benefits for development for both AsEPs and the EP they are working with.</li><li>To support safe and independent practice, agree templates / scaffolds that AsEPs can be trained in and can use to support their observations, / assessment activity / parent and pupil voice gathering.</li><li>In supervision or through other structures, seek feedback from AsEPs on their experiences of autonomy and whether the level of autonomy is experienced to be in line with their competency and confidence, balanced with safe practise.</li><li>To support well-being, provide opportunities for AsEPs to discuss feelings of uncertainty, both in the present about the role and for the future.</li><li>Find out about AsEPs' previous experience, and where possible, provide opportunities for them to apply previous areas of competence in their new role, to build feelings of competence and confidence and to better understand their new role.</li><li>Apply self-determination theory in the organisational context (Deci et al., 2017; Rigby & Ryan, 2018) to offer insight into how to develop an effective AsEP role, supporting high quality motivation. Evaluate the support to experience competence, relatedness and autonomy.</li></ul>**EVALUATION**<ul><li>Evaluate the impact of the AsEP role on EP time. Ask EPs about allocated versus actual time spent on tasks, and time spent supervising.</li><li>To explore the impact of AsEPs, consider using case study designs to illuminate the nuance of the impact.</li></ul>**THE FUTURE**<ul><li>Have conversations in the EPS about what the plan for extending / ceasing contracts will be if increasing numbers of AsEPs do not secure doctoral training places, if AsEP numbers are rising.</li><li>Engage in national conversations about permanency of contracts to inform local decision making, considering advantages and disadvantages for AsEPs, the EPS and the profession. Consult on views regarding permanency of AsEP contracts within the EPS and LA.</li><li>At exit interviews, ask AsEPs who are entering doctoral training whether they would return to the EPS once qualified, to give insight into factors that impact on the recruitment of previous AsEPs to qualified roles.</li></ul> |
| **Exo-system** | **Policymakers & Leaders** should consider…<ul><li>Create and maintain national networks of PEPs / EPs / AsEPs to provide the forum for national conversations about the AsEP role and remit.</li><li>To support EPS decision making, include further specific examples of tasks and / or ways of deploying AsEPs in policy and guidance documents (e.g. as an Appendix).</li><li>Develop ethical trading guidelines with specific reference to AsEPs.</li></ul>**Researchers** should consider…<ul><li>Disseminate AsEP research through research presentations, sharing with research participants and PEPs.</li></ul> |