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Supporting Justice Involved Youth in Northern Ireland

The Potential Role of Educational Psychologists - Executive Summary



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Executive summary

Introduction

This document explores the potential role of educational psychologists (EP) within the youth justice system (YJS) under the core roles of consultation, assessment, intervention, training, and research across individual, group and organisational levels (Fallon et al., 2010). To synthesise the existing literature within the field, a review was conducted exploring EP involvement with YJS, utilising four databases: PsychInfo, ERIC, Child Development and Adolescent Studies, and the British Educational Index. A review of grey literature was also undertaken to achieve an understanding of the unique Northern Ireland (NI) context. To inform evidence-based practices for assessing risk and protective factors in youth offending, insights from current forensic psychology practices were also incorporated. Collaboration with key stakeholders, particularly alternative education professionals, was also sought.

The outline of our review and recommendations are contained within three sections of this document. The first section reviews the current YJS in NI and provides a rationale for NI EP involvement, while the second discusses the multifaceted dimensions of risk and protective factors for youth who become involved with the justice system. Finally, section three explores the possible roles of EP involvement with at-risk and justice involved youth (JIY) supported by evidence-based recommendations for intervention and resources.

Youth Justice System Northern Ireland

In NI, children and young people (CYP) can be held criminally responsible from the age of ten. Approximately five CYP per 1,000 in NI are involved with the YJS (Department of Justice [DoJ], 2022a). Those in contact with the YJS often show heightened re-offending rates, underscoring the importance of early diversionary intervention (Farrington & Welsh, 1999). Over the past decade, the Youth Justice Agency in NI has undergone significant review and reform, including the creation of the Strategic Framework for Youth Justice (2022), a five-year policy promoting interagency collaboration to enhance positive outcomes and wellbeing of JIY.

Educational psychologists are uniquely positioned and skilled to support broader systemic change, intervening early for those at risk of offending and collaborating with allied professionals such as forensic psychologists. This aligns with the British Psychological Society's (BPS, 2024) definition of the EP role, emphasising their role in supporting vulnerable young people with learning difficulties, social and emotional challenges, and complex needs through training, and multi-agency collaboration.

Therefore, this report aims to:

- Outline the current landscape of JYS and EP involvement in NI.
- Discuss the complex interplay of risk and protective factors.
- Consider the context of offending behaviour within psychological models, drawing upon Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems theory and theories of social constructs such as Social GRRaAaCCEeeSsS (Burnham, 1992; Roper-Hall, 1998) and intersectionality (Collins & Bilge, 2020).
- Explore the potential contributions that EPs could make to best meet the needs of this vulnerable population including consultation, assessment, intervention, training, and research across individual, group and organisational levels.
- Provide evidence-based examples of good practice and offer recommendations for the EPS in NI.

Currently, most EP involvements with at-risk or JIY are within mainstream education settings, responding to school concerns regarding the social, behavioural, emotional and wellbeing (SBEW) of CYP. Below is a summary of the risk and protective factors identified, as well as the potential roles that EPs could undertake in line with their core skills and competencies.

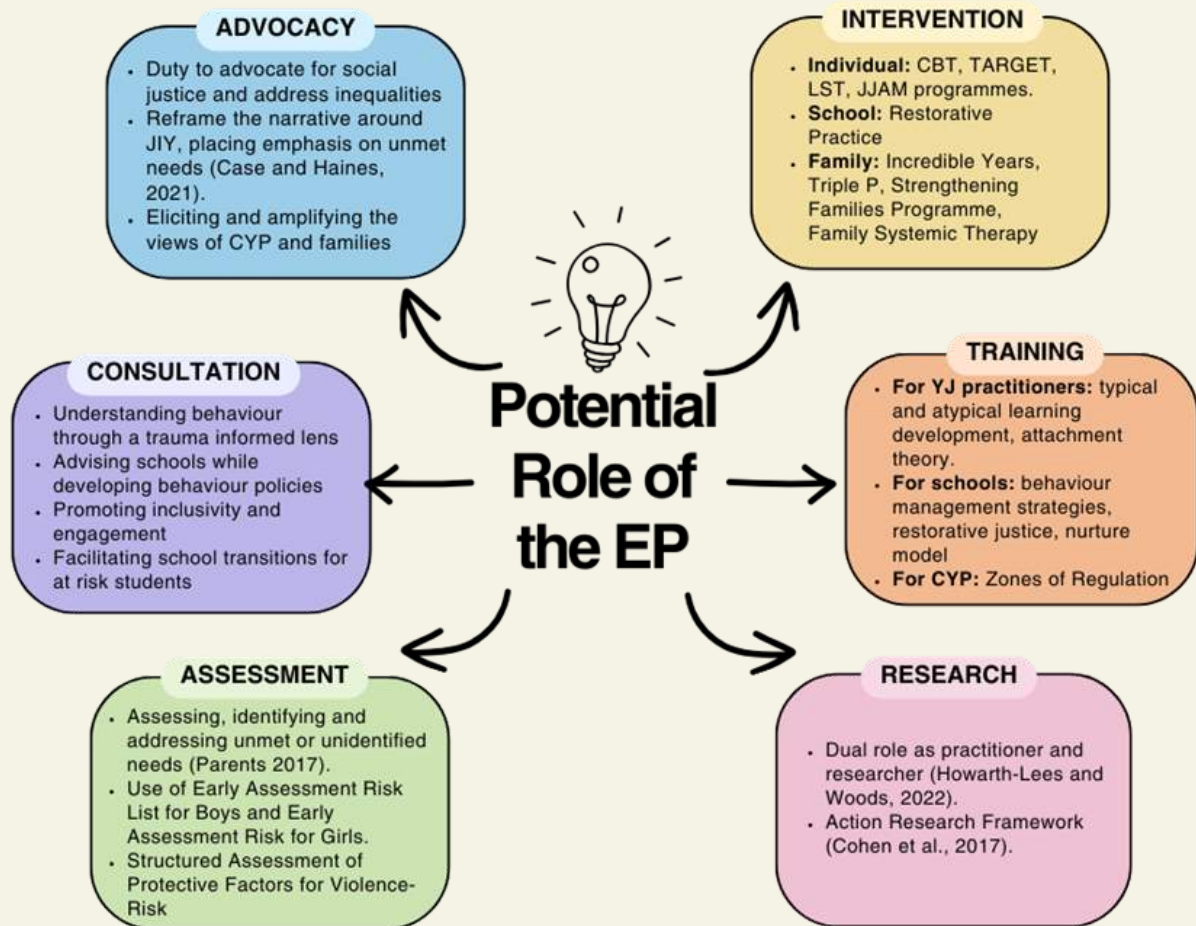
Risks and Protective Factors

Both protective and risk factors play a significant role in contributing to offending behaviour. Understanding the functioning of these factors at individual, family, school, peer, and community levels is crucial. Although certain individual risk factors, such as poverty and social networks, may disproportionately influence offending behaviour, it is important to note that no single factor can reliably predict it (Augimeri et al., 2020).

Key Facts

- A disproportionately high level of learning needs, language needs, and neurodevelopmental differences exists among JIY (Cosma & Mulcare, 2022).
- Academic lack of achievement has long been associated with JIY and reoffending (Sanders et al., 2020).
- UK prison population research suggest adults with four or more adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) had a fourfold rate of serving a sentence in a youth offending institution (YOI) (Ford et al., 2020).
- In UK institutions, 30% of JIY have mental health needs (Roberston, 2022).
- The 'school-to-prison pipeline' highlights the risk of youth entering the YJS due to punitive punishments in schools (Hemez et al., 2019).
- High rates of school exclusion for ethnic minority groups, including Gypsy, Roma, Irish Traveller, and Black Caribbean communities, heighten the vulnerability of CYP to criminal exploitation (The Traveller Movement, 2022).
- Many JIY have a history of involvement in school bullying, either as victims or aggressors, and have experienced rejection by peers (Vaswani, 2019).
- Children and young people in families marked by parental conflict, absence, neglect or abuse are at risk of antisocial and violent behaviour (Burghart et al., 2023).
- Predictive risk factors for JIY involve community aspects such as poverty, housing, lack of resources and 'street-corner' peer groups (Short, 2018).
- Exposure to ethnic-political related violence has a significant impact on CYP wellbeing, radicalisation, and violent extremism in NI (Cummings et al., 2019).
- Protective factors such as self-control and coping skills, are key areas for positive intervention (deVreis Robbé et al., 2020).

Potential Roles and Contributions of Educational Psychologists working with Justice Involved Youth



Advocacy

- Reframe the narrative around JIY emphasising the unmet needs that underlie their behaviours (Case & Haines, 2021).
- Employ psychological tools to elicit the voice of the child, such as narrative-orientated inquiry and personal construct frameworks, to acknowledge perspectives and contribute to positive outcomes (Newton, 2016).
- Utilise the Power Threat Meaning Framework (PTMF) which comprehensively explores emotional distress, challenging behaviour and considers power dynamics, threats, subjective meaning, and culture (Johnstone & Boyle, 2018).

Consultation

- Ensure school-based interventions are targeted within the CYPs 'window of tolerance', taking a balanced approach to avoid overwhelming or reactivating trauma (Beyond Youth Custody, 2016).
- Advise schools on behavioural policies that shift focus from punitive measures towards promoting resilience and prosocial behaviour (Roffey, 2015).
- Take a trauma-informed approach to address factors beyond the offending behaviour, including wellbeing, coping mechanisms and future aspirations (Glorney & Neave, 2022).

Assessment

- Conduct comprehensive assessments to facilitate a better understanding of the needs of CYP and identify potential unidentified or unmet SEN (Howarth-Lee & Woods).

Intervention

- Support schools to implement evidence-based interventions for those at risk of offending, including individual, school-wide and family-level strategies.
- School-wide programmes targeting self-regulation and control, such as Life Skills Training (LST) and Juvenile Justice Anger Management (JJAM) programmes (Botvin & Griffen, 2014).

Training

- Provide training in:
 - challenging behaviour strategies
 - restorative justice approaches, and
 - the nurture model to promote prosocial behaviour (Cunningham & Kearney, 2023).

Research

- Integrate evidence-based approaches, and disseminate this knowledge through training and consultation to build capacity among all stakeholders (BPS, 2024).

Summary

It is crucial to consider the complex interplay of potential risk and protective factors to identify appropriate support for at-risk or JIY (de Vries Robbe et al., 2015). Engaging in antisocial behaviour during childhood serves as a warning sign for future offending. Addressing these factors collectively offers a comprehensive approach to intervention (Howell et al., 2019).

Justice involved youth often present with complex needs and encounter persistent systemic barriers hindering access to appropriate support due to marginalisation and school exclusion (Choudhury, 2022).

Educational psychologists can uniquely drive change through advocacy, consultation, assessment, intervention, research, and training across individual, group and organisational levels.





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