The use of technical terms in exemplar EP reports and factors affecting trainee teachers’ and Newly Qualified Teachers’ (NQTs’) access of the language used.

Dr Alicia Crane

Rationale:
An article on the Times Educational Supplement (TES) website written in 2011 opens with the statement: “The running joke about what educational psychologists do is: ‘they tell you what you already know - but using words you don’t understand’.”

EPs spend significant time and money writing reports and so their accessibility is important. In addition, EPs no longer have to have trained as teachers and therefore may not have an idea of what level of technical terminology should be easily accessible to this group. Furthermore, New legislation (Code of Practice 2014) has changed the technical terminology used (school action, school action plus and the way in which reports are written (statements. Education Health Care Plans, outcomes).)

Previous Research:
Most was conducted a long time ago (1950s – 1980s) and so the language is out of date (e.g. “educational retardation”; Rucker, 1967). Laboratory, studies looked at other types of psychology reports (not EP reports; e.g. Dietz et al. 1983; Cuarda & Albaugh, 1956). Rarely investigated trainee teachers, who could be considered a baseline of understanding (with the exception of Raloth & Richmond, 1983; and Shively & Smith, 1969). Many confounded report length and readability with the use of technical terminology (e.g. Wiese et al). Most research was not conducted in the UK (with the exception of Cranwell & Miller, 1987). In addition, none had considered what factors may affect readers understanding.

Research Questions:
1. To what extent are technical terms used in exemplar Educational Psychologist (EP) reports?
2. To what extent do trainee teachers and Newly Qualified Teachers (NQTs) perceive they understand technical terms used in exemplar EP reports?

Procedure:
Phase 1:
1. Invite EPs to participate via email (3 Local Authorities, LA’s)
2. Survey EPs using a pre-research questionnaire to ensure that no technical terminology is used.

Phase 2:
1. Include EPs from 3 Local Authorities (5 EPs per LA).
3. Questions relating to hours of SEN training, experience relating to SEN and self-efficacy learning.
4. Interview questions among trainee teachers.

Behaviours:
In this study I have included 3 main aspects of teacher behaviour:
1. Teacher attitude towards inclusion (TATIS, Cullen, Gregory, & Noto, 2010).
2. Self-efficacy to learn about SEN terms (GSE, Schwarzer & Jerusalem, 1979).

Phase 2 Measures:

Results:
There were 1383 distinctive technical terms used 2459 times across the 9 reports. Perceived understanding could range from 0 to 6 with 0 being no understanding and 6 being complete understanding. Terms with an asterisk (*) included in explanations in some reports. Terms with dark grey bars were present in all three Local Authorities’ reports and terms with light grey bars were present in two Local Authorities’ reports. Standard deviation bars are shown.

Overall, trainee teachers and NQTs rated their perceived understanding as high. The least understood terms had been explained in some reports, suggesting some EPs may be aware of terms less likely to be understood.

On average if the trainee teacher or NQT had experience relating to SEN rather than the no experience relating to SEN, their perceived understanding increased by 0.02. Comparing the standardised betas (β) shows that self-efficacy for self-directed learning is the stronger predictor of the two significant predictors in model two.

Conclusions:
Although a large number of technical terms were found, and many used only once in the sample, the most frequently used terms were perceived by trainee teachers and NQTs as well understood. Self-efficacy for self-directed learning and experience relating to SEN were significant predictors for perceived understanding of technical terminology. The limitations of this study were the low response rate and likelihood that participants were highly conscientious and therefore more likely to engage in practices to improve their understanding. The model did not explain most of the variance, but a “social norm” factor was absent. Strengths include the use of exemplar reports which may be considered best practice factor and experience relating to research interpretation on terminology.

Implications for future research:
Do trainee teachers and NQTs understand technical terminology which is less frequent, or when it is presented within a whole report? Do young people, parents, people with low literacy, or people who speak English as an additional language understand technical terminology used in exemplar EP reports? How may difficulties with understanding be overcome, does increasing self-efficacy for self-directed learning help? Which alternative models predict a greater amount of variance in the model?

References:
