Education Psychology in Practice

*Expert Interview with Stephanie James, Editor*

Recorded on 18 May 2010 at the publisher’s headquarters in Abingdon, Oxfordshire, UK.

**Journal Specific Questions**

1. **For researchers or students who have never encountered the journal of Education Psychology in Practice, what is the journal about in a nutshell?**

   The journal’s the official journal of the Association of Educational Psychologists, the AEP, and it attempts to disseminate research, theory and practice articles to predominantly the readership of the AEP, but as an international journal it looks at the context of the application of psychology within the UK and attempts to disseminate that more widely. Because it is predominantly a practice journal, this particular journal attempts to offer practicing psychologists insights into how they might apply their psychology professionally across a range of contexts in which they find themselves working, so with children, families and schools predominantly, but also working with multi-agencies.

2. **What do you see as the strengths of the journal as an academic journal compared to other titles in the field?**

   The strength of *Educational Psychology in Practice* as opposed to some of the other journals which inform practice is that *Educational Psychology* goes beyond that and the important part is that there is some practical application of the theory and so in the notion of what to do if there is a complex issue and there is a piece of research about the pros and cons, and the whys and wherefores of it, if that just sits there in the air without a ‘and so the implications for practice are...’ that, for me makes it less valuable for the practitioner psychologist, not that they’re not quite capable of making those inferences for themselves, but it is quite helpful if they are spelled out. I see that as being a very valuable aspect of the journal which is not found more readily in some of the more academic journals.
3. What do you look for when considering articles and submissions for the journal?

What I’m looking for is anything that really triggers people’s thinking in terms of being rigorous in the application of psychology. I’d look for things that are quite, I suppose unique is the wrong word, but distinctive about applied educational psychology as opposed to any other branch of psychology. So the kind of article that would catch one’s eye is something that would provoke debate as well as improve practice and challenge people’s thinking in terms of their application of psychology in the political context, social political context in which they find themselves.

4. What do you find are the most common mistakes that people make?

Anybody who presents something that seems to be unproblematic is quite problematic in itself because the very nature of the job is that it is quite problematic and so things that challenge thinking or that provoke a thought about how perhaps educational psychology is positioned within the socioeconomic climate and culture of the UK particularly. You will be aware that psychologists have changed, or the application of psychology has changed quite significantly in recent years and now, although we are called Educational Psychologists, we tend to work with other agencies in a multi agency approach following some of the more distressing aspects of the way children I suppose slip through the net of the support agencies and certainly the enquiries that came about from that would lend psychologists to think that they perhaps need to be working in more multi agency ways.

We are not here to report things that people have done unless that is linked very clearly into the research and of people in terms of their practice. Although it is a practice journal, it’s got to be linked very clearly to the research and to show how the practice relates to what we know about the research in the field. So a common mistake would be that people merely report what they have done.

I think that in any article there is a large part of any research that people do or practice that people do, it is ok to report that but actually the discussion that follows that is very helpful. Somebody might say, ‘I did some reading and the literature suggested that running groups is good for developing children’s confidence and self esteem’ without any unpacking of how that might happen, and if it’s merely reported, ‘I did this, ran this group and these children looked happier and they all said they were happier equals that’s a good group’, it’s that kind of lack of rigour in thinking about the other variables. Is it actually what you do in the group that is important or is the fact that children are perhaps interacting with each other, is it something about that that is making the improvement or is it something about the content of the thing you are doing? It is the way in which the author teases out the different variables so that the reader of the journal can see whether in fact
this is something they want to replicate in their own context and which aspects of it are the bits that are the important ones to include.

We reject outright very few articles and the ones we do reject are the ones that tend not to have any knowledge of the journal at all. If you picked up any volume of the journal you would see again the breadth of the topics covered and if you have something that you feel is going to compliment that body of knowledge then we would be delighted to hear it. The other thing that leads to almost instant rejection is if there’s no practical application of the psychology, and that’s not because it is a bad article it’s just that it doesn’t fit in with our business which is the practice of educational psychology. So even if it is the most dry article, if there’s some practical application of it, that would I think be of great interest to us, far better if the author can ask perhaps a lay reader to proof read it and have a read of it for sense and for holding the attention of the reader and I think some of those issues of rejection would perhaps be overcome at that stage.

When we are considering articles that have been submitted it helps the reader, those who are critiquing, the reviewers, if when the article’s submitted, that the most simple things like spellings, like grammar, are proof read first by the author. I kind of feel it’s slightly disrespectful to submit what in essence is a very poorly finished article and expect the reviewers to spend the time critiquing it and so I suppose there is an irritation factor as well in that and it does lead the reviewers to think less kindly of an article. It’s not a big issue but I do think that is something that as a matter of courtesy one should try to avoid.

5. What advice would you give to EP’s who are interested in writing for the journal? How would they go about turning a report into a research article?

The three year doctorate has replaced the one year masters degree so routinely within people’s training they are doing more research, not that there wasn’t a research element in the masters degree, but it is even more so within the doctoral programme, and I guess there is more of a focus on that than there has hitherto been and so I would suggest that when people are actually thinking about what they’re researching and how they are going to disseminate that research through the written word, that they think in terms of presenting it in a way that is going to be useful for practitioner readers of the journal so that it’s not just written for an academic audience within a University to pass an exam of some description, but it’s actually tailored to the application of psychology. If I were a psychologist who perhaps had been working quite a long time in the field in other words were a very good practitioner but wanted to capture some of that in terms of
disseminating that through the journal, then again I’d ask them to think very carefully about structuring the article to set the scene, an introduction in terms of a literature review, and then a question that would emerge from that and then some notion about how they would interrogate that question, how they would research that question in terms of methodology and then reporting clearly what they found and some implications for practice. So to help the practitioner psychologist almost to step back into their student days in terms of making this in to a discrete, rigorous, defensible article that will stand alone down the years.

6. The journal is quite nurturing towards new authors, how do you see that being the case?

Bearing in mind that this particular journal is owned collectively by the members of the Association of Educational Psychologists, we always feel that there’s a service to members aspect to this, and it is a rare person who is an author just by putting pen to paper. There tends to be some very good research being carried out which perhaps people haven’t quite been able to write in a way that sits comfortably in an academic journal, so we certainly use the reviewers and the Editorial board try to nurture, if that’s not too patronising a word, but nurture is probably quite a useful term, in helping those who want to write to be able to write a defensible article which is worthy of not only their name but the name of the journal.

In terms of refereeing, although it will be tempting sometimes to say you know ‘actually this isn’t really up to the mark’, what we tend to do is to try to identify the strengths of the article as well as the limitations and to phrase them in a way that encourages the author to take that next stage of self critique to be able to make the article as they really intended, which is to improve practice for the greater good I guess of psychologists generally.

7. How do you see EP developing in the future? What Hot Topics do you see coming through from your work on the journal?

In this world we live in of instant media and instant headline, it is tempting I guess for educational psychologists to follow the vogue really and I suppose I would see the journal as being rather than a follower but more a leader really, and to perhaps offer a critique of some of the not just government but I guess societal need to have cures to every ailment really as if these were single issues, you know, pill for everything, and life is far more complex than that, as we who live complex lives know.

 Particularly, governments obviously are charged with improving the lot for children, Getting it Right for Every Child in Scotland is currently a government aim, and as in England, Every Child Matters, these are very serious agendas and linked into safe guarding for children and making sure that children have every chance. The difficulty with that as with some of these more complex issues,
there is often seen to be a single blunt instrument in which we can right the ails of what is perceived occasionally as an ailing society. I suppose, through the journal, authors get an opportunity to challenge some of these assumptions to make sure that the different variables are interrogated and that appropriate interventions are put in to help ailing societies on the basis of evidence rather than on the basis of polemic.

8. Can you think of any topics/papers/issues that have come through the journal recently that have been particularly successful?

It was interesting in one of the most recent journals, March 2010, the very first of the articles was entitled ‘A Discussion of the Developing Role of Educational Psychologists within Children’s Services’ and that did really offer a very helpful critique and an evaluation of the way in which Educational Psychology has constantly over the years sought to try to work out what it’s role is, what is the role of educational psychologists, what is the distinctive role, what is the characteristic role? I just feel that of all the articles about the developing role of educational psychologists, that was probably one that challenges people’s thinking most, so I would certainly like people to have a look at that one. And if you are looking for a benchmark in terms of the kind of articles and the way the articles are written in terms of what the journal is looking for, that would be a good example.

In terms of the direction of the journal, anything that continues to challenge the professional to work, yes, by all means in collaboration with other agencies, but nonetheless to be clear about its own distinctive culture if you like and what distinctive role a psychological service or educational psychologists can bring to that.

Where do I want the journal to go in the future? Well I guess that rather depends upon what the authors think we should be interested in; I mean we can only publish those things that are submitted. Bearing in mind my earlier point about nurturing authors, I don’t see the journal as having a role of censoring debate within the profession, this is a vehicle for debate within the profession, and the profession will go wherever it evolves really, but I certainly would like to think that through our research practice and theory and our examination of that, we will in fact continue to lead rather than to follow certainly government initiatives.

9. The journal celebrated its 25th anniversary last year. How has the journal developed over the last 25 years?

We had the 25th as you say, we had four issues and the very first one of those, the first article was written by Peter Love [25:1. Educational Psychologists: the early search for an identity] who was the first Editor of the journal and is now a retired EP. He helpfully drew us back to 25 years ago where
educational psychology was very much in terms of a gatekeeper of resources and very much in the sense of assessing children in terms of deficit, because again I suppose educational psychology, the practice of it came about through this notion that we should be gatekeepers to the deserving and the undeserving in terms of resourcing. And we have come a long way from that I hope, not that individual assessment isn’t a central part of what we do, but that we understand that it’s not only the child that we are assessing or considering, but also the child’s context and wider social sphere really.

We have come pretty much full circle since then. This notion of a search for identity has been something that I think psychology has pretty much gone through year upon year, and again, drawing your attention to this most recent issue on the discussion of the developing role of educational psychologists within Children’s services, again talking about where the profession is at now. If I could just read you part of this because I think this pretty much sums it up, and this is from Fallon, Woods and Rooney and it says:

Taking together the numerous reviews of the EP profession and such frameworks for practice, it seems to these authors that the aspect of the EP role relating to what EPS actually do appears to have been reasonably clearly articulated. EPS are fundamentally scientist practitioners who utilise for the benefit of children and young people psychological skills, knowledge and understanding through the functions of consultation, assessment, intervention research and training, at organisational, group or individual level, across educational, community and care settings, with a variety of role partners.

I think that pretty much sums up what educational psychologists do and the role that they have carved out of themselves and perhaps the process of searching for the identity, it may be that we could say we’ve arrived, I guess that listeners to this may disagree and if they do I’d be delighted to publish a critique of their disagreement.

The first issue of Volume 25 in March 2009 I started off that particular volume with an Editorial which reflected on 25 years of Educational Psychology in Practice and tried to look at all the variables that had been identified through the years and was delighted actually at the end of that issue, in the December one, to be able to reflect, again in the Editorial, of the breadth and depth of the articles that had been submitted even in that one year. If you multiply that by 25 I think we could claim quite rightly to have been a very influential body of people and that the journal has been massively influential in the practice of educational psychology, for which we should all be, I think the word is proud, and rightly so.
10. For new authors who haven’t published before, can you describe how the journal reviews articles and what the process is?

If an author wants to submit an article for review then, be bold, try and read what we are looking for on the website, or in fact on the inside back cover of the journal, and then submit your article and we will immediately acknowledge its receipt and thereafter send it out to two reviewers who are members of the Editorial Board. The Editorial Board are elected by the membership of the AEP as being people who are given the responsibility of peer reviewing these articles.

So the articles go to review. The reviewers have no idea who’s submitted them, these are blind reviewed, and the reviewers return their critique of the article. They try to do it in terms of ordinary things like, does it fit with the house style, is there any language that needs changing, is it clearly set out, those kinds of practical issues. And then to actually think about the content of the article in terms of the coherence of it and the way that it sits as a standalone article.

The reviewers always try to be very helpful in terms of picking out the strengths of the article and then to shape up some improvement suggestions. The different reviewers do that in slightly different ways. Finally, when those reviews are back to me as the Editor, I would collate those and add my thoughts as well before sending them back to the author, with hopefully some notion about how they could proceed to make their article even better than it was.

The reviewers, can, when they are reading the article, decide whether there’s a lot if work or a little work to be done to shape the article up, and if there is a fair bit of work to be done then, especially if there is something perhaps wrong with the research design or the way the data had been interpreted, it may be that the article would need to go back for further review before it could be deemed to be almost ready for publication.

11. How do you make sure that all of the reviewers are on the same wave length?

Well the members of the Editorial Board are elected for a three year term, clearly there’s a randomness to that which I think is a strength of the journal because these are not people who are selected by the Editor, I’m not suggesting that selecting by the Editor might in any way shape the board, but there’s a possibility that one could surround one’s self with people who think like oneself, and the beauty of the election process is that it’s the membership, their peers, who elect these people.

The Editorial Board members meet three times a year to discuss the business of the journal, and generally how things are going but also a very crucial part of that is the moderation exercise
whereby we all blind review one particular article, again sometimes picked at random or perhaps because there has been some divergence of views from reviewers. We have a moderation exercise whereby each reviewer brings to the table their own thoughts and we lay them on the table item by item. So there’s a sense of a consensus view built around the strengths and limitations of the article. It also helps everybody to hear each other’s way of interpreting things and it is hoped through that process three times a year we get some sense of understanding what it is to critique an article.

12. Are there any contentious issues that you would like to see papers about?

Again I think that other journals do have special issues occasionally where they signal their intention to publish a particular volume on one particular topic and *Educational Psychology in Practice* has resisted that again because there is a large CPD element to the journal, it’s a service to members and its eclectic nature is what’s valued. In fact it’s interesting, certainly again if I can just refer you to this most recent journal, the one I’m looking at now is 26:1, March 2010, and there are a variety of different articles here which again is something about the whole being greater than the sum of the parts. There is one about the role of EPs which I mentioned earlier, one about spirituality in children and young people, one about online video gaming, young people’s views about decision making, evaluation of a particular programme and the needs of looked after children.

So again I think the strength of the journal is in the eclectic mix of articles which are all of great relevance to practicing psychologists and I think as the volumes build up and practicing psychologists get their four a year you can find over quite a short period of time you’ve got quite a body of information there that is very helpful in a variety of practical applications of psychology.

13. How did you become the Editor of EPP and what is your relationship with potential authors of EPP?

The Editor is appointed for a five year term by the Association of Educational Psychologists and there’s a competitive interview if more than one person applies, as happened in my case, but prior to that I was the book review and software editor so I kind of had a bit of a run into it and the joys of editing articles so that was quite useful. I’ve been involved in the journal now for about 10 years.

I find it immensely enjoyable. I kind of feel quite privileged to be able to read these articles. People invest lots of time and energy into these articles and without people taking the time and energy to write then we would be a much poorer group of practitioners I feel. So people are generous with their time and I’m privileged to be the first reader of that. And I think all members of the Editorial
Board take their role very seriously and very respectfully too. I think that authors need to know that there’s a high level of respect for them and their wish to disseminate their research, practice and theory for the rest of us. I hope from their viewpoint they find the experience reasonably painless, I’m not sure they always do but I do hope that they also feel that they are supported in their role.

14. What is the Association of Educational Psychologists (AEP)?

The Association of Educational Psychologists, the AEP, has two functions, it is a professional association of educational psychologists and it’s also a trade union. As part of its service to members it publishes the journal but it also has an annual course, usually in the Autumn of the year in which practitioner psychologists can come together and exchange information and can hear key note speakers about relevant issues, normally around a theme. This year it is about emotional wellbeing, and as well as key note speakers there is also an opportunity for psychologists to have seminars, to deliver seminars and hear seminars around practice issues, usually on research that has been conducted and so again it is quite an eclectic conference. The journal also at that time, runs a writers workshop and a meet the Editorial Board and again that is a service to members so that anybody who is thinking about writing for the journal can actually have a tutorial, either individually or as a group about ways in which we can ensure that their article’s given the best opportunity to be successful. Not all articles are published, for obvious reasons, but we do attempt very hard to help authors to produce work that is worthy of being published in the journal.

The journal is distributed to all members of the AEP as part of their subscription. If you are interested, if you are a practicing psychologist, an educational psychologist, and are interested in the AEP then the best place to get information about that is from the website. www.aep.org