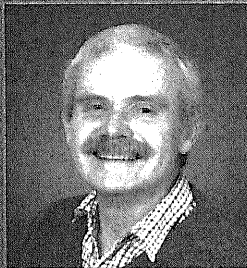


## The future of educational psychology

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### INTRODUCTION

Educational psychology is airing its anguish in public, and if the assertions of Brown (2010), Coleman and Pine (2010), and Hornby (2010) are to be believed then this professional discipline is indeed in a parlous state. As a psychologist who worked for the old Department of Education's Psychological Service, and subsequently for the Special Education Service and Specialist Education Services, I also think that educational psychology is in trouble. However, the history of occupations is littered with the wrecks of vocations that have become redundant to requirements. At the outset of his paper, Brown (2010) raises the possibility that educational psychologists are a species that may speedily become extinct because of hostile environments, and this parallel with the natural world is another reminder that change happens as circumstances alter.

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It is arguable that educational psychologists have largely brought about their own demise. Probably the biggest strategic 'mistake' that they made was to abandon the widespread

use of intelligence testing for placement decisions, because in doing so they gave away the role and the mystic of gatekeepers in education. The stance that they took on psychological testing was professional and ethical, and it was associated with another career compromising move, and that was the active promotion of the mainstreaming and inclusion of students with special needs into regular schooling. Effectively, the more that psychologists promoted the human rights of young people with special educational needs the more they challenged their own existence. Over time, educational psychologists have worked really hard at giving away their specialist knowledge and expertise to regular class teachers and others and this is inevitably an own-goal strategy for professional preservation.

Educational psychologists as professionals and managers have also participated in some other compromising acts, and these might have been more carefully considered. The first of these was the widespread recruitment of special education advisers as stand-ins for psychologists. Quite simply, no profession can expect to last when it accepts that people who do not possess the standard qualifications and skills are capable of doing most, if not all, of that profession's tasks. A second and substantial threat to educational psychology was the training and establishment of resource teachers: learning and behaviour (RTLb). Brown (2010) refers to RTLb as 'barefoot' psychologists', and Coleman & Pine

(2010) describe them as substitute educational psychologists; and their numerical strength alone (about 800 at last count) is a force for professional marginalisation. Actually, RTLb raise a whole host of professional and management issues (see Education Review Office, 2004; Education Review Office, 2009) and included amongst the professional issues is the validity and utility of vocational scopes in psychology.

Does it matter that educational psychology is dying in this country? Brown (2010), Coleman and Pine (2010), and Hornby (2010) clearly think it does matter, and so do I but for somewhat different reasons. Briefly stated, I believe that New Zealand society now contains significant and concerning percentages of children and youth with problem behaviours and the logical and most efficacious way of responding to them is with proven programmes and practices in homes and schools. The corollary of this is that we need highly trained and skilled educational psychologists like we have never needed them before because these are the professionals who have shown that they can deliver empirically-supported procedures in the real-life settings that young people occupy.

From time to time, the media contains stories about binge drinking by adolescents and about teen suicide. Less occasionally, there are also accounts about teenage mothers, depression amongst young women, and antisocial behaviour in the streets and in schools. A typical response to the media reports is to demand tougher laws, or 'more education' about these matters for teenagers. What is less generally accepted is that problem behaviours tend to go together (Jessor & Jessor, 1977), and if we have relatively high percentages of our young people binge drinking (Alcohol Advisory Council of New Zealand, 2008), and greater numbers of teenage mothers, and more adolescents killing themselves compared to most other countries (Ministry of Social Development 2009),

then it is probable that we have other problem behaviours in excess as well. In fact, our major longitudinal studies provide evidence that this 'comorbidity' does exist (Fergusson, Poulton, Horwood, Milne, & Swain-Campbell, 2004).

We can speculate about how this situation has come to pass. The OECD points to our comparatively high levels of child poverty (OECD, 2009), while Wilkinson and Pickett (2009) suggest that it is not the poverty per se that is the issue as it is the income inequality within our community. As a consequence of poverty (whether absolute or relative), some families are subject to significantly more stress than others and, as various authorities suggest (e.g., Patterson, Reid, & Dishion, 1992), stressors of whatever type and source tend to impact on the nature and quality of care giving practices and on child outcomes. Analyses of this sort create quandaries for psychologists, social workers and others because their workloads are determined by socioeconomic circumstances beyond their control, and no matter how hard they prioritise, weight list, provide 'brief therapies', or otherwise strategise, they cannot hope to keep up (Albee, 1999).

Where psychologists with the relevant skills can make a real difference is in equipping parents, teachers, and others with the competencies to be able to do *their* jobs despite economic adversity and other stressors. In this regard, psychologists in this country are in an advantaged position because we can learn from the United States, which has even greater social problems than we do, but where powerful intervention systems have been developed, trialled, and proven to work. The available overseas programmes have been scrutinised by the Advisory Group on Conduct Problems that reports to the Ministry of Social Development (Blissett, et al. 2009a; Blissett, et al. 2009b)), and included in the Committee's recommendations has been *The Incredible Years* (IY). We already have preliminary data that show that the IY parenting programme works well here for Māori and Pakeha (Fergusson, Stanley, & Horwood, 2009),

and it has been adopted by 15 other countries world-wide (<http://www.incredibleyears.com>). The Ministry of Education is fully conversant with this information and it is committed to offering IY Parent to 12,000 parents and IY Teacher to 5,000 teachers by 2014 (Ministry of Education, 2010).

Educational psychologists are key players in responding to our young people who are at risk because they have the experience, training, skills, and orientation to deliver empirically-supported group programmes to parents and teachers, while also being able to assume individual case work functions. Educational psychologists work closely and collaboratively with caregivers and schools, they have training in contextualised and evidence-based practice, and their professional orientation is positive and strengths-based (Massey University, 2009). These are the very attributes that underpin the effective implementation of a treatment system such as *The Incredible Years*. Moreover, because educational psychologists possess skills in assessment and behaviour change, they are also capable of working effectively with individual children, parents, and teachers.

No other occupational group is so well situated at this time to make the distinctive contribution that educational psychologists are capable of. Quite clearly, we need more of them, and we need ways of attracting younger professionals; and we also need structures and processes to ensure that the brightest and the best psychologists attain positions of influence. When Brown was Chief Psychologist and Director of Special Education in the old Department of Education he oversaw the wholesale recruitment and training of educational psychologists and this legacy has sustained special education in this country by providing innumerable service leaders and managers, as well as psychologists, for the Special Education Service, Specialist Education Services, and for the Ministry of Education. It is now time to rejuvenate and refocus educational psychology for its new role in a changed and challenging world.

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