Novice teachers' perceived understanding of technical terminology in exemplar EP reports

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Introduction

It is important for a report to be accessible in order for the advice it contains to be implemented. Reports often take a long time to write and are, therefore, costly to produce. Previous research has focused on the qualities of reports that affect their accessibility, such as readability (e.g. Donaldson et al., 2004), length (e.g. Wiener, 1987), organisation (e.g. Wiener & Kohler, 1986) and the use of jargon (e.g. Cuadra & Albaugh, 1956). Language is dynamic and constantly evolving. In the light of recent changes to the legislation around Special Educational Needs (SEN) (DfE & DfH, 2014), it was timely to investigate the language currently used.

As this research was undertaken as part of a Doctorate in Educational and Child Psychology, the reports investigated were Educational Psychologist (EP) reports. Often, the primary audience for EP reports are teachers. For other psychological reports, they may be part of a wider audience who will be required to read and implement advice. Teachers new to the profession (trainee teachers and Newly Qualified Teachers, NQTs) could be considered a baseline for investigating teacher understanding and so this group were the focus. The research question is how well do novice teachers perceive they understand the most frequently used technical terms from exemplar EP reports?

Method

First the research needed to establish what language is currently used in EP reports. Exemplar reports are produced by services to guide EPs in how to write reports and so should offer a 'best case' scenario for accessibility. Three Educational Psychology Services (EPSs) from London and the South East of England provided 21 exemplar reports. Three from each were randomly selected for analysis. Types of reports included consultation records, statutory psychological advice, and Education, Health, and Care Plans (EHCPs).

A content analysis established the frequency and prevalence of 'technical terminology', which was defined as any word, phrase or acronym which is specific to education or psychology and has not been explained within the report. This is a very broad definition and professionals who work within educational or psychology may be surprised by the words included. However, from an outside perspective even obvious terms are technical. For example, in British law terms for professional roles such as lawyer, barrister, and solicitor may seem confusing to an outsider. Cranwell and Miller (1987) highlighted that even relatively simple words such as 'gestures' were misinterpreted as 'guessing' by parents. For this reason, any word which may be interpreted differently in another time or culture was considered technical terminology. This research takes a critical stance towards the view that technical terminology of a basic nature is universally understood in line with the authors' social constructionist viewpoint on language.

The 22 most frequently used terms (nine or more incidents without explanation) which were prevalent across at least two local authorities were then used to answer the research question. Only the first 22 terms were measured as including more terms would have made the questionnaire prohibitively lengthy and may have affected the sample size.

An online questionnaire was developed using Qualtrics. Perceived understanding was measured by a Likert scale ranging from 0-6, where 0 meant 'no understanding' and 6

meant ‘complete understanding’. The participants were not asked to define words or choose from multiple choice definitions because (a) this might feel like a test, (b) the researcher may define terms differently to the original author, (c) misunderstanding and inconsistency of interpretation has already been investigated by Cranwell and Miller (1987), Cuadra and Albaugh (1956), and Rucker (1967), and (d) the aim of this research was more focused on the implications of a reader feeling they do not understand as this is more likely to affect whether they follow advice (albeit incorrectly if it is misunderstood) or ignore it if the language in the reports is off-putting.

Novice teachers were recruited via email to a member of staff responsible for Initial Teacher Training (ITT). A total of 83 institutions named in The Good Teacher Training Guide (Smithers, Robinson, & Coughlan, 2012) were invited to participate, of which 16 were included. Two further courses were included through snowball sampling where trainee teachers were approached directly by the researcher or by other trainee teachers. A total of 143 novice teachers completed the questionnaire towards the end of the academic year in 2014. A representative mix of genders, ages, ethnicities, primary/secondary school trainee teachers and NQTs participated.

Results

Through the content analysis it was found that technical terminology referred to:

- Documentation such as legislation, policies, and guidance such as ‘School action plus’ is a term associated with the Code of Practice (DfES, 2001);
- Assessment such as ‘BAS-3’ or ‘observation’;
- Problem dimensions such as ‘speech and language difficulties’ or ‘behaviour difficulties’;
- Job titles e.g. ‘Key Worker’;
- Types of school e.g. ‘Pre-school’;
- Or any other aspect which may be unclear or misunderstood by a naïve reader.

A total of 1387 distinctive technical terms were found in the reports. These were used 2459 times across the nine reports. Figure 1 shows the average perceived understanding for each of the 22 technical terms included in the questionnaire in descending order. Overall, the participants felt they understood most of the terms well. Only five terms had average scores below five: consultation, Educational Psychologist, statutory assessment, percentile, and standard score.

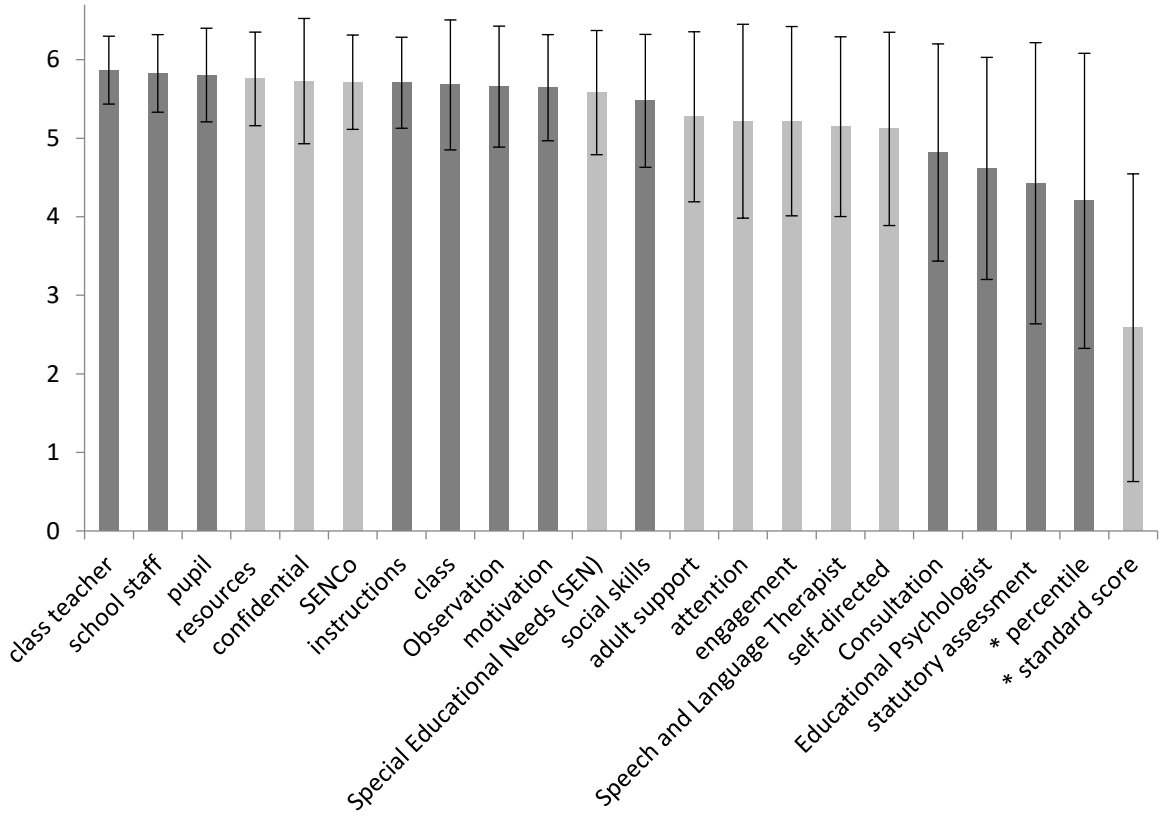

Figure 1. Average perceived understanding (bars) of each technical term (x-axis) with standard deviation (SD, error bars). Terms with an asterisk (*) included explanations in some reports. Dark grey bars were terms present in all three Local Authorities' reports and light grey bars were present in two.

Discussion

Technical terms relating to formal assessment (such as percentile and standard score) are less well understood by novice teachers than other frequently used terms. While the language used in EP reports may be different to that used in other psychological reports, there are similarities in language used for reporting assessment information. Authors of psychological reports should ensure that readers readily understand this terminology. Teachers are likely to have more experience of formal assessment as the government requires use of 'scaled scores' (DfE, 2016). However, this has the potential to be confusing as the guidance seems to be referring to 'standard scores', typically with a mean of 100 and SD of 15, rather than scaled scores in formal assessments which typically range from 1-19, have an average of 10, and SD of 2. Psychologists reporting formal assessment scores should be clear on how to accurately interpret scores to avoid a feeling of confusion amongst teachers.

Authors should also consider the other audiences of their reports, such as parents and young people, who may have additional challenges not expected of teachers, such as low literacy or lacking proficiency in English Language. Future research could investigate the perceived understanding of these groups and what strategies help to improve their perceived understanding, particularly for assessment terminology.

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