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Difficult but possible: Exploring Educational Psychologists' experiences of facilitating organisational change; a Reflexive Thematic Analysis

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Contents Page

Abstract 8

Acknowledgements 9

1. Professional interest in the topic 10

2. Literature Review 11

2.1 Introduction 11

2.2.1 The Past (1913 - 2015) 13

2.2.2 Recent developments in the EP role (2015 – now) 17

2.3 Systematic Literature review: What does the literature tell us about what Educational Psychologists think they do? 21

2.3.1 Overview of the Systematic Literature Review 21

2.3.2 Participants, Study Design and Measures 22

2.3.2.1 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria 22

2.3.3 Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) 28

2.3.4 Framework Synthesis 34

2.3.5 Findings 35

2.3.6 Discussion 39

2.4.7 Implications for the current piece of research 40

2.3.8 Strengths and Limitations of the SLR 41

2.3.9 Conclusion 42

2.4 Systems Theories 43

2.4.1 General Systems Theory 43

2.4.2 Family Systems Theory 44

2.4.3 Ecological Systems Theory 45

2.4.4 Organisational Learning Theory 46

2.5 Understanding 'Working Within Systems', 'Systemic Thinking', and 'Systemic Practice' in Educational Psychology 47

2.5.1 Working Within Systems 47

2.5.2 Systemic Thinking: A Conceptual Mindset 48

2.5.3 Systemic Practice: Applying the Lens 48

2.5.4 Interrelationships and Implications 49

2.6 Systemic work vs individual – level approaches 51

2.7 Organisational Change 54

2.8 Conclusions 56

3 Methodology 57

3.1 Chapter Overview 57

3.2 Epistemological and Ontological Stance 57
3.2.1 Ontology 58
3.2.2 Epistemology 58
3.2.2.1 Positivism and post-positivism 59
3.2.2.2 Constructionism 59
3.2.2.3 Contextualism 59
3.2.3 Theoretical positioning this research 60
3.2.4 Procedure 60
3.2.4.1 Stakeholders 60
3.2.4.2 Service Context 60
3.2.4.3 Sampling and Participants 62
3.2.4.4 Semi-structured interviews 63
3.2.4.5 Role of the Researcher 64
3.2.4.6 Data Analysis 65
3.2.5 Thematic Analysis 66
3.2.5.1 Rationale for choosing Thematic Analysis 66
3.2.5.1.1 Variations of reflective TA 67
3.2.5.1.2 Orientation to data 67
3.2.5.1.4 Qualitative framework 69
3.2.5.2 Summary of Reflexive TA approach adopted 69
3.2.6 The process of Reflexive Thematic Analysis 69
3.2.7 Ethical Considerations 72
3.2.7.1 Valid Consent 73
3.2.7.2 Confidentiality and anonymity 73
3.2.7.3 Sharing of the data 74
3.2.7.4 Participant well-being 74
3.2.7.5 Researcher's dual role as practitioner and researcher 75
4 Analysis and Discussion 76
4.1 Introduction 76
4.1.1 Dataset overview 76
4.2 Themes and Subthemes 78
4.2.1 Theme 1: Within Psychologically Safe Relationships 79
4.2.1.1 Subtheme - Trust and Safety 79
4.2.1.2 Subtheme - Managing Vulnerability and Openness 85
4.2.1.3 Subtheme - Balancing Challenge and Support 86
4.2.2 Theme 2: Prioritising Psychological and Systemic Perspectives 90

4.2.2.1 Subtheme - Leading with Psychology 90
4.2.2.2 Subtheme – Systemic Thinking 92
4.2.2.3 Subtheme - Systemic Practice 100
4.2.3 Theme 3: Opportunity and Time to embed change at different levels of the system 104
4.2.3.1 Subtheme - Practical barriers and facilitators 104
4.2.3.2 Subtheme - Champions of change 109
4.2.3.3 Subtheme - Incremental change 111
4.3 Conclusion 115
4.3.1 Summary of Key Findings 115
4.3.2 Systemic Positioning 117
4.3.3 Trustworthiness 118
4.3.4 Credibility 118
4.3.5 Transferability 119
4.3.6 Dependability 122
4.3.7 Confirmability 123
4.4 Methodological considerations and limitations in the research 123
4.4.1 Thematic Analysis Limitations 123
4.4.2 Interview limitations 124
4.4.3 Sample Limitations 125
4.4.4 Theoretical Positioning 126
4.5 Dissemination of Research Findings 127
4.6 Distinct contribution of the current research 127
4.7 Implications 128
4.7.1 Possible implications for Educational Psychologists (EPs) 128
4.7.2 Possible implications for schools 129
4.7.3Possible implications for Local Authorities (LAs) and the wider government 129
4.8 Suggestions for future research 130
5 References 132
6 Appendices 149
6.1 Information Sheet 149
6.2 Interview Schedule 150
6.3 Interview Schedule 2 150
6.3 Consent Form 151
6.5 Privacy Notice 152
6.6 Timeline of research 153

6.7 CASP Quality Appraisal 154
6.8 Example extract for Framework Synthesis (Oliver et al., 2008) using the predfined category of ‘EPs are scientist practitioners’ (Fallon et al., 2010) and data extracts 160
6.9 Extract of generating initial themes (first analysis – not used) 162
6.10 Thematic Map (first analysis - not used) 163
6.11 Example of a highlighted page of transcript showing written codes (second analysis – used) 164
6.12 Excerpt showing how codes marry to data extracts (second analysis – used) 165
6.13 Generating initial themes (second analysis – used) 168
6.14 Attempting to refine and define themes (second analysis - used) 169
6.15 Codes within their themes and subthemes (second analysis – used) 171
6.16 Reflexive commentary following interviews 178

List of Tables

Table 1	Page number 22	Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria for Systematic Literature Review
Table 2	Page number 24	List of references included in the Systematic Literature Review
Table 3	Page number 29	Strengths and Limitations of Each Study with Qualitative Overall Judgement Statements
Table 4	Page number 34	Overall CASP Quality Judgements
Table 5	Page number 77	Dataset Overview – Key Characteristics of Work Carried out by Participants
Table 6	Page number 155	CASP Quality Appraisal – Ratings and Justifications
Table 7	Page number 166	Excerpt Showing how Codes Marry to Data Extracts (Second Analysis – used)
Table 8	Page number 173	Excerpt Showing Codes Within their Themes and Subthemes (Second Analysis – used)

List of Figures

Figure 1	Page number 24	PRISMA Flow Chart - Illustrating Identification, Screening, and Exclusion of Studies
Figure 2	Page number 39	Visual representation of the findings from the SLR
Figure 3	Page number 79	Thematic Map - Illustrating the Core Themes and Subthemes Identified in the Analysis
Figure 4	Page number 81	The Two Knowledge Bases Identified by West and Idol (1987)
Figure 5	Page number 113	Illustration of the Overlapping Boundaries Identified by Miller (2003)
Figure 6	Page number 164	Thematic Map Showing Themes and Subthemes from the First Analysis (not-used)
Figure 7	Page number 165	Example of a Highlighted Page of Transcript Showing Written Codes (Second Analysis – used)
Figure 8	Page number 170	Image Illustrating the Process of Generating Initial Themes (Second Analysis - used)
Figure 9	Page number 171	Images Illustrating the Process of Refining and Defining Themes (Second Analysis – used)

Glossary of Acronyms

AEP	Assistant Educational Psychologist
AI	Appreciative Inquiry
FE	Further Education
AR	Action Research
BPS	British Psychological Society
CASP	Critical Appraisal Skills Programme
CSE	Child Sexual Exploitation

CYP	Children and Young People
DA	Discourse Analysis
ED	Eating Disorders
EHCNA	Educational, Health and Care Needs Assessment
EHCP	Educational, Health and Care Plan
EP	Educational Psychologist
EPS	Educational Psychology Service
ERIC	Educational Resources Information Centre
EST	Ecological Systems Theory
FS	Framework Synthesis
GST	General Systems Theory
GT	Grounded Theory
HCPC	Health Care Professionals Council
HT	Head Teacher
LA	Local Authority
LEA	Local Educational Authority
MAT	Multi- Academy Trust
OLT	Organisational Learning Theory
PEP	Principal Educational Psychologist
SEP	Senior Educational Psychologist
SC	Systemic Change
SEMH	Social, Emotional and Mental Health
SEN	Special Educational Needs
SENCo	Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator
SEND	Special Educational Needs and Disabilities
SLCN	Speech, Language and Communication Needs
SLR	Systematic Literature Review
TA	Thematic Analysis
TEP	Trainee Educational Psychologist
US	United States
UK	United Kingdom
YP	Young Person/Persons

Abstract

This research explores the experiences of Educational Psychologists (EPs) in facilitating organisational change within educational settings, using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Against the backdrop of long-standing tensions between EPs' aspirations to engage in systemic and preventative practice and the legislative pressures emphasising individual assessments for Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) (DfE, 2015; Fallon et al., 2010; Gillham, 1978), this study investigates how, and in what ways, EPs navigate these competing demands.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with five EPs, from which three central themes were developed: *"Within Psychologically Safe Relationships," "Prioritising Psychological and Systemic Perspectives,"* and *"Opportunity and Time to Embed Change."* Participants highlighted the importance of establishing psychologically safe environments that enable both EPs and educational staff to engage in constructive challenge without defensiveness (Edmondson, 1999). They described the ongoing tension between offering support and delivering challenge, a delicate balance that required EPs to remain attuned to relational dynamics. The integration of psychological expertise with systemic thinking was recognised as both essential and demanding, requiring EPs and school staff to move beyond established, individual-focused approaches. Additionally, practical considerations, such as time and resource availability, were identified as critical to supporting sustained organisational change.

The findings emphasise the potential for EPs to foster meaningful and lasting change within educational systems when psychologically safe relationships, systemic practice, and the application of psychology are prioritised, despite statutory constraints. The study concludes by discussing the implications for EP practice, school leadership, and local authorities, and highlights strategies to strengthen systemic engagement within existing structural limitations.

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1. Professional interest in the topic

When I began the Doctorate in Applied Educational Psychology, I was permitted to work alongside EPs and participate in their discussions. I began to pick up on discussions around EP workload and frustrations at the lack of opportunities to work systemically and preventively. The work I observed and initially undertook focused predominantly on individual assessments. School staff typically sought EP involvement either to strengthen an EHCNA request or to complete the EP contribution once the EHCNA request had been approved, rather than to engage in more creative or preventative forms of practice. As I progressed through the course, I was eager to apply the systemic tools I had learnt at university. However, these experiences had to be requested and, in some cases, offered at no expense to the schools. This indicated to me that EPs working systemically to facilitate organisational change was not valued to the same degree as individual assessments. I agreed with the EPs who wanted to work preventively but often found themselves positioned as SEND assessors.

However, reflecting on my experiences as a SENCO, I believe I also viewed EPs as SEND assessors. One experience stands out to me now. I was supporting one child who was making limited progress in reading and writing. During my teacher training, I was taught that phonics was the best and only way to teach children to read and write; therefore, I supported the Teacher and teaching assistant in implementing the sixth round of Phase Five phonics. When the link EP visited the school for an annual planning meeting, I discussed the child and asked whether an EHCNA was required. Looking back now, perhaps the EP's time would have been better spent exploring theories on how children and young people learn to read and write. Perhaps there was room, even in that short planning meeting, for the EP to challenge my perception that phonics is the only way to teach reading and writing, rather than shifting the focus of the conversation to individual assessment. For me, this experience highlighted the importance of EPs thinking systematically and having a role in sensitively challenging unhelpful practice. I wanted to talk to EPs about their experiences of working systemically and facilitating organisational change. How did they do it? Did they come across any barriers, and how did they overcome them? Does the focus on statutory assessment mean that EPs do not have the capacity to carry out systemic/organisational change? Therefore, this thesis was developed to explore

whether EPs are well placed and can facilitate organisational change by asking colleagues to share their experiences of having facilitated it successfully.

From now on, I will refer to 'the researcher' rather than 'I' (with the exception of reflection boxes).

2. Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

The present study examines how Educational Psychologists (EPs) facilitate organisational change within educational settings. This focus arises from the recognition that, although EPs are equipped through training and professional expertise to influence systems at multiple levels (British Psychological Society, BPS, 2019; Farrell et al, 2006; Fallon et al., 2010; Frederickson & Miller; 2008) their capacity to do so is frequently restricted by statutory obligations (BPS, 2019; Lee et al*.,* 2020). Most prominently, the requirement to act as assessors of special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) often dominates professional activity (BPS, 2019; Fallon et al., 2010; Lee et al., 2020). Although it would be an exaggeration to claim that statutory responsibilities entirely prevent systemic work, there is evidence that suggests that these obligations significantly constrain the scope for preventative and whole-school interventions that could otherwise foster lasting change (Kelly et al., 2008; Norwich, 2014).

The principal aim of the study is therefore to explore how EPs negotiate these professional tensions in practice. Specifically, the research investigates the extent to which EPs can engage with educational systems to support organisational change, and the strategies and conditions that facilitate or obstruct this engagement.

In order to provide contextual grounding, the literature review is organised around five areas: Historical and Current Role of EPs, Challenges in Defining the EP role, Systematic Literature Review, Systemic Theories and Practice, and Clarifying Systemic Terminology.

Historical and Current Role of EPs

The professional role of the EP has undergone significant evolution. Initially centred on individual psychometric assessment in the early twentieth century (Gillham, 1978; Woolfson, 2009), the role has since expanded to encompass a broader and more complex set of responsibilities. The 2014 SEND reforms, introduced through the

Children and Families Act 2014, led to the publication of a new SEND Code of Practice in 2015, replacing earlier versions from 1994 and 2001. This revised Code (DfE & DoH, 2015) extended the remit of EPs, particularly in relation to Educational, Health and Care Needs Assessments (EHCNAs), and intensified statutory responsibilities that may constrain opportunities for more systemic or preventative work.

Challenges in Defining the EP Role

Although repeated attempts have been made to clarify the role of the EP (e.g., Fallon et al., 2010), it remains subject to debate and ambiguity. This section critically examines the reasons behind this lack of clarity, including differing stakeholder expectations, multi-level responsibilities, and evolving professional identity. The implications of this ambiguity for multi-agency work and systemic change are also discussed.

Systematic Literature Review (SLR)

A systematic review of eight qualitative studies was conducted using a Framework Synthesis approach informed by Fallon et al.'s (2010) conceptualisation of the EP role. Findings indicate broad alignment but also suggest that EPs' work often goes beyond the defined functions, incorporating emotional containment, reflective capacity, and advocacy - qualities essential to systemic change.

Systemic Theories and Practice

A range of systemic theories, including General Systems Theory, Family Systems Theory, Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, and Organisational Learning Theory, offer conceptual groundings for understanding the ways in which EPs may support change (von Bertalanffy, 1968; Bowen, 1978; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Argyris & Schön, 1997). Each highlights schools as dynamic and interdependent systems, influenced not only by structural arrangements but also by relationships, emotions, and broader sociopolitical contexts (Burnham, 2012; Kelly et al., 2008). These theoretical perspectives provide valuable frameworks for analysing the complexity of systemic engagement (Lee et al., 2020).

Clarifying Systemic Terminology

The terms *working within systems*, *systemic thinking*, and *systemic practice* are often used interchangeably within the literature, yet they represent different approaches to

practice (Kelly et al., 2008; Stobie, 2002). Clarifying these nuances is important for situating EP practice when attempting to facilitate organisational change.

Collectively, these strands of literature establish the context for the study's central research question: *How do EPs facilitate organisational change in schools and systems?* The literature review highlights the evolving complexity of the EP role, the structural barriers to systemic engagement, and the continuing need to examine how EPs position themselves in relation to the dynamic systems of which they are a part.

2.2 Historical and Current Role of Educational Psychologists

This section focuses on how the EP role has developed in the past, starting with the appointment of the first EP, Sir Cyril Burt, in 1913. The author then discusses the 'present' context of the EP role, beginning in 2015 when key legislation steered the course of the EP role (DfE & DoH, 2015), having lasting implications for the work of EPs today.

2.2.1 The Past (1913 - 2015)

Burt's role was to report on individual cases, with a focus on standardised testing (Rushton, 2002). Burt was influenced by Binet's psychometric work and embedded it into his efforts to identify children who might benefit from alternative educational settings. Despite being employed to administer cognitive assessments, towards the end of Burt's service, he commented on the need to view children as more than a set of scores on an assessment. This hinted at a potential change in perspectives towards working systematically.

> *'I fear that both our earlier scholarship examinations and our present eleven-plus, we tend to concentrate too much on the academic type of child, the good grammar school scholar, and to ignore the more original and imaginative and creative type of child.' (Burt, 1964, address to the Association of Educational Psychologists' Conference, transcribed, and reported in Rushton, 2002, pp. 264- 265)*

However, there were significant differences in the understanding of psychometric testing. While Binet rejected the idea of fixed, innate 'intelligence', which he deemed "brutal pessimism" (Binet, 1909 in Stobart, 2008, p.54), Cyril Burt embraced it. According to Hill (2013), Burt's concept of 'intelligence' played a key role in shaping

the Education Act of 1944, which introduced the 11-plus test for screening, categorisation, and separation of children in the education system, often based on psychometric assessments.

In the evolution of the education system, the significance of psychological testing for individual children was highlighted by The Hadow Report: Psychological Tests of Educable Capacity and their Possible Use in the Public System of Education (HMSO, 1924). The report's guarded use of the word "possible" perhaps indicates a slight critical stance and marked a pivotal moment in shaping the future role of educational psychologists. It recommended collecting information from teachers, though this was seen more as a validation of assessment results rather than as a collaborative effort to reach a shared understanding. Despite acknowledging the influence of social and systemic factors on psychological test scores and educational outcomes, the report maintained a belief in a fixed underlying ability and positioned EPs as the 'recognised experts' with the authority to define a child's abilities. Burt's contributions to the field of educational psychology, focusing on individual casework, may have influenced this perspective.

Since Burt's appointment, the number of EPs being appointed has slowly increased (Birch et al., 2015). In the 1950s and 60s, EPs were based in child guidance clinics with child psychiatrists, psychiatric social workers and other health workers offering a multi-disciplinary approach. Being placed in the child guidance clinics was recommended by The Underwood Report (Ministry of Education, 1955), with the aim for EPs to provide the 'link' between schools and clinics. The report positioned EPs as not only being 'recognised experts' but also 'gatekeepers' with the EP having the authority to refer children to the clinics for further assessments. However, EPs found that their fellow co-workers adopted a narrow medical model[1] of understanding and assessing children and young people (CYP), which caused tensions with what EPs thought appropriate assessment and intervention should look like (Birch et al*.,* 2015). Psychometric testing was once regarded as a central and necessary means of determining appropriate educational placements for children and young people

[1] The medical model is an approach that views learning difficulties and behavioural issues as stemming from biological or physiological causes. This model is rooted in the idea that these issues can be diagnosed, classified, and treated similarly to physical illnesses (Gutkin, 2012)

(Farrell, 2010; Arnold & Hardy, 2013). This emphasis, however, contributed to a view of Educational Psychologists primarily as assessors (Fallon et al., 2010).

A significant change to the EP role occurred in 1968 after the publication of the Summerfield Report (DES, 1968). The inquiry recommended that EPs should be based within Local Authority (LA) education departments rather than within the child guidance clinics. The report emphasised the need for EPs to be more closely integrated into the educational system to facilitate better coordination and collaboration with schools. Therefore, the report broadened the EP's role as it hoped that the closer collaboration with schools could foster the importance of EPs involvement in educational planning, policymaking and development of support strategies.

The 'reconstruction of educational psychology' movement occurred primarily from the 1960s through to the 1980s. The influential book 'Reconstructing Educational Psychology' (Gillham, 1978) compiled works from various EPs, expressing frustrations with the role of EPs at the time. During this critical period for defining the profession's role, Topping (1977) observed that although many EPs were starting to challenge the medical model, the mindset persisted. He noted that it remained a key part of educators' perspectives, with many teachers still expecting psychologists to focus on the "assessment and treatment" of individual students, who were considered "abnormal" and needing such intervention (p. 21). The movement encouraged a shift from assessing and quantifying the 'deficits' of children and young people (CYP) to a more systemic model that empowers and builds the capacity of those who support them (Gillham, 1978).

In 1978, the Warnock Report was published and emphasised a push towards integrating children by emphasising a continuum of special needs rather than classifying them under the term 'handicap' (Faupel & Hardy, 2013). Despite this shift and the movement to 'reconstruct educational psychology', the approach still maintained a realistic perspective on categorising children's 'difficulties'. The Education Act (1981) suggested EPs have a role in contributing to the assessment of Statement of SEN (Special Educational Need) alongside other professionals. This aimed to safeguard the educational needs of children with SEN but also led EPs to

focus on resource allocation and conducting lengthy assessments, leaving little time for preventative, intervention-based work (Arnold & Hardy, 2013). Despite this, EPs remained determined to broaden their scope beyond working with individual children.

Farrell et al. *(*2006) produced the next review of the EP workforce, which is still discussed today (Barrow & Thomas, 2022; Carpenter et al., 2023; Chidley & Stringer, 2020), in which it was emphasised that the valuable contribution of 'psychology' to education is uniquely provided by EPs. This has led to the adoption of various approaches, including sharing psychology through training in schools and other settings (Leadbetter, 2010).

In 2009, the profession of educational psychology became a regulated profession (British Psychological Society, 2009). All EPs were required to register with the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC). The Department for Education (2011) recognised the breadth of the EP role, highlighting therapeutic work, consultation, training, and advice giving as some of the functions of the EP role. To do this, EPs work in a range of contexts, with different people at different levels. The Scottish Executive (2002) express that EP work across three distinct levels;

- Child and family
- School or establishment
- Council/Local Authority (LA)

However, some local authorities now recognise 5 distinct levels: within the school as an organisation, with teachers and parents, with individual children or groups of children, outside of school (supporting pre-school aged children or children with EHCP placed in an out of LA school) and the county council.

Fallon et al. (2010) state that despite the profession's turbulent past in finding an identity (Gaskell & Leadbetter, 2009), there has now been extensive research and debate around defining the EP role, and there is now a 'reasonably' formed understanding. Fallon et al. (2010, p. 4) offer the definition:

> *'EPs are fundamentally scientist-practitioners who utilise, for the benefit of children and young people (CYP), 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'

This definition will become central to the systematic literature review later in this chapter.

2.2.2 Recent developments in the EP role (2015 – now)

In 2015, the Department for Education published the SEND code of practice: 0 to 25 years (The Children and Families Act, 2014). As suggested in its title, this publication extended the age range EPs typically work with from solely school-aged children to 0-25 years. This extension includes those in further education, higher education, and training. EPs remain central to the 2014 legislation, even though Statements have been replaced with Education, Health, and Care (EHC) plans. The "Health" and "Care" components are included only when relevant to the young person's special educational needs (SEN). Consequently, EPs continue to play a crucial role in assessing these needs within the statutory framework, and the Act made it a legal obligation for EPs to provide psychological advice for every EHC Need Assessment.

However, EPs are involved in more than just statutory assessments. They also support young people and the education system through individual casework, consultation, and training (Fallon et al., 2010). With the increased marketisation in education, reflected in the rise of academies (e.g., Shah, 2018), EP services have developed new service models. Many have adopted 'traded' models, where educational settings purchase their services directly (Lee & Woods, 2017). This has enabled some EPs to expand their roles while maintaining their psychological expertise (Lee & Woods, 2017). This shift has allowed EPs to reassert themselves as 'scientist-practitioners' (e.g., Miller & Frederickson, 2005, in Buck, 2015) and broadened the range of EPs' work, including working systemically and preventively (Lee & Woods, 2017). However, some EPs have noted a power shift toward academies, which can allocate funds as they see fit (Shah, 2018), raising ethical concerns about this working model (Islam, 2013).

'Educational psychology services: workforce insights and school perspective on impact' is a recent (DfE, 2023) research report published by Government Social Research. After a series of surveys, interviews, focus groups, case studies and quantitative analysis, the researchers found that EPs typically perform similar tasks

across different educational settings, especially in primary and secondary schools. They provided examples of working directly with CYP but expressed a preference for operating at the educational setting level. This included delivering consultations, whole-school interventions, early intervention, and staff training to maximise their impact. It has been consistently reported that EPs lack the capacity to meet demand for their services (DfE, 2023). Principal EPs (PEPs) and EPs described a relentless cycle where the time-consuming nature of statutory assessments limited EPs' ability to focus on early intervention and advisory work (DfE, 2023). Consequently, the problems faced by children and young people have worsened, resulting in an increased need for EHCPs. The extent of EPs' engagement in statutory and non-statutory work was influenced by the service model used by their local authority, whether traded or non-traded. However, regardless of the model, it was consistently reported that the demand for EPs is greater than the capacity of psychological services (DfE, 2023).

The report (DfE, 2023) also highlighted some recruitment and retention challenges. Overall, 88% of local authority PEPs reported experiencing recruitment difficulties, with 77% consistently facing these challenges. The main reasons cited were a shortage of trained EPs, negative perceptions of local authority work, and competition from private EP service providers - the increased demand for EHCPs exacerbated capacity issues. Additionally, 34% of local authority PEPs reported retention issues, attributed to the high percentage of time EPs spent on statutory work and the appeal of more diverse work opportunities in private practice.

Despite highlighting challenges relating to capacity and recruitment, the report (DfE, 2023) acknowledges the positive impact EPs can make. A range of interviewees reported improved outcomes following engagement with EP services in the EHCP process. Notably, CYP's needs were accurately identified, resulting in appropriate EHCPs. Key outcomes for educational staff included increased knowledge, ability, and confidence in identifying needs, along with emotional support from EPs. Whole-school outcomes included improved relationships with families and the implementation of new, school-wide approaches to tackling issues. EPs' work resulted in system-level outcomes, such as informing local authority policies and improving the identification of

local needs and multi-agency practices. However, EPs sometimes felt uncertain about their specific impact due to the indirect nature of some of their work (DfE, 2023).

There was a varied understanding among children, young people, parents/carers, and stakeholders in education and wider services about the role and expectations of Educational Psychology services. Awareness was particularly inconsistent regarding EP's work beyond statutory assessments, such as early intervention and systemic work. This uncertainty around defining and understanding the role of EPs is seen throughout the literature. In addition to the review (DfE, 2023), there have been numerous reviews of the role in the literature (Ashton & Roberts, 2006; Cameron, 2006; Fallon et al, 2010; Farrell et al., 2006; Gaskell & Leadbetter, 2009; Kelly & Gray, 2000; Love, 2009; MacKay, 2002; Norwich, 2005; Stobie, 2002; Sewell et al., 2024) therefore the next section hopes to bring some clarity defining the EP role according to the literature.

Broadly, it can be supposed that EPs are expected to work at individual, group and systems levels (The Scottish Executive, 2002) and therefore often have more than one 'client'. This may cause some uncertainty around the clarity of the role of the EP, as often the demands and expectations of the EP conflict with one another (MacKay, 2002).

Kelly and Gray (2000) conducted a nationwide school survey comparing what schools desire from an EP and what EPs would like to offer. They found clashes in their wishes, bringing about more uncertainty when describing the functions of the EP role. They found that schools often see themselves as the primary users of educational psychology services because their experience is limited to school-based interactions. Secondly, schools viewed EPs as primarily responsible for assessing individual students, without recognising the benefits of broader work with groups of students and school staff. They go on to report some concerns over not having clarity of the EP role, in relation to duplicating work. One EP in their study described the lack of coordination within the LEA:

> *"We've got SENCOs doing similar things that we're doing, and now some behaviour support teachers are going into schools to look at behaviour... Often three agencies are all involved at once."* (Kelly & Gray, 2000, p. 82).

This EP also noted that due to unclear boundaries and roles among different services, schools have adopted a '*scattergun approach*' (Kelly & Gray, 2000 p. 82), submitting many referrals with the aim of receiving support, without being overly concerned about who provides it. However, it must be noted that these sources are around 24 years old and could possibly be thought of as outdated. Since then, there has been the Department for Education (DfE, 2015) legislation, which broadened EP's work significantly with the introduction of supporting children and young people between the ages of 0 and 25. In addition to this legislation, doctoral-level training has been introduced, which all aspiring EPs must complete and pass to be HCPC-registered. The author wonders if the developments in training and other legislative changes may have brought about some consistency in EP roles, functions, and expectations across local authorities.

Because Educational Psychology is a relatively small profession compared with medicine and social care, clients may have a less well-developed understanding of the role (Fallon et al., 2010). It could be argued that service users' potential lack of understanding of the role, in conjunction with the re-occurring theme of 'reconstructing' (Gillham, 1978) educational psychology, is leading to an under-confidence in professional direction and identity (Ashton & Roberts, 2006; Thomson, 1996). Stobie (2002) found that the lack of consensus around the EP role was impeding the 'reconstructing' movement. Gordon (2003) and Strongman (1995) suggest the uncertainty around the role of an EP could cause feelings of 'anxiety' or worry to those who are expected to practice as an EP. They argue that having a clearly defined expectation of the role of an EP could lead to a reduction of EP anxiety. However, to the author's knowledge, there is little evidence of EPs experiencing anxiety or worry because there is no agreed consensus on the EP role.

Kelly and Gray (2000) highlight that, in order for different professionals to be effective when working together, they must all have a clear understanding of their specific role in multi-agency work. The '*Every Child Matters'* Government publication (DfES, 2003) recognised the importance of the clarity of the role played in multi-agency working. The Green Paper came about following the death of Victoria Climbie, and the paper highlights a lack of professional coordination and accountability, which led to the inability to protect the most vulnerable children. This highlights the importance of

services increasingly being accountable for their work and highlights the need for EPs to be clear about their role and what they can offer (MacKay, 2002).

Therefore, it is clear that defining the EP role is important. The following Systematic Literature Review (SLR) hopes to provide further clarity around how EPs conceptualise their role.

2.3 Systematic Literature review: What does the literature tell us about what Educational Psychologists think they do?

2.3.1 Overview of the Systematic Literature Review

A SLR is a structured and methodological approach to reviewing existing research on a specific topic or research question. The primary aim of a SLR is to identify, evaluate and synthesise all relevant studies on a particular subject to provide a comprehensive summary of the existing evidence (Higgins & Green, 2008)

This SLR aimed to explore the question: *"What does recent research tell us about how EPs perceive their role?"* In other words, what do EPs say they do? This focus was chosen in light of ongoing discussions about how the EP role is defined. At the same time, this review recognises the value of achieving role clarity, as discussed in Section 2.3: *"Why is it so hard to define the Educational Psychologist role, and why is it so important to try?"* Since the role of an EP is central to the thesis research question (specifically the role of an EP in systemic work), it is first important refine how the author defines the role of an EP. Using a systematic and comprehensive review of the literature, the author aimed to ensure their definition of the role of an EP is evidence-based. A systematic search of different databases was conducted using the search terms identified. The literature was then filtered according to the inclusion and exclusion criteria (see Table 1). Eight studies were identified and reviewed. The studies selected were assessed on their quality using the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP, 2018). The CASP is a 10-question checklist taken to help researchers make sense of the quality of qualitative research. The researcher then completed a Framework Synthesis (Oliver et al., 2008). Framework Synthesis utilises an existing conceptual or a priori framework (in this case, Fallon et al., (2010)'s definition of the EP role). Fallon et al. (2010)'s definition was chosen as (to the author's knowledge) this is the most up-to-date, all-encompassing, and comprehensive definition of the EP role. Of course, research has continued to explore the EP role since 2010, but it is specific to a particular field/topic, e.g. Lee and Woods (2017)

explored the EP role when working in a 'traded' context, and therefore does not reflect the profession as a whole.

The Framework Synthesis approach provides a clear and organised structure for the review, ensuring that all aspects of the framework are systematically addressed. By using this framework, the researcher aimed to explore whether Fallon's definition of the role of an EP stood up to the literature in the area. This is especially important since steering legislation has been published since 2010 (DfE, 2015).

2.3.2 Participants, Study Design and Measures

The eight studies in the review included 55 participants in total. Due to the inclusion criteria, all participants were UK-employed EPs at the time of the study being conducted. Interviews were the most common methodology used, and thematic analysis was the most common method of analysis.

2.3.3 Search Procedure

A systematic search of the literature was conducted on 3rd August 2022 and again on 27th July 2024 (however, no new literature met the inclusion criteria). The author chose the databases: ERIC (Education Resources Information Centre), Web of Science and Scopus. The databases Scopus and Web of Science were selected for their comprehensive overview and wide range of multidisciplinary citations. ERIC was chosen for its focus on education and psychology. The search terms used were 'educational psychologists' and 'role' OR 'functions'. They were chosen for their relevance to the research question, focusing on EPs perceptions of the EP role.

2.3.2.1 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Using the search terms identified, 190 citations were found, excluding duplicates (16 duplicates). These citations were screened using the established inclusion and exclusion criteria (see Table 1 for a comprehensive list and rationale for the criteria). Following the screening, 182 did not meet the criteria, and eight studies did. These studies were identified as being eligible for inclusion in the review. Figure 1 illustrates a flow diagram

of the study selection procedure. Table 2 cites the eight references (in full) that were included in the review.

Table 1

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria for the Systematic Literature Review

		Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria	Rationale
1	Population	All Educational Psychologists, including Trainee Educational Psychologists, Senior Educational Psychologists and Principal Educational Psychologists	Any other profession, including Social Workers and Educational Psychologists' work, which falls outside of the EP role, e.g. an Academic Tutor.	The review question is related to EP perceptions of the EP role that is both 'generic' and 'specialist'
2	Population	Research conducted in the UK only	Research conducted outside of the UK	To increase the relevance of the review to a UK context, in line with the current research context.
3	Publication article	published in a peer-reviewed journal	Non-peer-reviewed, i.e. discussion papers, theses, etc.	To ensure high quality of research/robustness of research
4	Research Focus	Studies that include qualitative analysis to explore the perceptions of the EP role, i.e. what do EPs say they do?	Studies that explore any other outcome/focus, i.e., what do EPs say they *should* do?	Exploration of any other outcomes is not relevant for the research question, as the SLR review question is related to the EP role only.
5	Language	Reported in the English language	Reported in any language other than English	The author's primary (and only) language is English
6	Date	Research published from 2010 onwards - 2024	Published either in or prior to 2010	To explore research published since Fallon et al. (2010), which is the most up-to-date review of the EP role. This review aims to provide an updated exploration of contemporary perceptions of EPs' role.
7	Participants	EP employed by Local Authority Only	EP employed by any other organisation, e.g. private, MAT	This is the population of EPs within which the author hopes to gain views.
8	Data collection method	Data collection method: Qualitative data	Quantitative data	The review asks the question of perspective, and

				therefore, only qualitative data is appropriate.

Figure 1

PRISMA Flow Chart - Illustrating Identification, Screening, and Exclusion of Studies

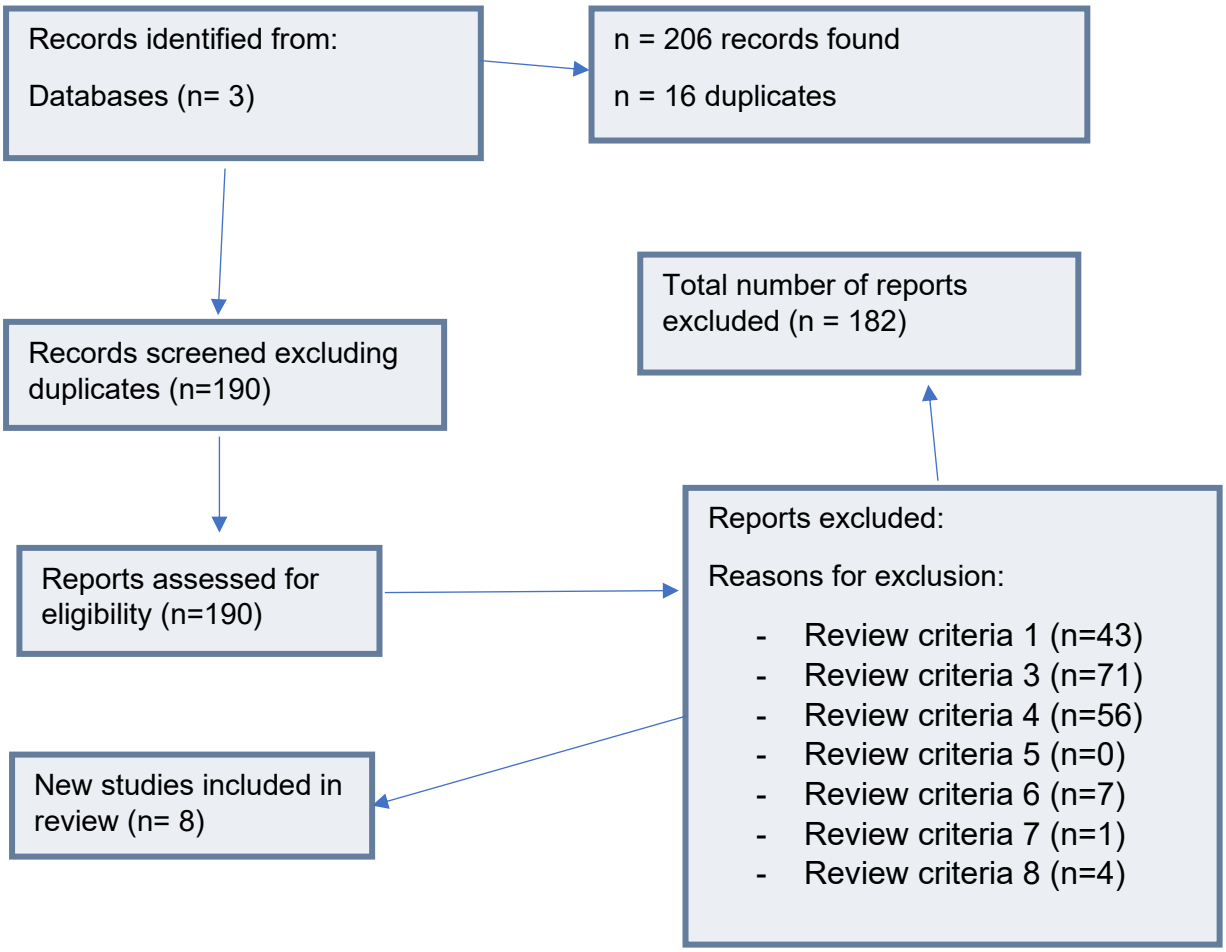


Table 2

List of References Included in the Systematic Literature Review

References included in the review
Allen, B., & Bond, C. (2021). Exploring Psychological Frameworks to Guide Educational Psychologists' Practice in Relation to Child Sexual Exploitation [Article]. *Educational Psychology in Practice*, *37*(1), 19–33. https://doi.org/10.1080/02667363.2020.1848805
Burnham, S. (2013). Realists or pragmatists? "Reliable evidence" and the role of the educational psychologist. *Educational Psychology in Practice, 29*(1), 19–35. https://doi.org/10.1080/02667363.2012.734277
Elms, B., & Higgins, A. (2022). The potential role for educational psychologists working with systems supporting young people with eating disorders. *Educational*

Psychology in Practice, *38*(2), 151–172. https://doi.org/10.1080/02667363.2022.2045906
Lee, K., & Woods, K. (2017). Exploration of the developing role of the educational psychologist within the context of "traded" psychological services [Article]. *Educational Psychology in Practice*, *33*(2), 111–125. https://doi.org/10.1080/02667363.2016.1258545
Morris, R., & Atkinson, C. (2018). How can educational psychologists work within further education to support young people's mental health? An appreciative inquiry [Article]. *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*, *23*(3), 285–313. https://doi.org/10.1080/13596748.2018.1490085
Schulze, J., Winter, L. A., Woods, K., & Tyldsley, K. (2019). An International Social Justice Agenda in School Psychology? Exploring Educational Psychologists' Social Justice Interest and Practice in England. *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation*, *29*(4), 377–400. https://doi.org/10.1080/10474412.2018.1531765
Sedgwick, A., & Stothard, J. (2019). An exploration of educational psychologists' perceptions, knowledge and practices regarding speech, language, and communication needs [Article]. *Educational Psychology in Practice*, *35*(3), 307–325. https://doi.org/10.1080/02667363.2019.1598939
Zafeiriou, M. E., & Gulliford, A. (2020). A grounded theory of educational psychologists' mental health casework in schools: connection, direction, and reconstruction through consultation. *Educational Psychology in Practice, 36*(4), 422–442. https://doi.org/10.1080/02667363.2020.1818553

An overview of the included studies

Allen and Bond (2021)

The study aimed to foster reflection and contribute to the knowledge base regarding EPs practice in responding to Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE). Interviews were conducted with three EPs. The research successfully fulfils its goal by encouraging reflection and offering insights that can guide EPs in their practice when supporting children and young people at risk of or experiencing CSE. The researchers stated that they adhered to the British Psychological Society (BPS) Code of Human Research Ethics (2014), and the study received full university ethical approval. Particular care was taken to ensure participant anonymity, given the emotive and political nature of CSE.

In addition, at the time of writing the research, CSE practice was amidst a shift in practice and policy, as previous findings have caused concern over their potential harm to service users. The researchers acknowledged this and offered supervision to all participants to mediate any potential negative feelings regarding their previous

practice. Whilst the authors supported participants, the change in policy and practice could have had an impact on the validity of the EP role in this area.

Burnham (2013)

The study interviewed seven EPs who were self-selecting. It is possible that the self-selecting approach to participant recruitment meant that the researcher's sample consisted of EPs with a particular interest in the area. Therefore, the sample may not necessarily be generalisable to the EP population as a whole. The research hoped to facilitate discussion of theoretical practice issues with EPs and EPs' views about their practice in using and reflecting upon the literature base.

The researcher was aware of potential power imbalances between the researcher and participants and attempted to rebalance the power dynamic in favour of the participants. One of the ways in which they did this was by allowing participants some control over the questions asked during the interview. By doing this, the researchers ran the risk of not being able to answer the research questions and aims as thoroughly as having full control over what questions were asked. Despite this, the researcher was able to explore all research questions, and any potential power imbalances were mediated.

Elms and Higgins (2022)

This study hoped to explore EP views on how they support CYP with eating disorders (ED). They talked to 8 EPs using a semi-structured interview. A pilot study was conducted to ensure the feasibility of the research approach and to increase the validity. Independent researchers were also used to ensure inter-rater reliability.

Lee and Woods (2017)

Focus groups and service brochures provided qualitative data, which was analysed using thematic analysis. The study sought to explore service delivery patterns in the developing context of traded EPSs; they were interested in seeing how EPs saw their contribution in a traded context. The research only focused on the positive elements of a traded service delivery model, and therefore, potential 'negative' elements may have been missed. Lee and Woods (2017) state that their research was conducted "with full regard to the BPS (2013) Code of Human Research Ethics." (pg. 16)

Although the current published version of the BPS Code of Human Research Ethics

is dated 2014, the authors refer to a *2013 iteration*. To maintain accuracy, this thesis reports their wording verbatim while acknowledging that the formally cited, publicly available code is the BPS (2014) version.

Morris and Atkinson (2018)

The study aimed to explore EP perceptions of their role in supporting post-school student mental health difficulties. An appreciative inquiry was conducted through a series of focus groups with six EPs. The findings suggest tentative possibilities for extending EP mental health support for further education settings. However, a small sample size risks the data's generalisability. The research gained full ethical approval from the appropriate bodies.

Schulze et al. (2019)

This research hoped to add to the knowledge base around EP practices of social justice in educational and school psychology. Nine interviews with EPs were conducted, with findings indicating a role for EPs and social justice in consultation. In order to improve validity and reliability of findings, data was checked, and thematic maps were given to all participants so that they could offer feedback on their thoughts to ensure the data truly captured participant's thoughts and opinions.

Sedgewick & Stothard (2019)

The study aimed to explore EP's perceptions, knowledge and practices regarding speech, language, and communication needs (SLCN). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight EPs. Results showed that EPs recognised the importance of supporting SLCN, but inconsistencies in practice were highlighted. The authors recognised the limitations around generalisability due to the small sample size and recommend that further exploration and research should be conducted in the area.

Zafeiriou and Gulliford (2020)

Zafeiriou and Gulliford (2020) explored EPs' mental health casework in schools through interviews with five EPs (all within the same local authority). This means that results may only reflect that of the EPs interviewed and possibly of the local authority by which they were employed. The authors also recognised that they were limited to

a time scale. They reflected that should there have been no time scale, the research might have gained a fuller picture of the topic.

2.3.3 Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP)

CASP emphasises the critical appraisal of research quality, making it particularly useful for evaluating the reliability and validity of studies included in a systematic review. This framework provides a structured approach to assess the methodological rigour and relevance of research, helping to identify potential biases. CASP offers tools tailored to different study designs, such as randomised controlled trials (RCTs), cohort studies, case-control studies, qualitative research, and more. This versatility allows researchers to apply the CASP framework across a wide range of study types, which is crucial when conducting comprehensive systematic reviews that include diverse forms of evidence. There are different types of Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) checklists, depending on study design. The CASP (2018) Qualitative checklist was chosen since all studies in this SLR have qualitative data and so it was deemed the appropriate checklist (Noyes et al. 2022).

The researcher felt that the CASP framework is simple and easy to use. It provides clear, structured checklists with straightforward questions that guide researchers through the appraisal process. This makes it accessible not only to experienced researchers but also to those who are new to systematic reviews.

CASP checklists cover a broad range of evaluation criteria, including study validity, results, and applicability. This comprehensive approach ensures that all relevant aspects of a study are considered, leading to a more thorough and balanced assessment.

In contrast to other frameworks, CASP's balance between simplicity, comprehensiveness, and focus on critical appraisal makes it a strong choice for systematic reviews, especially given the researcher's limited experience in writing and completing SLRs. Other frameworks might excel in specific aspects (e.g., PRISMA for reporting guidelines), but CASP's critical appraisal emphasis is a key differentiator.

The CASP tool was used to consider and reflect upon the quality of the studies used in the review. The CASP is a checklist of 10 questions and encourages the researcher to consider: Are the results of the study valid? What are the results? And will the results help locally? A CASP was completed for all 8 studies. All completed CASPs can be found in Appendix 6.7.

The following section hopes to outline some of the key considerations when the studies were appraised using the CASP tool. Table 3 provides an overview of the key characteristics of each of the included studies, which gave the overall CASP quality judgement and briefly summarise/bullet point the key strengths and limitations of each study.

Table 3

Strengths and Limitations of Each Study with Qualitative Overall Judgement Statements

Allen and Bond (2021)		
Strengths of the study	Limitations of the study	Overall CASP quality judgement
Qualitative Analysis: The use of semi-structured interviews provides insights into the experiences and perspectives of EPs **Addressing a Research Gap**: The study fills a gap in the literature regarding EPs' roles in CSE, offering contributions to the field. **Methodology**: Reflexive thematic analysis is employed, offering a method for interpreting data and generating themes. **Ethical Considerations**: Ethical approval was obtained, and the study adheres to ethical guidelines.	**Small Sample Size**: The study includes only three participants. However, qualitative research typically uses small sample sizes and does not aim for generalisability. **Recruitment Challenges**: The difficulty in recruiting participants may have affected the diversity of perspectives included in the study. **Potential Bias**: The reliance on opportunistic sampling could introduce bias, as the participants may not represent the broader population of EPs. **Exploratory Nature**: As an exploratory study, it does not aim to provide definitive answers but rather to foster reflection and discussion, which may limit its practical applicability.	Overall, the study offers valuable insights into the role of EP's views in addressing CSE. While the limitations should be considered, the strengths of the study make it a significant contribution to the field.
Burnham (2013)		
Strengths of the study	Limitations of the study	Overall CASP quality judgement
Qualitative Analysis: The use of interviews provides insights into the experiences and perspectives of EPs . **Methodology:** The study uses a structured thematic analysis to identify and organise key themes from the interviews. **Practical Relevance:** The research addresses real-world challenges faced by EPs, making the findings applicable to professional practice. **Ethical Considerations:** Research was conscientious about the rights and well-being of those	**Small Sample Size**: The study includes only seven participants. However, qualitative research typically uses small sample sizes and does not aim for generalisability. **Potential Bias**: The reliance on self-selecting sampling could introduce bias, as the participants may not represent the broader population of EPs. **Potential for Subjectivity:** The biographical approach and thematic analysis are inherently subjective, which could affect the interpretation of the data.	Overall, the study is a valuable contribution to the field of educational psychology. It provides, qualitative insights into the epistemological and ontological positions of EPs, addressing practical issues relevant to their professional practice. However, despite limitations, the study's small sample size, and potential volunteer bias, the research offers

participating. Ethical approval was obtained, and the study adheres to ethical guidelines		contributions to the understanding of how EPs view the scientific basis of their work and the role of evidence in their practice.
Elms and Higgins (2022)		
Strengths of the study	Limitations of the study	Overall CASP quality judgement
Comprehensive Approach: The study uses a two-part design, combining quantitative data from online questionnaires with qualitative data from semi-structured interviews. This mixed-methods approach allows for a more nuanced understanding **Methodology:** The study uses a structured thematic analysis to identify and organise key themes from the interviews. **Focus on Practical Recommendations**: The study offers practical recommendations for how EPs can enhance support for YP with EDs, including training for school staff, improving communication between home and school, and developing effective policies. **Ethical Considerations**: Ethical approval was obtained, and the study adheres to ethical guidelines	**Small Sample Size**: The study includes only eight participants. However, qualitative research typically uses small sample sizes and does not aim for generalisability. **Potential Bias**: The reliance on self-selecting sampling could introduce bias, as the participants may not represent the broader population of EPs. **Lack of Specificity on ED Types**: The study does not clearly differentiate between the various types of EDs (e.g., anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa), which could affect the specificity of the recommendations. **Limited Longitudinal Data:** The study does not include longitudinal data to track the long-term effectiveness of the recommended interventions and support systems.	Overall, the study provides valuable insights into the role of EPs in supporting YP with E.Ds. While it has some limitations, its strengths lie in its comprehensive approach and practical recommendations.
Lee and Woods (2017)		
Strengths of the study	Limitations of the study	Overall CASP quality judgement
Data Collection: The study utilised multiple data sources, including focus groups, interviews, and service brochures, providing a rich dataset. **Methodology:** Combining qualitative and quantitative methods allowed for a thorough exploration of the research questions. **Methodology:** The study uses a structured thematic analysis to identify and organise key themes from the interviews. **Case Study Design:** The use of two case studies provided insights into the differing impacts of trading on established and emerging EPSs. **Practical Implications:** The findings offer valuable insights for EPSs considering or currently	**Small Sample Size**: The study includes only nine EPs. However, qualitative research typically uses small sample sizes and does not aim for generalisability. **Limited Generalisability:** The study focused on two EPSs within the northwest of England, which may limit the generalisability of the findings to other regions or contexts. **Positive Focus:** The study primarily explored positive aspects of trading, potentially overlooking negative experiences or challenges faced by non-commissioning service users. **Regional Variability:** Differences in community demographics and local government funding could influence the findings, making	Overall, the study is a well-conducted and insightful piece of research that makes a significant contribution to understanding the evolving role of EPs within traded services. Its strengths in methodology, detailed case studies, and practical implications outweigh its limitations, making it a valuable resource for both academic and professional audiences.

operating within a traded service model, highlighting both opportunities and challenges. **Ethical Considerations**: Ethical approval was obtained, and the study adheres to ethical guidelines	them less applicable to other areas. **Ethical Concerns:** The study raised ethical issues related to the accessibility of services for schools with limited budgets, which may affect vulnerable children.	
Morris and Atkinson (2018)		
Strengths of the study	Limitations of the study	Overall CASP quality judgement
Methodology: Uses Appreciative Inquiry within Action Research to foster positive change and collaboration. **Data Collection**: Focus groups and thematic analysis provide detailed insights grounded in participants' experiences. **Contextual Relevance**: Focuses on a specific local authority, making findings particularly relevant for similar settings. **Ethical Considerations**: Ethical approval was obtained, and the study adheres to ethical guidelines	**Small Sample Size**: The study includes only six participants. However, qualitative research typically uses small sample sizes and does not aim for generalisability. **Limited Scope**: Focuses on a specific local authority, limiting broader applicability. **Potential Bias**: The facilitator's dual role in research and initial consultations may influence the findings. **Implementation Challenges**: Practical application may be hindered by funding constraints and socio-political factors. **Qualitative Focus**: Lacks quantitative data for broader validation.	This study is a valuable contribution to the field of educational psychology. Its creative use of methodologies, combined with practical recommendations, makes it a piece of research with significant implications for practice. However, the limitations related to sample size, scope, and potential bias should be considered when interpreting the findings.
Schulze et al. (2019)		
Strengths of the study	Limitations of the study	Overall CASP quality judgement
Exploratory Nature: The study provides an exploration of social justice interests and practices among EPs in England, contributing to the international dialogue on social justice in school psychology. **Methodology:** The study uses a structured thematic analysis to identify and organise key themes from the interviews. **Contextual Relevance**: The research situates its findings within the broader sociopolitical context of austerity in England, highlighting the impact of budget cuts on educational psychology practice. **Rich Data**: The study includes detailed participant quotes, enhancing the trustworthiness and grounding of the findings in real-world experiences. **Professional Insight**: The involvement of experienced EPs	**Small Sample Size**: The study includes only nine participants. However, qualitative research typically uses small sample sizes and does not aim for generalisability. **Potential Bias**: The reliance on self-selecting sampling could introduce bias, as the participants may not represent the broader population of EPs. **Limited Scope**: The study focuses primarily on the perspectives of EPs, potentially overlooking other stakeholders in the educational system.	This study is a valuable contribution to the field of educational psychology, particularly in its exploration of social justice. Despite its limitations, the research provides rich, contextually relevant insights and highlights important considerations for the practice of educational psychology in times of austerity. The qualitative design and detailed analysis enhance the depth and trustworthiness of the findings.

and researchers potentially adds credibility to the study. **Ethical Considerations**: Ethical approval was obtained, and the study adheres to ethical guidelines		
Sedgwick and Stothard (2019)		
Strengths of the study	Limitations of the study	Overall CASP quality judgement
Relevance and Timeliness: The study addresses a gap in understanding the role of EPs in supporting speech, language, and communication needs (SLCN), which is important given the high prevalence of SLCN among children. **Methodology:** The study uses a structured thematic analysis to identify and organise key themes from the interviews. **Practical Implications**: The findings have clear implications for the training and professional development of EP, as well as for policy and practice in educational settings. **Ethical Considerations**: Ethical approval was obtained, and the study adheres to ethical guidelines	**Small Sample Size**: The study includes only eight participants. However, qualitative research typically uses small sample sizes and does not aim for generalisability. **Potential Bias**: The reliance on self-reported data from interviews may introduce bias, as participants might present socially desirable responses or may not accurately recall their practices. **Lack of Quantitative Data**: The study does not include quantitative measures, which could have provided additional validation and a broader understanding of the findings.	This study is a valuable contribution to the field of educational psychology, particularly in understanding the role of EPs in addressing SLCN. Despite its limitations, the research is methodologically sound and offers important insights that can inform both practice and policy
Zafeiriou and Gulliford (2020)		
Strengths of the study	Limitations of the study	Overall CASP quality judgement
Methodological Rigour: The study employs constructivist grounded theory (GT), which is well-suited for generating new theory from limited previous research. **Comprehensive Data Collection**: Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with EPs ensuring detailed insights into their mental health casework in schools. **Theoretical Integration**: The GT developed draws from multiple psychological theories, including attachment theory, person-centred counselling, self-determination theory, and solution-focused thinking, providing a robust theoretical framework. **Practical Relevance**: The study highlights the role of EPs in supporting mental health in schools, offering practical implications for policy and practice. **Ethical Considerations**:	**Small Sample Size**: The study includes only five participants. However, qualitative research typically uses small sample sizes and does not aim for generalisability. **Single Context**: The research is conducted within one large semi-rural local authority EP service, potentially limiting the applicability of the results to other settings. **Subjectivity**: As constructivist GT acknowledges the researcher's subjectivity in data construction, there may be biases influencing the findings. **Limited Participant Diversity**: Although participants varied by professional role, ethnicity, gender, and years of experience, the sample size restricts the breadth of perspectives.	This study offers valuable insights into the mental health casework of EPs in school. Despite its limitations, the methodological rigour, comprehensive data collection, and theoretical integration contribute to its overall quality.

Ethical approval was obtained, and the study adheres to ethical guidelines		

To determine overall quality judgements for the qualitative studies included in the systematic literature review, each paper was critically appraised using the CASP Qualitative Checklist (2018), which comprises ten core questions evaluating the clarity of aims, methodological alignment, design, sampling, data collection, reflexivity, ethical considerations, analysis, findings, and overall value (Noyes et al., 2022). Each criterion was assessed independently, with responses rated as “Yes,” “No,” or “Can’t Tell,” and supported by justifications grounded in the study’s content (see Appendix 6.7). Although CASP does not prescribe a scoring system, a structured three-tier framework was applied to support transparency and consistency: studies with 8–10 “Yes” responses and no major concerns in key areas were rated as high quality, those with 5 - 7 “Yes” responses or minor concerns as moderate quality, and those with fewer than 5 “Yes” responses or serious methodological flaws as low quality. In addition to this count-based threshold, greater evaluative weight was placed on five key CASP domains considered central to qualitative rigour: data collection, reflexivity, ethics, analysis, and findings (Noyes et al., 2022). If a study showed significant weaknesses in one or more of these areas, this would result in a lower overall judgement regardless of the number of “Yes” responses. This combined approach ensured that the overall rating was not merely numerical but also reflected the study's trustworthiness, transparency, and practical value (Noyes et al., 2022).

Table 4

Overall CASP Quality Judgements

Study	Overall CASP Quality Judgement
Allen and Bond (2021).	High Quality
Burnham (2013).	High Quality
Elms and Higgins (2022).	High Quality
Lee and Woods (2017).	High Quality
Morris and Atkinson (2018).	High Quality
Schulze et al. (2019)	High Quality
Sedgwick and Stothard (2019).	High Quality
Zafeiriou and Gulliford (2020).	High Quality

Reflecting on the findings, the researcher brought together the evidence through an integrative approach, specifically using Framework Synthesis (Oliver et al., 2008).

This method is essentially deductive: data are extracted and set against an existing framework of concepts and themes. In this case, Fallon et al.'s (2010) definition of the EP role provided the reference point.

> '*EPs are fundamentally scientist-practitioners who utilise, for the benefit of children and young people (CYP), 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'* (pg.4)

This definition will act as the a priori framework of concepts and themes in which data extracted from the studies (exploring EP's perception of their role) can be charted. The author hopes to explore whether the definition Fallon et al. (2010) offer is robust when considering the perspectives of their fellow EPs and the significant changes in legislation since 2010.

2.3.4 Framework Synthesis

The researcher used Framework Synthesis (Oliver et al., 2008), which draws on an existing conceptual framework to guide data extraction and analysis. On the surface, this offers an efficient and systematic way of structuring a review. Every component of the framework is addressed, thereby reducing the risk of cherry-picking evidence. Yet this neatness can be deceptive: adopting a predetermined framework inevitably shapes how the findings are read and presented.

At the same time, Framework Synthesis is not rigid. Oliver et al. (2008) emphasise that the method allows for adjustments or expansions in light of the data, meaning that a framework can be tested rather than simply applied. This flexibility makes it suitable for topics, such as the role of the EP, where practice is dynamic, and contexts continually shift. Compared with inductive approaches such as thematic synthesis, Framework Synthesis arguably saves time by using preexisting categories, but it does so at the cost of potentially missing perspectives that do not fit neatly within the given structure.

It may therefore be best to view Framework Synthesis as a pragmatic compromise. It offers coherence and comparability across studies.

Compared to other synthesis methods, such as narrative or thematic synthesis, Framework Synthesis offers a more structured approach. While the other methods may allow for greater flexibility in handling varied evidence, they often lack the efficiency and direct applicability to policy and practice that Framework Synthesis provides.

2.3.5 Findings

The Fallon et al. (2010) definition of the EP role was chosen as the conceptual framework because the researcher felt it was comprehensive and widely recognised (Birch et al., 2015; DfE, 2011; DfE, 2015; Lee & Woods, 2017; Zafeiriou & Gulliford, 2020). Using this lens, the studies were systematically reviewed and mapped, and quality assured through the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) checklist. Extracted data was coded into Fallon's 'categories' (EPs are scientist-practitioners, EPs work for the benefit of children and young people, EPs use psychological skills, knowledge and understanding, EPs work within core functions; consultation, assessment, intervention, research and training, EPs work at an individual, group and organisational level, EPs work within the contexts of Educational, Community and Care and EPs work with a variety of role partners) while also noting evidence that sat uncomfortably against this definition. Colour-coding was used to distinguish alignment from divergence (see Appendix 6.8). The findings of this synthesis will now be discussed.

EPs are scientist-practitioners

EPs as 'scientist–practitioners' could perhaps be described as unevenly represented within the studies. Zafeiriou and Gulliford (2020) gave examples of EPs formulating hypotheses and integrating psychological theory with applied evidence. Yet Burnham (2013) reported a more ambivalent stance, with participants describing themselves as pragmatic rather than "scientific." For some, the concern was not about establishing truth but about creating meaningful change for a child, teacher, or school. One practitioner suggested: "We're not bothered about the truth as such. Sometimes, what we want to perhaps create is a change" (Burnham, 2013, p. 25).

The studies suggest EPs frequently blend empirical knowledge with professional judgement and personal experience (Schulze et al., 2019). It could be suggested that

EP willingness to engage as research participants within these studies, perhaps suggests an appreciation for research and its ability to better their knowledge and practice. It is perhaps possible that these studies disproportionately reflect the views of EPs who identify more closely with the 'scientist-practitioner', maybe raising questions about whether the findings of this SLR capture the views and thinking across the wider EP population.

EPs work for the benefit of children and young people

Almost all studies placed children and young people at the centre of EP practice. For some EPs, this meant prioritising relevance over rigour in their scientific identity (Burnham, 2013). Sedgwick and Stothard (2019) found that EPs often felt compelled to advocate for children whose schools misunderstood the complexity of their needs (as perceived by the EP). Similarly, Zafeiriou and Gulliford (2020) described EPs as advocates in mental health contexts, sometimes challenging assumptions held by schools or parents. In addition, Schulze et al. (2019) highlighted that EP practice is consistently child-centred and holistic, but this commitment may conflict with systemic pressures, e.g. limited time, traded service models, or statutory duties. Since the SEND Code of Practice (DfE, 2015), the definition of "children and young people" has expanded to cover 0–25, suggesting that Fallon et al.'s (2010) framework may already be somewhat outdated.

EPs use psychological skills, knowledge and understanding

Psychological theory and skill use were reported as central in all studies. EPs described drawing on attachment theory, systemic perspectives, and developmental psychology to inform practice (Allen & Bond, 2021; Elms & Higgins, 2022). Lee and Woods (2017) noted that the shift towards traded service models allowed some EPs to use psychology more creatively, moving beyond traditional consultations.

Yet limits were also acknowledged. Sedgwick and Stothard (2019) reported gaps in specialist knowledge, for example, around speech, language and communication needs (SLCN). Elms and Higgins (2022) found similar gaps in areas like eating disorders. This suggests that continuous professional development remains important.

Zafeiriou and Gulliford (2020) emphasised that psychological knowledge is not applied in a vacuum. EPs must also manage emotional and relational demands, often

navigating tense or sensitive situations. In this sense, psychological skills overlap with interpersonal skills such as empathy, containment, and the capacity to hold uncertainty.

Core functions: consultation, assessment, intervention, research and training

Consultation was the most frequently described process in the studies, characterised as relational and empowering (Zafeiriou & Gulliford, 2020; Allen & Bond, 2021). It was suggested that EPs use consultation to challenge assumptions, encourage reflective practice (Morris & Atkinson, 2018), facilitate social justice work (Schulze et al., 2019), and engage with wider systemic change.

Assessment was also widely reported. Yet, a tension emerged. Some EPs critiqued assessments as overly cognitive or driven by statutory processes (Sedgwick & Stothard, 2019), instead advocating for more ecological and holistic approaches. Problem-solving models (Lee & Woods, 2017) are highlighted as an alternative.

Intervention was often indirect. Burnham (2013) noted that EPs typically recommended strategies rather than implementing them directly, raising questions about the extent of ownership EPs retain over outcomes.

Research was under-reported. EPs acknowledged its importance but expressed discomfort with hierarchies that privilege certain types of evidence over practice-based knowledge (Burnham, 2013).

Training was the least visible of the five functions. Only a handful of studies (e.g., Allen & Bond, 2021) described training as a core activity, usually linked to systemic practice.

EPs work at an individual, group and organisational level

Across studies, EPs were described as operating at individual, group, and organisational levels. Yet the balance was uneven. Individual casework dominated, with consultations, assessments, and problem-solving models as key tools (Lee & Woods, 2017; Elms & Higgins, 2022). Group and organisational-level work was less frequent and often aspirational.

Zafeiriou and Gulliford (2020) and Allen and Bond (2021) provided examples of EPs contributing strategically at the organisational level. However, Burnham (2013) found

little evidence of systemic work beyond individual cases, possibly reflecting reactive service demands.

Supervision was sometimes framed as a way of extending impact beyond the individual, supporting staff to think reflectively and systemically (Elms & Higgins, 2022). Schulze et al. (2019) added that consultation could create space for wider discussions of social justice, perhaps hinting at organisational-level influence.

Contexts: Educational, Community, Care

Most studies described EPs working in educational contexts. Engagement in care and community settings was less consistent. Allen and Bond (2021) reported work in residential care and specialist homes for exploited young people. Elms and Higgins (2022) noted that EPs recognised the need to collaborate with health services, particularly CAMHS, though structural barriers often constrained this collaboration.

Burnham (2013) suggested that EPs were aware of wider social contexts, yet direct work in these settings was limited. This unevenness points to the challenges of multi-agency working and the enduring centrality of schools as the primary site of EP practice.

EPs work with a variety of role partners

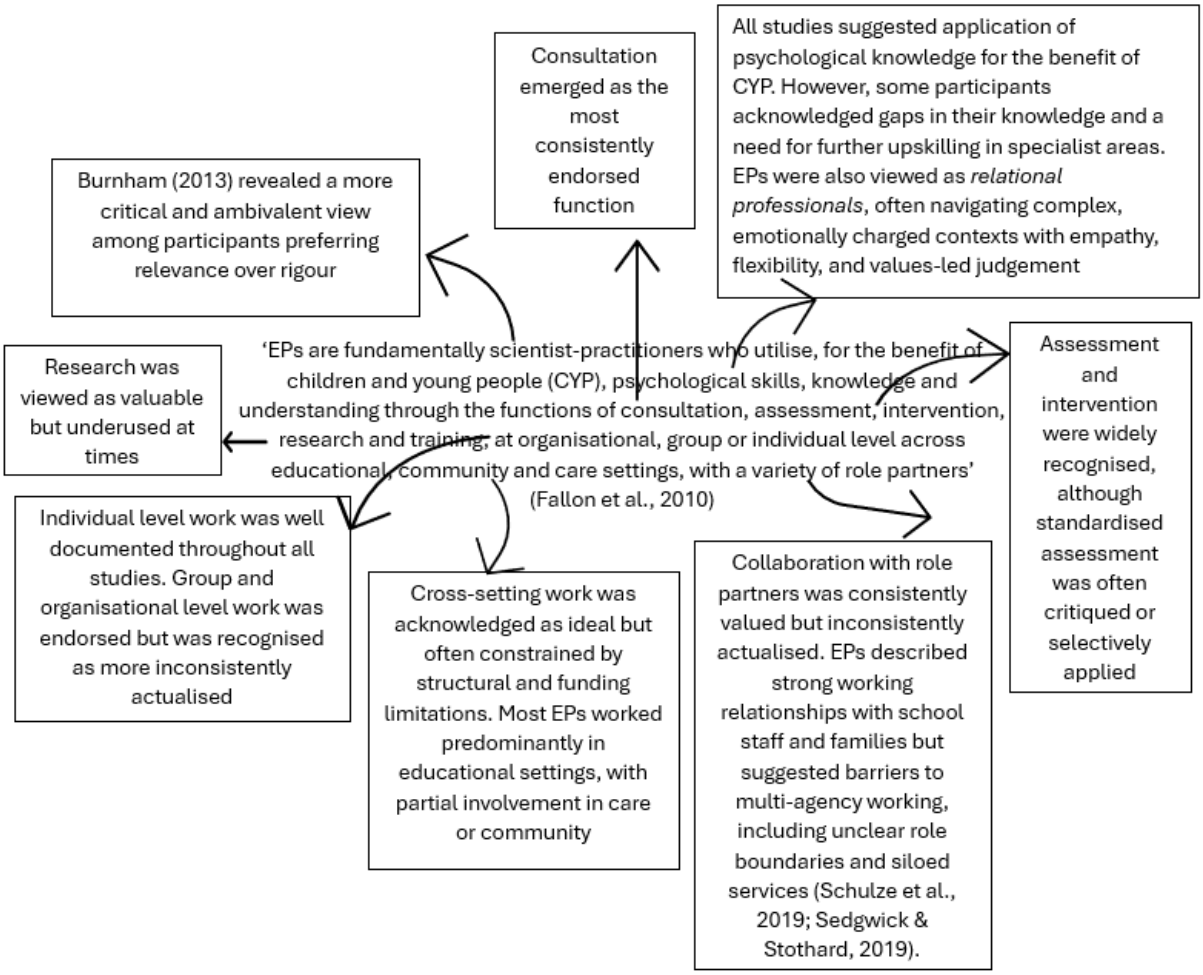
Collaboration with role partners was widely acknowledged as essential, yet frequently difficult. Working alongside school staff, parents, and other professionals was described as central to EP effectiveness (Allen & Bond, 2021; Elms & Higgins, 2022; Morris & Atkinson, 2018; Sedgwick & Stothard, 2019; Zafeiriou & Gulliford, 2020). These partnerships allowed EPs to share psychological knowledge, build trust, and challenge perceptions.

However, the quality of collaboration varied. EPs reported relatively strong relationships with school staff, but partnerships with health and social care professionals were harder to establish. Zafeiriou and Gulliford (2020) and Schulze et al. (2019) stressed the importance of trust and containment in multi-agency contexts, yet structural boundaries and competing priorities often undermined these relationships.

The figure below illustrates aspects of the original definition and the points on which this review comments.

Figure 2

Visual Representation of the Findings from the SLR



2.3.6 Discussion

This review sought to examine whether practising EPs perceive their role as described by Fallon et al. (2010). The framework synthesis used Fallon's definition as an a priori map, and the researcher extracted data and assessed it against that definition to explore how EPs view their role relative to it. On a surface level, the definition captures the perceived functions of the EP role. In practice, the studies suggest something 'messier' and more human: EPs working as relational professionals who contain anxiety, question "common sense," and hold spaces where change may become possible (e.g., Zafeiriou & Gulliford, 2020; Allen & Bond, 2021). This does not mean to say that EPs within the studies are moving away from using psychology so much as psychology 'done' in the real world - under time pressure, with competing priorities,

and sometimes with someone experiencing distress. Fallon's definition does not deny this, but perhaps it does not quite name it either.

Two further patterns stand out. First, the "scientist–practitioner" identity appears negotiated rather than settled. Burnham's (2013) participants were wary of rigid evidence hierarchies, preferring what worked for a particular child, in a particular school, at a particular time. This could sit awkwardly with the Health and Care Professions Council's (HCPC) emphasis on evidence-based and evidence-informed practice, though the standards themselves are deliberately broad and were updated in 2023 to emphasise practice-based judgment (HCPC, 2015;2023). The tension is not new; applied fields have long wrestled with balancing rigour and context (Burnham, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Schon, 1987), but it is the day-to-day reality described in some of the included studies.

Secondly, the service structure perhaps somewhat shapes the EP role. Traded models, statutory demands, and possible blurred inter-agency boundaries pull EPs towards some activities and away from others. Lee and Woods (2017) wonder if practicing under a 'traded service model' can widen creativity in some services while narrowing time for research or direct intervention in others. The recent DfE workforce report notes the growth of traded arrangements and the consequent mix of paid-for and core work across England (Atfield et al., 2023).

While many EPs maintained strong relationships with schools, their collaboration with health and social care services is more tenuous (Burnham, 2013), perhaps due to conflicting or unclear professional boundaries. Such limitations in multi-agency collaboration could contribute to the sidelining of systemic work, even though it is highly valued.

2.4.7 Implications for the current piece of research

The findings of this framework synthesis have several potential implications for the proposed research exploring how EPs facilitate systemic change. While systemic practice is strongly seen as valuable (e.g., Zafeiriou & Gulliford, 2020; Allen & Bond, 2021), the SLR suggests that EPs' ability to work systemically is often constrained by service-level limitations, time pressures, and ambiguous role expectations. For instance, although participants expressed a clear desire to contribute to whole-school development and multi-agency planning, such opportunities were inconsistently

realised in practice (Burnham, 2013; Lee & Woods, 2017). This suggests a disconnect between the aspirational scope of the EP role, as conceptualised by Fallon et al. (2010), and its practical actualisation. Consequently, the proposed research has the potential to make a meaningful contribution by identifying the enablers and barriers that influence EPs' engagement in systemic work. It may also offer insight into how EPs navigate and negotiate their roles in complex settings, and how systemic change is interpreted and operationalised by EPs.

Fallon's definition rightly identifies the core functions and systemic breadth of the EP role, yet the reviewed studies indicate that EPs also operate as relational professionals, navigating complex, often emotionally charged contexts with empathy, flexibility, and values-led judgement (Zafeiriou & Gulliford, 2020; Allen & Bond, 2021). The synthesis highlights how EPs frequently draw on interpersonal, emotional, and reflective skills, using psychology not only to deliver functions like consultation or assessment but to contain anxiety, challenge fixed thinking, and create psychologically safe spaces for change (Schulze et al., 2019). The implications of this 'messiness' of real-world EP practice lay the context and foundations for the proposed research.

Moreover, findings could inform service design and continuing professional development by highlighting the conditions under which systemic change efforts are most effective.

2.3.8 Strengths and Limitations of the SLR

The systematic review has some strengths. To start, the researcher used the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) checklist to judge both methodological quality and ethical conduct. The CASP tool hoped to enhance the credibility of the review by reducing potential bias and ensuring the inclusion of methodologically sound research.

Its integrative design could be viewed as another strength. Framework Synthesis (Oliver et al., 2018) appears well-suited to a question about a complex professional role, one that extends from consultation and assessment to training and system-level work. The approach allows established categories to provide structure while still accommodating the emergence of additional and new insights. It potentially offers a balanced way of holding onto what is already known about EP practice while noticing nuance and differing perspectives. However, if the a priori framework is utilised too strictly, newer or messier features of the role could be overlooked.

Leaving out PsycInfo database is a significant limitation gap for a psychology-oriented topic. Including PsycInfo could have captured a wider range of relevant literature and potentially enriched the findings. Its omission may have led to a narrower evidence base and the inadvertent exclusion of pertinent psychological research concerning the EP role.

Several included papers drew on small, fairly homogenous samples, often practitioners from a single local authority. Such designs can generate detailed, context-rich reporting, but they limit the ability to generalise patterns across the profession. Future work would benefit from larger, more diverse samples (geography, years of experience, service models) to explore whether the same themes emerge.

Finally, the synthesis relies entirely on qualitative material. That choice hoped to yield rich, situated accounts of the EP role. Even so, the lack of quantitative indicators limits what can be said about prevalence or effect size.

2.3.9 Conclusion

In conclusion, Fallon et al.'s (2010) definition still provides a credible baseline for the EP role. Yet the synthesis suggests the role also includes aspects of the definition only implied, e.g. sustained relational work (Allen & Bond, 2021; Zafeiriou & Gulliford, 2020); sometimes prioritising relevance over rigour when it comes to being a 'scientist-practitioner' (Burnham, 2013; Sedgwick & Stothard, 2019) and ethical decision-making in grey areas (Allen & Bond, 2021; Schulze et al., 2019). Practice appears adaptive and context-dependent, sometimes necessarily so (Lee & Woods, 2017; Elms & Higgins, 2022; Morris & Atkinson, 2018). Recognising this explicitly would, arguably, bring the formal description of the role closer to what EPs report doing. For the present study, the working hypothesis is cautious: Fallon's definition is a good one, with the SLR highlighting nuance and texture; adding deliberate attention to emotional labour (Zafeiriou & Gulliford, 2020), tensions between evidence-based practice and practice-based evidence (Burnham, 2013; Sedgwick & Stothard, 2019), advocacy (Schulze et al., 2019) and structural constraints (Lee & Woods, 2017; Elms & Higgins, 2022). This context is important when exploring how EPs understand and enact their work – and, crucially, how that work improves outcomes for children and young people at an organisational change level (Morris & Atkinson, 2018).

Given the findings that EPs often aspire to systemic practice, yet implementation is viewed as less well fulfilled, it is important to consider the seminal theoretical frameworks that underpin systemic thinking and practice. The following section hopes to explore models such as General Systems Theory, Organisational Learning Theory, Family Systems Theory and Ecological Systems Theory that have perhaps shaped thinking in this area.

2.4 Systems Theories

Systems theories often approach a "system" not simply as a collection of parts, but as a network of interdependent relationships, where the connections likely matter just as much, if not more, than the individual components themselves (von Bertalanffy, 1968). These systems aim for a kind of balance or homeostasis. Still, they're not immune to disruption. A small shift in one area can send ripples through the entire structure (von Bertalanffy, 1968). The author now aims to outline key systems theories and their relevance to EP practice.

2.4.1 General Systems Theory

General Systems Theory (GST), most closely associated with Ludwig von Bertalanffy (1968), is positioned as a broad conceptual framework for thinking about complexity in systems in holistic terms. As mentioned above, rather than exploring isolated parts, GST encourages practitioners to look at the whole: a system made up of interrelated, interdependent elements.

One element of GST's is its framing of feedback loops. These loops, whether negative (stabilising) or positive (amplifying), offer a way to understand how systems regulate themselves in response to internal or external pressures (Skyttner, 2005). In a school context, this might show up in the tension between maintaining daily routines and responding to sudden changes, such as a shift in leadership or a new policy.

GST also introduces the idea of emergent behaviour: patterns that arise at the level of the whole and can't be traced back to any single part (Capra, 2001; Skyttner, 2005). This is particularly relevant for EPs trying to make sense of schools, not as static institutions, but as dynamic, adaptive systems. What happens in one classroom or the practice of one teacher may reflect broader organisational patterns, though not always in obvious ways.

Simple, one-way cause-and-effect explanations are rarely sufficient under this view. GST leans toward circular causality, where changes loop back and influence the conditions that produced them in the first place (von Bertalanffy, 1968; Checkland, 1981). For EPs, this way of thinking can legitimise a more systemic approach - one that resists quick fixes and instead focuses on ongoing, reciprocal influence.

For this research, GST functions as a foundation from which more specific approaches, such as Family Systems Theory and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, extend with added contextual detail (Capra, 2001; Checkland, 1981).

That said, GST's breadth can be a double-edged sword. While its generality allows for wide application, it can also leave practitioners unsure of how to move from theory to action. Without additional scaffolding, GST may feel too abstract to guide practice. For EPs working in complex, layered environments, integrating GST with more context-sensitive models isn't just helpful; it seems essential (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Checkland, 1981).

2.4.2 Family Systems Theory

Family Systems Theory, widely written about by Bowen (1978), takes a narrower focus and views families as 'systems': it focuses on the emotional and relational patterns that play out within families. It conceptualises families as emotional systems in which individual behaviours are embedded within patterns of interaction, positioning these patterns, not individuals, as the primary focus for understanding and intervention (Minuchin, 1974). Potentially unique to Family Systems Theory is its explicit emphasis on emotional processes as central to the functioning and evolution of systems. This is particularly significant for EPs, as it highlights the need to consider emotional undercurrents that may either hinder or facilitate systemic change (Kerr & Bowen, 1988).

A core concept within the theory is differentiation of self, which refers to an individual's ability to maintain a clear sense of self while remaining emotionally connected to others. Low differentiation in heightened emotional reactivity and fusion with others' emotions can influence functioning in both families and systems, such as schools (Bowen, 1978). EPs can use this concept to support school staff in developing emotional resilience and maintaining professional boundaries in emotionally charged environments.

‘Boundaries’ are another key feature. These are often the unspoken rules and agreements influencing a system’s dynamics, e.g. who gets to know what, who makes decisions, and how influence arises. In families, boundaries that are too rigid might leave members feeling isolated, while boundaries that are too loose can lead to individuals experiencing ‘enmeshment’[2] (Minuchin, 1974). In schools, boundary issues might look like unclear lines between teaching and pastoral roles, or situations where teachers feel like they are ‘parenting’ or therapists. When applied to schools, EPs can help identify boundary issues, for example, unclear roles between staff members or between students and teachers, that may disrupt effective functioning and collaboration.

The theory also leans on the ideas of relational reciprocity and influence. These concepts point to the way behaviour is shaped, not in a vacuum, but through ongoing, circular interactions. Everyone within the system is both influencing and being influenced, sometimes in ways that are hard to untangle (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). For EPs, this means that efforts to shift school culture or practice need to take account of these feedback loops; otherwise, well-intentioned interventions may be resisted by the existing system.

Applying Family Systems Theory in schools isn’t always straightforward. While the theory encourages practitioners to pay close attention to emotional and relational patterns, there’s a risk of stretching the family metaphor too far. Schools are not families, and what works in a family therapy context may not translate neatly to a staff team or a year group. Without careful adaptation, there’s a danger of oversimplifying complex organisational realities or misapplying concepts that were never designed for institutional settings.

2.4.3 Ecological Systems Theory

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979) significantly contributes to systemic perspectives by highlighting the multiple environmental layers influencing human development. Bronfenbrenner conceptualises systems in a nested structure: microsystem (immediate environments, e.g., family, school), mesosystem (interconnections between microsystems), exosystem (external settings indirectly

[2] Enmeshment refers to a blurred boundary structure within family systems. It is often characterised by intense emotional closeness and involvement, where the individual’s autonomy is overshadowed by the family unit (Minuchin, 1974)

affecting the individual), macrosystem (broader cultural and societal contexts), and chronosystem (historical and time dimensions). This theory offers some utility to EP practice by facilitating understandings of individual behaviour within diverse contextual layers, encouraging practitioners to examine factors ranging from family and peer relationships to societal policies (Darling, 2007). Critically, however, Bronfenbrenner's model may sometimes be overly comprehensive and complex for practical application, potentially leading to difficulties in operationalising interventions due to its extensive scope (Tudge et al., 2009).

2.4.4 Organisational Learning Theory

Argyris and Schon's (1997) concepts of single-loop and double-loop learning present another distinct systemic perspective, specifically targeting organisational learning and reflective practice within institutions. Single-loop learning involves adapting practices without altering fundamental assumptions, whereas double-loop learning critically examines and seeks to change these underlying assumptions. This theoretical approach is likely relevant to educational psychology practice, particularly in consultancy roles, as it encourages reflective, critical, and transformative practices within educational institutions (Argyris, 1977). Nonetheless, the challenge in Argyris's theory is its complexity and the demanding nature of double-loop learning, which requires substantial organisational commitment and openness to reflective critique (Easterby-Smith et al., 2000).

One notable aspect of organisational learning theory is the concept of organisational defensiveness, which refers to the set of routines and behaviours organisations use, often unconsciously, to avoid embarrassment, threat, or discomfort, thereby preventing learning. Argyris (1990) argues that when individuals or groups act defensively, they inhibit double-loop learning by protecting existing norms and practices, even when these may be counterproductive. This tendency towards defensiveness can be problematic in educational settings where hierarchical structures, accountability pressures, or resistance to change may suppress open dialogue and reflection (Argyris, 1990; Senge, 2006). For EPs, recognising and navigating these defensive routines is likely important when attempting to facilitate systemic change. Critically, while Argyris's insights into defensiveness potentially offer valuable tools for diagnosing and addressing barriers to organisational learning, some critics suggest his work underemphasises the socio-political and emotional

complexities of schools as institutions (Fenwick, 2003). Nevertheless, the framework provides an interesting lens for EPs to engage in reflective, consultative practice that addresses both surface-level and structural barriers to change.

Having outlined seminal systemic models, the author now hopes to consider how theory translates into practice. The following sections explore the distinctions between working with systems, systemic thinking and systemic practice.

2.5 Understanding 'Working Within Systems', 'Systemic Thinking', and 'Systemic Practice' in Educational Psychology

In the author's experience, terms such as *working within systems*, *systemic thinking*, and *systemic practice* are frequently used, often interchangeably, to describe approaches that move beyond individual-level interventions. However, these concepts hold distinct meanings with important implications for theory and practice. This section of the literature review seeks to explore and define these three terms, drawing on seminal systems theories and psychological literature to evaluate their relevance and usefulness in EP's work. It will be argued that while all three concepts are interrelated and grounded in systems theory, systemic thinking and systemic practice represent deeper levels of engagement than working within systems, offering greater potential for meaningful and sustainable organisational change.

2.5.1 Working Within Systems

Working within systems refers to the act of operating in environments that are themselves complex systems, such as schools, local authorities, or multi-agency networks. In educational psychology, this often involves working with school teams or engaging with multiple stakeholders, without necessarily applying a systemic approach to problem-solving (Fox, 2009). This definition aligns to some degree with Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory, which situates individuals within layered environmental contexts ranging from immediate settings (microsystem) to broader societal structures (macrosystem). However, merely existing within these layers does not constitute systemic work in itself.

Critically, working within systems risks being a passive descriptor of context rather than a proactive engagement with system dynamics. It may involve navigating the

limitations of institutional structures (e.g., statutory assessment processes) without challenging their assumptions or seeking system-level change. Argyris and Schön (1997) would consider such engagement to be single-loop learning, in which individuals or organisations adjust behaviour within existing norms rather than interrogating those norms. Consequently, while *working within systems* could be considered a necessary condition for systemic work, it is not sufficient for promoting transformative practice.

2.5.2 Systemic Thinking: A Conceptual Mindset

The author considered systemic thinking as a mindset or cognitive framework that emphasises relational, contextual, and holistic understandings of problems. Originating in General Systems Theory (von Bertalanffy, 1968), systemic thinking views systems as dynamic networks of interrelated components, where change in one part affects the whole. In educational settings, systemic thinking enables EPs to conceptualise a child's difficulties not as isolated traits but as emerging from patterns of interaction between students, families, educators, and wider socio-political contexts (Pellegrini, 2009).

Systemic thinking is further informed by Family Systems Theory (Bowen, 1978), which emphasises the recursive nature of relational dynamics and the importance of emotional processes within systems. For example, this could be particularly relevant when EPs consider how staff responses, school culture, or parental engagement patterns may maintain or exacerbate a child's difficulties. It also aligns with Argyris and Schon's (1997) double-loop learning, where individuals not only act but reflect critically on their beliefs, values, and systemic contributions.

While systemic thinking is a powerful interpretive tool, its abstract nature may limit it applicability. Without an easy way to apply systemic thinking, it could remain theoretical.

2.5.3 Systemic Practice: Applying the Lens

The author refers to Systemic practice as the application of systemic theories, tools, and interventions to effect change at the group or organisational level. Examples in EP work include systemic consultation, use of systemic frameworks (e.g., Planning

Alternative Tomorrows with Hope or Circle of Adults), facilitating reflective practice sessions, and engaging in school-wide development work (Wagner, 2000; Fox, 2009). It embodies the transition from thought to action by applying systemic thinking to facilitate capacity building and learning within educational communities.

Family Systems Theory (Minuchin, 1974; Kerr & Bowen, 1988) provides specific strategies that can be adapted for use in school systems, such as circular questioning, reframing and adopting a 'not-knowing' position. Meanwhile, Bronfenbrenner's (1979) model could guide EPs in aligning their interventions to various ecological levels, such as offering staff training at the mesosystem level or contributing to local policy at the exosystem level. Argyris and Schön's (1997) work could further support the role of the EP as a facilitator of organisational learning, helping institutions not only to improve practice but to re-examine foundational beliefs (Argyris, 1977).

Critically, systemic practice is not without challenges. Implementing it often requires time, trust, and institutional support, conditions that may be varied in contexts with increasingly dominating statutory demands and resource constraints (Lee & Woods, 2017). Moreover, EPs may find themselves caught between individual casework and aspirations for system-wide influence, leading to role tension (Fallon et al., 2010).

2.5.4 Interrelationships and Implications

While these terms are distinct, the author views them as points along a continuum of systemic engagement. Working within systems describes the contextual backdrop of EP practice; systemic thinking provides a conceptual lens for understanding problems within that context; and systemic practice translates this perspective into purposeful action. Each builds on the other, with increasing depth and potential for sustainable change. However, conflating the terms risks superficial engagement, where EPs believe they are working systemically simply because they are present in a school system, rather than thinking and acting systemically. Ultimately, systemic practice underpinned by systemic thinking is seen as a potentially thorough pathway for addressing complex challenges in education, not by fixing individuals, but by facilitating change within the systems that surround them.

EPs could have the flexibility to adopt a systemic thinking and systemic practice approach regardless of which theoretical framework they choose to draw upon, be it General Systems Theory (GST), Family Systems Theory, Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, Organisational Learning Theory or any other systems theory they choose to adopt. Each theory offers a different entry point into understanding and engaging with complex systems, yet all emphasise the interconnectedness of elements within those systems. GST provides a holistic foundation that encourages EPs to think systemically by considering the dynamic interactions within educational contexts (von Bertalanffy, 1968). Thus, while the theoretical lenses may vary, they all potentially facilitate a systemic orientation to EP work that moves beyond individual-level problem-solving toward sustainable, contextually grounded change.

For the purposes of this study, the concept of a *system* is understood through the lens of General Systems Theory (GST), as initially developed by von Bertalanffy (1968). GST defines a system as an organised whole comprising interdependent and interacting components, where the relationships and processes between parts are more significant than the individual elements themselves. This approach emphasises interconnectedness, dynamic interaction, and equilibrium, suggesting that a change in one part of the system can have wide-ranging effects on the whole (Capra, 2001; Checkland, 1981).

As an umbrella theory, GST also supports the integration of more specific systemic frameworks, such as Family Systems Theory and Ecological Systems Theory, under a unified conceptual foundation (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bowen, 1978). Within this theoretical stance, the author hopes to explore EP's systemic thinking - referring to the cognitive orientation that prioritises understanding the relational, contextual, and interactive nature of problems. However, systemic thinking, while powerful, remains largely conceptual unless translated into action. This leads the author to be further interested in EP's systemic practice, defined as the purposeful application of systemic principles to bring about change within and across systems. The author wonders how EPs moved from understanding systemic patterns to actively intervening at relational and organisational levels to improve outcomes.

Reflection Box	adopting a position as to how I am defining a “system”
At the outset of this research, I found myself overwhelmed by the wide array of definitions of systemic work and the multiple systemic theories available. Although each framework offered valuable insights, many of them seemed to overlap in meaning while also presenting subtle distinctions that were difficult to reconcile. As a result, I struggled to clearly identify a specific systemic lens to guide the design of my interview questions, the practical implementation of the research, and the way I engaged with and interpreted the data. It wasn’t until I began to reflect retrospectively on my approach that I recognised that General Systems Theory (GST) most closely aligned with my thinking during the early stages of the project. I believe this is likely because of GST’s broad and flexible conceptualisation of systems, which allowed me to consider the dynamic and interconnected nature of educational contexts, even if I had not explicitly labelled it as such at the time.	

The current section of the literature review hopes to extend the focus from individual-level work to the systemic conditions that enable or constrain change, recognising that EP practice often aims to influence organisations rather than isolated cases. In doing so, it positions organisational change as a key context through which systemic work can support sustainable and meaningful developments within educational settings.

2.6 Systemic work vs individual – level approaches

Woods and Farrell (2006) highlighted the ongoing debate regarding the term "individual assessment" and its implications for Educational Psychology practice. This term encompasses various methods, including iterative testing, formative assessment, and psychometric testing. Their study, which surveyed 142 EPs from at least 37 different Local Authorities (LAs) across England and Wales, found that interviews with children and young people (CYP) were the most frequently used method in individual assessments. Furthermore, 63% of EPs considered these interviews valuable. Interestingly, although 40-46% of the respondents commonly used psychometric testing, only 6-13% found it the most useful method. This research suggests that individual assessment remains a core function of the EP role, corroborating other studies that emphasise the importance of individual approaches in EP practice (Farrell,

2010). However, Woods and Farrell's questionnaire focused solely on EPs' perceptions of individual assessments, without exploring their views on systemic approaches. As a result, it could not compare the perceived value or usage of the two approaches.

The frequency with which EPs employ specific methods may be influenced by service users' expectations rather than EPs' preferences (Farrell, 2009). Lee and Woods (2017) found that a well-established "traded" service experienced increased demand for casework and individual assessments, suggesting that service delivery models might shape the work EPs do. Festinger (1957) theorised that professionals might be experiencing cognitive dissonance due to the discrepancy between the approaches they use most often and those they find most useful. This dissonance could contribute to the perception of EPs primarily as assessors, despite efforts within the profession to move away from this image. Love (2009) argued that the conflict between expectations of the EP role and attempts to shift away from individual assessment has created a cyclical misunderstanding, leading to a perceived identity crisis within the profession. This identity struggle could potentially impact service quality and user satisfaction (Woods & Farrell, 2006). The introduction of statutory duties for EPs may have exacerbated these issues, as it added pressure to perform individual assessments (Buck, 2015; Leadbetter, 2010).

The statutory responsibilities of EPs have been a focal point since the 1981 Education Act, which required EPs to provide psychological advice to inform the Statement of Special Educational Needs, later known as the Education, Health, and Care Plan (EHCP). The Children and Families Act 2014 reaffirmed the importance of EPs making distinct psychological formulations and contributions to support CYP, positioning this statutory function as the primary reason for LA employment of EPs. Buck (2015) suggested that while EPs may be reluctant to increase their individual assessment workload, the statutory duty ensures the profession's longevity. However, others worry that this emphasis on statutory assessments risks casting EPs as "gatekeepers" to resources rather than as providers of preventive, inclusive support (Faupel & Norgate, 1993; Warnock & Norwich, 2010).

Ashton and Roberts (2006) conducted a mixed-methods questionnaire to explore what EPs and Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCOs) perceived as the unique and valuable aspects of the EP role. They found some alignment between the two groups regarding statutory assessments and standardised testing, reflecting a more traditional view of the EP role. However, they also identified differences, with SENCOs valuing the traditional aspects of the role, while EPs saw consultation as more valuable. Ashton and Roberts posed the question of whether EPs should provide the advice-giving services schools want or promote alternative ways of working. Kelly and Gray (2000) suggested that the issue might lie in marketing, as their research indicated that schools' perceptions of the EP role are often limited to their experiences with individual EPs rather than the full range of services provided. Although concerns were raised about the capacity to meet increased demand from marketing efforts, anecdotal evidence suggests that some EP services are now engaging in marketing to showcase the breadth of their offerings with the production of brochures. Ultimately, however, SENCOs will determine the value of these services, and EPs, as applied educational psychologists and "scientist-practitioners," should potentially look to research to guide their priorities.

The shift away from individual assessments towards systemic approaches has deep roots in the field of educational psychology. Gillham (1978) criticised individual approaches for failing to account for the broader systems surrounding the child and for neglecting the influence of people in the home and school environments. Gillham's work, which was pivotal in the "reconstructing" movement within educational psychology, sought to move away from a "deficit" or "within-child" model (Buck, 2015). This shift aimed to promote more inclusive practices in schools by focusing on systemic change rather than individual interventions (Farrell et al., 2009). The movement towards systemic working coincided with the development of General Systems Theory in other scientific fields, emphasising the idea that individual behaviour occurs within a context, and these contexts, or systems, influence behaviour (McGuiggan, 2021). Consequently, EPs began working more with families and educational establishments to gain a holistic understanding of the child's environment (Fine, 1985). These tensions between individual and systemic approaches perhaps highlight the need for EPs to work beyond the level of the child to influence

whole-school practices. Section 2.7, therefore, examines organisational change as an important context for EP practice.

2.7 Organisational Change

This thesis hopes to explore how EPs work systemically to facilitate organisational change; therefore, it is important to explore what organisational/change means and how it is discussed within the literature.

Organisational change presents significant challenges, particularly when it comes to ensuring the sustainability of the changes implemented (Adelman & Taylor, 2003). Change can look different and could take the form of modified behaviour, structural re-organisation and/ or altered communication patterns and a different understanding of problems (Dallos & Aldridge, 1986). Watzlawick et al. (2015) made a distinction between 'first-order' and second-order' change. First order change focuses on a reduction of the 'symptom' in the individual or immediate problem (Davey et al., 2012). First-order change concerns itself with 'superficial' changes within the system and not to the system itself. This links to the long-held belief that children can be 'treated' and change, without excessive intrusion within the social systems (McGuiggan, 2021). To measure first-order change, individual parameters would increase or decrease, e.g. a child falling behind on their word reading would enter an intervention focusing on individual word-level reading/decoding. By the end of the intervention, practitioners would hope the child could read more words than when they entered the intervention. Houston and Houts (1998) denoted first-order change as 'absolute stability' in statistical increases and decreases. According to Watzlawick et al. (2015), first-order change, creating lasting change, is not probable.

As highlighted by Argyris (1990), one of the critical aspects of successful organisational change is achieving what Argyris refers to as "second-order change." This type of change is not merely about making surface-level adjustments but involves deep, transformative shifts in the underlying structures, processes, and behaviours within an organisation. Second-order change occurs when there is a shift in the system (Davey et al., 2012) or recalibrating the system's equilibrium (Watzlawick et al., 2015). Systems are complex, meaning there is no one way to approach second-order change (Davey et al., 2012). Watzlawick et al. (2015) propose that one of the ways in which

second-order change can occur is when the ‘rules’ of the system change. Instead of modifying actions or the frequencies of actions, second-order change happens when the interaction or transaction is altered. This results in the system as a whole changing. For example, rather than changing an outcome, e.g. how many times a child is excluded, second-order change hopes to change the communication patterns, i.e. how teachers engage with the child. The second-order change may result in a difference in outcome, e.g. exclusions; however, the focus would be on the interactions. Another type of second-order change is the reframing of perspectives. In the example of the child at risk of exclusion, rather than focusing on decreasing exclusions, second-order change could present itself as an opportunity to learn about how individuals respond when they are feeling dysregulated. Potentially reframing challenging behaviour.

Argyris (1990) emphasises that one of the primary barriers to achieving second-order change is the presence of "defensive routines." These are ingrained patterns of behaviour that individuals and groups use to protect themselves from the discomfort associated with change. Defensive routines manifest as a preference for the familiar or the 'norm,' which helps individuals avoid potentially embarrassing or threatening situations that can arise during the change process. These routines serve as a form of psychological self-protection, but they can also prevent meaningful change by maintaining the status quo.

The challenge, therefore, lies in overcoming these defensive routines to create an environment where genuine learning and adaptation can occur. This requires not only addressing the external factors that resist change but also the internal, often unconscious, processes that individuals use to shield themselves from the perceived risks of change. By focusing on overcoming these barriers, organisations can better position themselves to achieve the deep, systemic changes necessary for long-term success.

Childey and Stringer (2020) report that EPs often offer training with the intention change in practice will follow. However, Patel (2013) found that whilst one-off training may influence trainees’ attitude and conceptual understanding, rarely does it influence their behaviour as they have often forgotten the training when it comes to practice. Chidley and Stringer (2020) suggest there is a ‘transfer problem’ and call on practitioners to address it and to be prepared to consider organisational change and

implementation carefully before offering one-off training. EPs are well placed to do this (Chidley & Stringer, 2020) as they have skills and knowledge in evidence-based practices which support implementation, such as coaching, consultation and supervision (Fixsen et al., 2009)

Lewin's (1951) theory of organisational change centred on a three stage model. These stages were labelled 'unfreeze', 'change' and 'freeze', in which the organisation is expected to enter a change period following an assessment of driving and restraining forces. In order for organisational change to be successful, driving forces of change need to overcome the restraining forces, unfreezing from the old to the refreezing of the new. This model could be described as static. A stable state of equilibrium follows another stable state of equilibrium after a period of intervention. This static or mechanistic view of organisational improvement can be seen in many aspects of school procedure. For example, the statutory process – where teaching staff are expected to adapt their practice following feedback from the EHCN Assessment or annual review, with the aim of better matching provision to individual outcomes. However, some critics of such linear models suggest that organisational change should be viewed more dynamically, rather than moving from point A to point B (Nelson, 2003). Tushman (et al., 1986) describe organisational change as incremental – a process of fine-tuning, where the aim is to create change to better fit an organisation's people, processes, strategy, and structure. Nelson (2003) recognised that static models of organisational change are being displaced by dynamic models.

2.8 Conclusions

The evolving role of Educational Psychologists (EPs) has been marked by shifts in context and an expanding range of duties. While there has been debate about the uniqueness of the EP role (Ashton & Roberts, 2006), Fallon et al. (2010) provided a definition that largely aligns with the existing literature and has withstood changes in legislation (DfE, 2015). However, it's important to note that this definition was based on a systematic literature review focused primarily on EPs' own perceptions of their role, suggesting a need for further investigation into how this definition holds up from the perspectives of other professionals and service users.

In delving deeper into the EP profession, the concept of 'systemic' work has emerged as a critical yet somewhat inconsistently defined area. Through the author's exploration, it became evident that EPs are often engaged in efforts to create systemic change within school and are well placed to do so. Legislative shifts (DfE, 2015) have increasingly emphasised individual assessment, limiting EPs' capacity to work at an organisational level.

Fallon et al. (2010) have moved the discussion beyond simply defining what EPs do to questioning how they implement and operationalise their core functions within specific contexts. This shift in focus raises a critical question: *how do EPs facilitate organisational change?* While some research has explored ineffective approaches to organisational change, such as the limitations of one-off training sessions (Childey & Stringer, 2020) and highlighting how difficult long-lasting organisation change is to achieve (Argryis, 1990), understanding how EPs overcome these constraints to effect change is crucial, and this research seeks to illuminate that process by investigating EPs' experiences and strategies in successfully facilitating organisational change.

3 Methodology

3.1 Chapter Overview

The following chapter aims to discuss different epistemological and ontological stances and define the theoretical position of the current research. The author then aims to describe the procedure of the research effort including and justifying the Thematic Analysis (TA) approach to data analysis. Finally, the researcher evidences pertinent ethical considerations in line with the British Psychological Society's guidance (2021), The Standards of conduct, performance and ethics described by the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC, 2016), Division of Educational and Child Psychology ethical codes as well as Nottingham University's ethical guidelines.

3.2 Epistemological and Ontological Stance

Questions of epistemology and ontology are concerned with the nature of reality and the nature of knowledge, respectively. Qualitative and Quantitative research can often have very differing epistemological and ontological standpoints. However, categorising epistemology/ontology and qualitative/quantitative in such a straightforward way can be crude and unrepresentative of the complex world of epistemology/ontology and research. A researcher can take different epistemological and ontological standpoints when gaining, interpreting, and analysing their qualitative

data. Some researchers can view their data through a positivist lens as well as a constructivist lens, but their methodology will look different. In other words, research relies heavily on a clear understanding of the ontological and epistemological standpoints taken (Guba and Lincoln, 1994; Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2003). In this section I will explore differing theoretical frameworks and outline the position taken for this thesis.

3.2.1 Ontology

Assumptions about the nature of reality relates to ontology (Al-Ababneh, 2020). Ontology explores the positions and relationships between the world and human interpretations and practices (Braun & Clarke, 2013) and considers whether reality exists separate from human interaction. Realism or 'mind independent truth' (Tebes, 2005) believes reality or truth exists with or without humans. On the opposite end of the scale, relativism believes reality entirely depends on human interaction and knowledge (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Realism assumes there is one truth, and humans can seek to discover it through research. In contrast, relativism assumes there are many realities and truths that are constructed by humans (Braun & Clarke, 2013) and we can never hope to get beyond these constructions (Cromby & Nightingale, 1999). Somewhere in between these two poles (realism and relativism) sits critical realism (and many other ontological assumptions) where proponents believe that there is one knowable truth, but to access and interpret that truth, researchers must examine social constructs, experience, and perceptions (Mandill et al*.,* 2000). Because of the social barriers to accessing the one reality, critical realists recognise that an entire understanding of reality may not always be possible and is often partial (Braun & Clarke, 2013) but that this is still valuable and has the potential to 'make a difference' (Stainton Rogers & Stainton Rogers, 1997).

Other authors, attempt to find a middle ground but instead of finding a new ontology chose to adopt different ontologies for different aspects of the world. Guba and Lincoln (1994) for example, offered that a realist ontology should be applied to the natural world (i.e., fields of medicine and biology) and a relativist should be applied to the social world (i.e., fields of sociology and psychology).

3.2.2 Epistemology

Rather than looking at reality and asking if there is one reality or multiple, epistemology considers how we can know about reality (Al-Ababneh, 2020). In a world full of

knowledge, how do we know what to trust? Braun and Clarke (2013) give the example of exploring research around personality. One might believe that individual personality is dictated by astrology and the alignment of the moon and stars on one's birth date. With so much knowledge out there, defining one's epistemological stance can help researchers to know which research to trust, value, and view as meaningful (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

3.2.2.1 Positivism and post-positivism

Positivism is an epistemology that aligns closely with empiricism (Braun & Clark, 2013), which believes trustworthy and valuable research is scientific and gained through established, precise scientific methods. Results inform researchers about reality and a singular truth (realism) (Braun & Clark, 2013), which seeks to discover scientific laws that can be generalised, applied to future research and, as such, form a knowledge base. However, Ashworth (2008) argued that this shift towards a more positivist approach to psychology meant that researchers no longer valued personal perspectives and the idiographic uniqueness of people and looked to measure behaviour.

Post-positivist researchers acknowledge that researchers cannot objectively observe because they are influenced by their contexts and the effects of research (Clark, 1998; Guba & Lincoln, 2005). Like positivism, researchers operating in a post-positivist paradigm believe that there is one truth, which is knowable, but believe that researchers have a demanding time in being fully objective (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

3.2.2.2 Constructionism

Proponents of constructionism reject the idea that there is one reality and that knowledge is objective, instead believing that the way individuals know their world is through the social world in which individuals live (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Researchers opting for the constructionist epistemology believe that individuals construe their world through language and systems of meaning (Gergen, 2022). As constructs change, so does truth. Every individual has their own reality, and therefore there are multiple realities.

3.2.2.3 Contextualism

Epistemological contextualism regards knowledge as provisional because it is situated within contexts (Mandill et al*.,* 2000). Researchers cannot be objective, and their participants can also not be objective, but there is still one reality (Tebes, 2005)

3.2.3 Theoretical positioning this research

The current research is written from the perspective of a critical realist. Therefore, the ontology of the research leans more towards a realist paradigm. Which allows the researcher to present one interpretation of 'reality' whilst also acknowledging that some aspects of reality are transitive and there be many different interpretations of that one reality (Bergin et al., 2008). As such, the research was able to extract hesitant conclusions about the realities of the world whilst remaining critical (Cruickshank, 2003). Lund (2005) also pointed out that a researcher adopting a critical realist theoretical position can recognise the fragility of knowledge, given that the contradictions and influences that exist in the world can be numerous. The critical realist's epistemological position aligns with contextualism, where the researcher hopes to gain insight through gathering individuals' experiences and perceptions around a phenomenon.

3.2.4 Procedure

3.2.4.1 Stakeholders

The primary stakeholders in the present study were:

· The researcher

· The participating EPs/TEPs

· The University of Nottingham

· The host Local Authority Educational Psychology Service

The research was developed in discussion with the Principal Educational Psychologist from the host Educational Psychology Service, the researcher's university tutor and placement supervisor. Since the research is of professional relevance to the host Educational Psychology Service, the researcher will make steps to provide feedback on findings and to discuss them with the team.

3.2.4.2 Service Context

The research was conducted within a local authority educational psychology service based in a medium-sized city in England. The city comprises a diverse population and includes areas of notable socio-economic disadvantage, contributing to a varied and complex educational landscape. The educational psychology service operates under a traded model of service delivery, whereby schools and other educational settings

purchase support directly. This model hopes for a responsive, needs-led approach, ensuring that EPs deliver demonstrable value in their work (Fallon et al., 2010).

The service offers a broad range of interventions at the individual, group, and systemic levels. Support packages may include consultation, assessment, intervention planning, staff development sessions, and bespoke training tailored to local needs. This model aligns with research advocating for collaborative, flexible, and context-sensitive psychological services (Farrell et al., 2006).

The service adopts a relational approach to psychology, which is central to its guiding philosophy and operational practice. This approach emphasises the role of dialogue, emotional attunement, and trust-building in fostering meaningful change. Change is viewed as emerging through interactions and the development of "news of difference", that is, new ways of seeing problems or situations that enable alternative responses (Burnham, 2005). EPs within the service are encouraged to work within what is referred to as the “Goldilocks Zone” of helpful conversation - interactions that are neither too familiar nor too challenging, but rather appropriately unusual to enable reflection and development.

Relational safety and mentalisation[3] are regarded as foundational to the service’s practice. The emphasis on safe uncertainty (Mason, 2015) and a ‘not-knowing’ stance (Anderson & Goolishian, 1992) reflects a therapeutic orientation that prioritises curiosity and collaborative meaning-making over prescriptive problem-solving with its foundations in Family Systemic Theory. This framework supports both direct work with children and indirect work with adults and systems, facilitating psychological insight and relational change across levels of practice.

The service’s work is guided by four core values: *Reflect, Respect, Empower, and Innovate*, which are operationalised through relational consultation, psychologically informed training, and multi-agency collaboration. Systemic work is conceptualised in ways that draw heavily from family therapy traditions, with an emphasis on relationship-building, emotional safety, and conversational change (Burnham, 2005; Dallos & Vetere, 2018).

[3] Mentalisation refers to the capacity to reflect on one's own and others' mental states (Bateman & Fonagy, 2016).

3.2.4.3 Sampling and Participants

The researcher used convenience sampling (Braun & Clarke, 2021) to recruit six EPs to participate in the semi-structured interviews. It was important that "the quality of data, the scope of the study, the nature of the topic, the amount of useful information" (Morse, 2000) were all considered before recruiting efforts ceased. Braun & Clarke (2022) offer that, whilst there is no universally agreed maximum and minimum number of participants required for TA, five participants are sufficient for a small-scale project with TA as the chosen method of data analysis. The researcher felt that the data gathered provided a richness, depth, and complexity to adequately provide tentative conclusions and answers to the research question.

The research was fully focused on the LA in which the research took place; therefore, the intention of the study could not be to generalise to a wider population. The scope of the study fitted a smaller number of participants. The host Educational Psychology Service is a Local Authority service consisting of 1 Principal EP, 2 Senior EPs, 2 Assistant EPs, 3 Trainee EPs and 5 main grade EPs. The service is within a city council. The Educational Psychology Service is a part of the LA-commissioned service (including statutory duties such as EHCN Assessments) and a traded service delivered to schools and the Virtual School (offering a range of work dependent on the service users' requirements).

The researcher recruited participants by sending out emails to all team members in the Educational Psychology Service with information sheets about the research (See Appendix 6.1 for the information sheets). The researcher provided a summary of the research (details contained in the information sheets) to all EPs in the service's team during a whole team meeting. For those who showed an interest (either by email or in person), the researcher offered to have a more detailed discussion about the procedure should potential participants have any questions or worries about the project. One participant took up this offer. Their concern was around their lack of experience with Systemic Working; however, after discussing systemic practice more generally, they decided that they did have experiences that would be relevant to the research question, and the interview went ahead. 1 of the 5 interviews was intended as a pilot study. Following the interview, no changes were made to the interview schedule, and consent was gained to use the data in the final analysis.

Participants needed to meet the following inclusion eligibility criteria:

· Must be a qualified EP, trainee EP or assistant EP at the time of the research taking place

· Must have engaged in a piece of work where they felt their practice led to organisational change

· Willing and able to commit to the research process (45-minute semi-structured interview)

The researcher recruited five participants. Four were fully qualified, and the remaining EP was a Year 2 trainee EP at the time of the interview. The number of years of experience in the role of a (T)EP ranged from 2 years to 25 years. One of the EPs had not completed the doctorate and completed a master's programme, as was the requirement before 2006. All participants were female. Whilst no attempt was made to sample EPs that would be representative of the demographic profile of the profession, the gender imbalance does reflect a national trend within the profession (Atfield et al., 2023; DfE, 2019).

3.2.4.4 Semi-structured interviews

In qualitative research, semi-structured interviews are the most common data collection method (Willig, 2013). This data collection method seemed appropriate as it fitted within the epistemological orientation. Contextualism places importance on individual voice, experience, and perspectives. The researcher wanted the data collection method to allow for rich narratives which had the ability to capture the unique perspectives and nuances of EP experiences. The questions used were open-ended to allow for this. Semi-structured interviews can aid participants in articulating their own experiences in their own terms and expressions. The interviewing allowed the researcher to establish a rapport with participants and respond flexibly and organically to their opinions, views, experiences, beliefs, and values, rather than sticking to a more rigid questioning style.

The use of focus groups as a data collection method was also considered. However, the research question lends itself to exploring in detail individual EPs experiences and reflections. A focus group methodology would not have been able to capture the nuance and detail of individual experience. Smith (2008) echoes this and cautions that researchers should consider that focus group methodology may undermine the eliciting of detailed subjective experiences within a group situation. They consider that

this undermining is likely due to time constraints, inhibition around personal disclosures, and potential group conformity could lead to a reduction in diversity of results and be less likely to elicit first-hand experiences. The potential for both inhibition and conformity may have been significant if the researcher had opted for a focus group design, as the participating EPs were colleagues, some knowing each other for many years. They, therefore, may have been more inclined to demonstrate a uniform position on the questions asked. Individual interviews aimed to provide an emotionally safe space and a relaxed experience for participants to explore their thoughts, feelings, and practices. This was done through active listening, using verbal and non-verbal prompts, summarising, empathic listening and responding (Egan, 2013). The aim of the semi-structured interviews was to understand the experiences as perceived by the participant and not to generalise responses.

Semi-structured interviews permit the exploration of participants' perspectives, aligning with a contextualist epistemology and critical realist ontology that recognises multiple interpretations of an underlying reality.

The questions used as a structure for the interviews are appended (Appendix 6.2) and were shared with participants before their interview. The interview schedule was created by the researcher according to the research question and was trialled in a pilot interview. The initial question was designed to be broad and general to allow participants to talk at length without being led and in the direction of their choosing (Smith et al*.,* 2021), with the rest of the questions being open-ended. All participants were given the option of having the interviews face-to-face or via Microsoft Teams; all participants chose to have their interviews face-to-face in the service's office building. All interviews lasted between 45 and 60 minutes, and all participants were interviewed once. All interviews were audio recorded and saved securely, and deleted once transcribed.

3.2.4.5 Role of the Researcher

Reflexivity is thought to be central to and a defining feature of qualitative research design (Finlay, 2002). Finlay and Gough (2008) defined reflexivity as habitually reflecting on the researcher's anticipations, choices, activities, and assumptions throughout the research process. Being reflexive and explicitly thinking about the researcher's standpoint hopes to highlight where aspects of the research is further enabled, excluded and/or closed off (Wilkinson, 1988). Therefore, viewing the role of

a subjective researcher as helpful to the research process rather than a limitation of the study (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The researcher brings with them experiences which relate to the research question they ask. As a trainee Educational Psychologist, the research is pertinent to their current and future roles. Prior to being a trainee EP, the researcher had the role of SENCO and class teacher in a mainstream primary school. In this role, the researcher met EPs and has since reflected that EP involvement to support the school and researcher in some systemic/organisational issues/problems would have been valuable, but for reasons not explicitly explored here, the work was not conducted. This is important because the researcher had experiences and formed ideas/perceptions of the EP role in systemic work before the thesis had even begun. It would be impossible for the author to detach themselves from their experiences and become an objective researcher, especially given their history. Instead, the researcher attempted to be mindful of the impact of their beliefs, experience, opinions, and perceptions on the study throughout the research. To encourage reflexivity and in being self-questioning, thoughtful and interrogating their positions, values and practices, the researcher adopted a 'reflective research journal,' which has been distributed throughout this thesis in the form of 'Reflection boxes.' The journal was started at the beginning stages of the research, but after the literature review was written and after the reflexive TA was chosen.

Whilst the journal has been a helpful tool in inspiring reflexivity, it is important to acknowledge that a full insight into the researcher's (or anyone's) positioning is very rarely possible (Finlay, 2002). One of the reasons for this is that being reflexive is never final or fixed and forever moulding (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The research journal in the current thesis does not claim to evidence complete self-awareness, but an attempt to think more deeply about the position of the researcher and how that has impacted the evolution of the research. Other support for reflexivity included university tutorials and placement supervision sessions.

3.2.4.6 Data Analysis

The researcher used a six-phase reflexive thematic analysis (TA) (Braun & Clarke, 2022) to analyse the data sets. For this research, a data set refers to individual interviews, and the data corpus refers to the entire data collected for this research. A description of the TA process is detailed in the following sections.

3.2.5 Thematic Analysis

3.2.5.1 Rationale for choosing Thematic Analysis

It is important to justify chosen analytical approaches in the field of research. It could be considered good practice to discuss the researcher's process of screening and rejecting/accepting different analytical methods. Therefore, the researcher briefly discusses Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), Grounded Theory (GT) and Discourse Analysis (DA) and explains why TA was chosen over these approaches. However, it was recognised by the researcher from an early stage that a journey to find the perfect analysis method for one particular research question is rare (Braun & Clarke, 2021, 2022). It is possible that the researcher could have chosen any of these other methodologies, so long as a sound justification was provided and on condition that their approach matched the researcher's epistemological and ontological standpoint.

Braun and Clarke's (2022) six-phase TA was chosen after consideration of other qualitative data analysis methods. IPA was considered as it is an increasingly widely used data analysis approach (McLeod, 2011) and, in many ways, is similar to TA (Braun & Clarke, 2021). It was thought of as an appropriate analysis methodology for the research question as it reflected individual experiences and recognised the potential partisanship or subjectivity of the researcher in understanding the data. However, it was ruled out as IPA has a focus on exploring the unique features of individual cases/interviews and is less able to generalise across the data set. TA focuses on identifying themes across the data set. This is beneficial to the current study as it allows analysis to be more applicable to the host Educational Psychology Service. Whilst the aim is not to generalise findings to a wider audience, the researcher felt that it was important for the findings and discussions to be pertinent to the service as a key stakeholder. GT was also considered but then rejected as it was not the researcher's aim to develop a grounded theory from the analysis of the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2021). In addition, with the restraints of time (being an assessment towards a three-year doctorate in Applied Educational Psychology), reflexive TA (whilst not quick) can be faster than a GT project completed thoroughly (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Finally, (pattern-based) DA was deliberated; however, it was excluded due to the researcher being new to qualitative research. TA is process-led, and Braun and Clarke (2022) offer practical guidance for completing the process. Whereas DA is a less concrete method of analysis, often based on ideas and concepts. There has been

guidance provided (Willig, 2013, for example), but this was difficult to grasp. In addition to the researcher's concerns regarding their ability to carry out DA rigorously, the primary focus of this study was not on the fundamental effects of language (e.g., subject positions), but rather on understanding participants' experiences and the meanings they ascribe to them. As such, DA was not deemed appropriate, given its emphasis on language as the primary site of meaning-making.

Thematic Analysis was therefore nominated as the most fitting analytical method for this thesis. TA is a qualitative approach which aims for a rich understanding of phenomena to be co-constructed between the researcher and the participants (or co-researchers) in line with a contextualist epistemology (Braun & Clarke, 2021, 2022). Since TA is not specifically aligned with a particular theoretical framework, the researcher felt that this flexibility would allow their own standpoint to be healthily applied to the method. The ontological stance taken in this research was critical realism, which assumes that while a real world exists, our access to it is mediated by language, interpretation and context. The researcher was mindful that the participants and researcher would influence each other, and that the researcher's assumptions, beliefs and values would influence (both consciously and unconsciously) the facilitation of the interviews and the interpretation of the data. This was particularly pertinent as the researcher was a trainee EP in the host service and had a previous role as SENCO and class teacher, with experience of interacting with EPs.

Reflexive Thematic Analysis allowed for the researcher to reflect on their own subjectivity and to consider its influence on the study.

3.2.5.1.1 Variations of reflective TA

Since there is no singular way to conduct reflexive TA, there were multiple decisions to be made (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Specifically, Braun and Clarke (2022) draw researchers' attention to orientation to data (inductive ↔ deductive), focus of meaning (semantic ↔ latent) and qualitative framework (experiential ↔ critical). Braun and Clarke (2022) recognised that these poles are not binary and that it could be helpful to think of them as sliding scales from pole to pole. These poles will now be discussed in relation to the current research.

3.2.5.1.2 Orientation to data

Braun and Clarke (2022) conceptualise 'orientation to data' as the researcher being able to take an inductive or deductive approach to their research analysis. Inductive

analysis is driven by the data, coding, and theming data away from the influence of previous research's constructs, models, and concepts. From a critical realist stance, it is assumed that there is an objective reality, but our understanding of it is shaped through participants' subjective experiences and meaning-making processes. An inductive analysis approach supports the exploration of how participants interpret and articulate aspects of that reality through language. Reflexive TA takes an inductive approach to data analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Braun and Clarke (2022) report deductive analysis to be opposite, where the evidence base drives the analysis and lends a 'lens' through which to see the data. Sitting in a positivist paradigm, researchers would attempt to 'fit' their data into the truths and reality that empirical data has found. Coding reliability is an example of deductive analysis beginning by generating themes (based on reading the research base) and then coding data to identify which theme the data belongs to (Terry et al., 2017). Since the current study adopts a critical realist stance, the researcher's contextualist epistemology, which holds that individuals construct meaning based on their experiences and social contexts, aligns with an inductive approach to analysis. Reflexive thematic analysis (TA) was selected because it supports the exploration of subjective experiences without being limited by pre-existing theoretical frameworks.

While coding and theming were conducted inductively, the researcher also recognised the value of integrating relevant literature during the theme development and discussion phases. This approach allowed theoretical insights to enrich the interpretation of the data without steering the analysis away from its inductive foundations.

As Braun and Clarke (2022) highlight, inductive and deductive approaches are not binary but represent a continuum. The researcher, therefore, positioned themselves toward the inductive end of this continuum, consistent with the flexibility afforded by critical realism.

3.2.5.1.3 Focus of meaning

Reflexive TA can have a focus on semantic analysis or latent analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Semantic analysis is referred to as exploring the meaning of the data at a more surface, manifest or explicit level versus latent analysis as exploring meaning at more implicit, hidden, or underlying meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Since critical realism

takes an uncomplicated view of the relationship between language and truth or reality, the research adopted a semantic analysis of the interview transcripts, as it did not hope to read between the lines or make inferences.

3.2.5.1.4 Qualitative framework

The researcher considered that a more experiential qualitative framework would be appropriate for the current study. Braun and Clarke (2022 pg. 10) view experiential research as a process that aims to 'capture and explore people's own perspectives and understandings.' Experiential research aims to validate participants' interpretations and experiences rather than using the qualitative data to analyse something else (Braun & Clarke, 2013). A critical qualitative framework is 'where the analysis focuses on interrogating and unpacking meaning around the topic or issue.' Since the researcher aims to understand participants' experiences and explore the language in the data at a largely semantic level, an exploratory design aligned with the research question.

3.2.5.2 Summary of Reflexive TA approach adopted

The researcher adopted a Reflexive TA data analysis approach. Sitting within a critical realist theoretical framework/paradigm, an exploratory approach with a focus on a semantic understanding of language was used. The researcher intended to take an inductive approach to the analysis, with some elements of a deductive approach introduced in the later stages of analysis.

3.2.6 The process of Reflexive Thematic Analysis

Braun and Clarke (2006) explain that their TA analysis approach involves a six-phase process.

· Familiarisation

· Coding

· Generating initial themes

· Developing and reviewing themes

· Refining, defining, and naming themes

· Writing-up

Reflexive TA guidance offers recommendations and direction and not fixed rules which the researcher must abide by. For example, researchers might not, and perhaps

should not, follow each phase in a linear order (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The authors reiterate that the progress does not always mean moving up a phase; it may move backwards or sideways as the researcher makes mistakes, has additional reflections and wrestles with the data. The six-phase process is designed to encourage the researcher to delve deeper into their data and understand the data in ways that differ from how they were initially understood at the data collection phase (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Familiarisation – as the name of this phase indicates, the researcher used this phase to become deeply familiar with the data. This meant the researcher listened to all audio recordings of their interviews at least once and transcribed the data. Manually transcribing the data (instead of using a transcription service or computer programme) meant the researcher submerged themselves into the data. Following transcription, each data set was read and re-read, and notes were made in the reflexive journal when analytical insights occurred.

Coding – The researcher went through the data sets in a systematic and detailed way. The researcher identified segments of the data that appeared meaningful, interesting, and relevant and applied code labels to them. The labels did not intend to summarise the data but provide an ‘analytic take’ on the data. Coding was done at a semantic level, meaning coding was intended to be explicit and surface-level.

Generating initial themes – the phase of the process allowed the researcher to start to identify patterns across the data set. The researcher compiled clusters of codes which had a shared core concept or meaning (see Appendix 6.9)

Developing and reviewing themes – here, the researcher wanted to assess the ‘fit’ of their developing themes with the data. To do this, they went back to the full data set and wondered if the theme made sense in relation to the coded extracts and the full dataset. The researcher checked that the theme highlighted the most important patterns across the data in relation to the research question. Revision of the themes was required. Some themes seemed to naturally merge, whilst others were split into new themes. The researcher considered the relationship between themes, the current evidence base, researcher experience and the wider context of the research (Braun & Clarke, 2022). See Appendix 6.10 for the thematic map generated at this time.

At this point, the analysis was shared with the researcher's university tutor. Through discussion, it was decided that the themes, as presented, were not 'close enough' to the data. Interpretation of the data had become too far removed from the transcripts, and a re-analysis was thought to be the best course of action.

The researcher went back to the raw data and began again at the coding phase.

Coding - A detailed and systematic approach was adopted during coding. Each transcript was examined line-by-line and word-by-word, with codes written adjacent to highlighted segments of text (see Appendix 6.11). These codes offered an initial analytic take on the content, focusing on semantically explicit meanings (Braun & Clarke, 2022). This process was repeated for each dataset, and all transcripts were revisited on multiple occasions to ensure consistency and depth of engagement. Codes were grounded in the data and reflected recurring ideas, experiences, or concepts relevant to the research aims. See Appendix 6.12 showing codes with the raw data.

Generating Initial Themes- Following the coding phase, all codes were compiled, printed, and physically arranged on a large surface to enable visual clustering. This process was conducted for each data set individually before being repeated using all codes from across the dataset. Clusters of codes were grouped together based on shared meanings or conceptual similarities, forming candidate themes. For example, codes such as *"staff feel safe"*, *"trusted relationships"*, and *"emotional openness"* were grouped under an early working theme of *relationships*. The clustering process was cyclical, returning to the data repeatedly and informed by ongoing reflexive journaling and supervisory dialogue. See appendix 6.13.

Developing and Reviewing Themes- Initial themes were then reviewed for coherence and fit with the original transcripts and associated coded extracts. This recursive process involved returning to the full data set to ensure that themes reflected key patterns across participants' accounts and remained grounded in the research question. Through this stage, some themes were merged where overlap was evident, while others were split for greater clarity. For example, an initial distinction between *systemic thinking* and *leading with psychology* was reconsidered. It was determined that these ideas were interwoven in the way participants discussed applying

psychological principles within complex systems and were therefore synthesised into a single theme.

Refining, Defining and Naming Themes - At this point, three overarching themes were established: *within psychologically safe relationships*, *leading with psychology*, and *opportunity and time to embed change at different levels of the system*. Each theme was reviewed to ensure conceptual clarity and internal coherence. See appendix 6.14. The researcher developed succinct summaries that captured the central organising concept of each theme and selected names that reflected their content and scope. Reflexive consideration was given to the boundaries between themes and their relevance to the broader aims of the research. For example, *leading with psychology* was conceptualised as encompassing both the application of psychological thinking and systemic thinking/practice, justifying the integration of related ideas under a single theme. This led to the generation of a revised set of themes that more accurately reflected the core narratives in the data.

Following the initial write-up, further reflection took place after further supervisory comment and discussion. It was concluded that the three overarching themes could be better understood if supported by subthemes. These subthemes were developed to articulate more specific patterns within each main theme, hopefully helping the reader navigate the complexity and nuance of the findings. The researcher felt that the inclusion of subthemes strengthened the analytical clarity of the thesis and aligned with the reflexive nature of the approach. See Appendix 6.15 showing all codes within their themes and subthemes.

3.2.7 Ethical Considerations

All aspects of the research adhered to the ‘Code of Ethics and Conduct’ published by the British Psychological Society (BPS, 2018) as well as the ‘Code of Human Research Ethics’ (BPS, 2021) and the Health Care Professional Council (HCPC, 2016) published guidance on ‘Standard of conduct, performance, and ethics’ which the researcher referred to. An ethics application was submitted to the Ethics Committee of the School of Psychology, Nottingham University, in September 2022, and approval was received in October 2022.

It is necessary that ethical considerations occur throughout all stages of research, from conception through to writing up and submitting/publishing, as it is possible and likely that ethical dilemmas can arise at any stage (Willig, 2013).

3.2.7.1 Valid Consent

It was important to the researcher that EPs within the host Educational Psychology Service did not feel an obligation to participate. The structure of the service is such that the team of EPs is relatively small (13 EPs: trainee, assistant, fully qualified, senior, and principal). Requesting a minimum of 6 participants from a 'small pool' may therefore have felt pressurising for some members of staff. In addition, most potential participants had also completed their own doctoral research and may have had different experiences of the ease of recruiting for their own projects. The 'Code of Human Research Ethics' guidance states that 'Researchers should ensure that every person from whom data is gathered for the purposes of research consents freely and voluntarily to participation, having been given sufficient information to enable them to make an informed choice.' The researcher wanted to reiterate the message that participation in their study was not compulsory. This was made clear on the information sheet. In addition, the researcher presented their research project in a whole team meeting. When presenting the research, the researcher also reiterated the message that EPs should only volunteer if they had an interest in talking to the researcher about their experiences of systemic practice and/or wanted to contribute to the evidence base in this area. Following the team meeting, an email was sent out to all possible potential participants, which contained the Information Sheet (Appendix 6.1), Consent Form (Appendix 6.4) and Privacy Notice (Appendix 6.5). It was hoped that the information sheet would enable participants to feel fully informed about the data gathering, data analysis and data presentation process so that they could make an informed choice regarding their participation. The information sheet also made clear that should a participant provide consent, this consent could be withdrawn at any point up until the researcher reached the data analysis stage (March 2023). Therefore, should participants feel a sense of regret or worry about what was discussed in their interview, their data could be destroyed, and consent withdrawn.

3.2.7.2 Confidentiality and anonymity

As with all research, confidentiality is a core ethical consideration. The BPS (2021) Code of Human Research Ethics writes,

> *'Participants in psychological research have a right to expect that information they provide will be treated confidentially and, if published, will not be identifiable as theirs'. (pg. 21)*

The researcher anonymised all information that could breach confidentiality as directed by the Data Protection Act (2018). This included names and any information that may identify participants. In addition, information about the demographics of the participants and where the service was located was limited. It was also a concern to the researcher that EPs (participants) may disclose information which may compromise the anonymity and identity of the staff, parents, children and young people within the local authority as they reflected on their work. Therefore, all participants were reminded about safeguarding and keeping identifying information anonymous. In some cases, however, in the flow of conversation, some names of staff and school names were mentioned. The researcher anonymised this data at the time of transcription.

The interviews were audio-recorded and securely stored on an encrypted laptop. The transcriptions did not use any names; instead, colour coding the interviewer and respondent/participant. Once the transcriptions were complete and checked, the audio recordings were destroyed. Participants were made aware that no names would be used in the write-up of the findings.

3.2.7.3 Sharing of the data

Anonymised data was shared with the researcher's academic tutor from the University of Nottingham and their placement supervisor (this was made clear to participants in the information sheet). In addition, participants were also made aware that anonymised data could be shared with a regulatory authority in the event of a suspected ethical breach or academic misconduct.

3.2.7.4 Participant well-being

The BPS (2021) guidelines call for all researchers to abide by the principle of 'maximising benefit and minimising harm'. It was important to the researcher that their involvement with participants did not lead to the possibility of unwittingly causing distress. Given that participants were invited to share their experiences of working as an EP, this may have generated possible feelings of unease, especially when comparing their experiences to what they may believe to be 'best practice' or what the literature describes as 'best practice.' This may have caused feelings of

embarrassment or that their work was not of the highest standard. To mitigate against these potential uncomfortable feelings and protect participants' well-being, I made it explicit that participants were able to think about their experiences beforehand and select an experience they felt best demonstrated their practice. Participants were aware of the researcher's planned questions prior to the interview and, therefore, had the opportunity to think about their answers and feel more prepared for the interview. During the interviews, (as well as participants being able to leave the room and/or withdraw from the experiment at any point – up until data analysis), the researcher could stop the discussion at any point should it become obvious that any participant was feeling distressed. The researcher checked in with the participants, offered emotional support and reminded them of their rights to withdraw. In addition, the participant's line manager (in most cases, this was the Senior EP or Principal EP) and I planned to contact participants after the discussions to offer emotional/professional support should this be required. As well as these precautions, the researcher also took steps to ensure the interview felt relaxed and informal to put participants at ease. This was largely done through questioning style, summarising, bond language, and recognising how interviews can feel very untypical and unusual compared to the day-to-day activities of EPs. Informal feedback (unprompted comments following the interview) indicated that participants did not feel overly stressed during interviews, and that they enjoyed sharing experiences and reflecting back on work they had already completed.

3.2.7.5 Researcher's dual role as practitioner and researcher

Conducting research within the Educational Psychology Service, where the researcher completed a placement and subsequently secured employment, presented various professional, ethical, and methodological challenges. The dual role of practitioner-researcher introduced potential tensions relating to power, trust, and boundaries (Berger, 2015; Gair, 2012). These tensions were further complicated by the fact that two participants held senior positions within the service, one was the researcher's placement supervisor and held the role of Senior EP, and the other was the Principal EP, who later became the researcher's line manager. Such pre-existing professional relationships created the potential for power dynamics to influence both data collection and interpretation. Participants may have modified their responses to present themselves or the service in a favourable light, either consciously or

unconsciously. Similarly, the researcher had to remain mindful of the possibility of interpretive bias, such as the risk of highlighting positive aspects of the service due to a desire for continued employment or to maintain professional relationships (Greene, 2014).

Although ethical approval was obtained and informed consent secured, the potential for participants to perceive an obligation to participate, given their hierarchical positions, introduced additional complexity (British Psychological Society [BPS], 2021). Recognising this, the researcher engaged in ongoing reflexive practice, recording positionality, assumptions, and emotional reactions to the data in a reflexive journal (Braun & Clarke, 2021). This critical reflexivity enabled the researcher to acknowledge how their 'insider' status, while offering contextual understanding and rapport, also posed risks such as losing analytical distance (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009).

Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained through the removal of identifying features during transcription, and pseudonyms were used (Asselin, 2003). This aimed to further the ethical responsibility to handle participants' information with sensitivity and transparency. Ultimately, the researcher had to carefully balance professional integrity, research ethics, and relational responsibilities. The use of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021) proved particularly valuable in managing the complexities of researcher subjectivity and positioning, allowing for an approach to the data that balanced critical analysis with empathy.

4 Analysis and Discussion

4.1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to present the findings of a Reflexive Thematic Analysis (TA) that was carried out to answer the research question 'How do Educational Psychologists facilitate organisational change?' The themes will also be discussed in relation to the literature and theory presented in the previous chapters. The focus will then move on to address the methodological limitations of the research, including personal reflexivity. The chapter will then conclude with the consideration of potential implications for practice and possible suggestions for future research.

4.1.1 Dataset overview

Table 5

Dataset Overview – Key Characteristics of Work Carried out by Participants

EP name	System they worked with	How their work came about	What the EP did	Nature of the work	Outcome of work
Emily	Mainstream secondary school	Local authority initiative to meet the SEMH needs of looked-after children	Training, reflective conversations, individual caseworks	Emotion coaching and relational/trauma informed practice	More trauma-informed practice across the setting; ongoing potential for changing the setting's behaviour policy to a 'relational' policy
Megan	Mainstream primary school	Three individual pieces of casework where all the children had similar needs	Reflective conversations facilitating systemic thinking; training	Matching the curriculum to children and young people's strengths and needs	Nurture provision; forest school; continuous provision in Year 1; staff who are prepared and good at thinking systemically
Grace	Mainstream primary school	Individual casework for one child	Coaching; therapeutic letters	Supporting the staff's practice and emotional well-being within a small group classroom to meet the needs of their children	Teaching staff's practice was more facilitative of their children's strengths and needs; senior leaders and parents felt more confident in their staff's competence to meet need; the child remained at the setting
Serena	Mainstream secondary school	Similar needs presenting in individual caseworks	Training, workshops and facilitation of systemic thinking consultations	Supporting children with executive functioning differences	Quality first teaching more supportive of children with executive functioning differences and a difference in staff perspective on children's behaviour
Lydia	Local authority	Local authority initiative around 'crime reduction'	Developed and delivered training to secondary schools across the local authority; pre and post questionnaire; trained and	Reduce bullying rates across the local authority and improve children and young people's feeling of safety within their settings	Young people felt safer and more supported; staff had a better understanding of bullying

			helped facilitate peer counsellors		

4.2 Themes and Subthemes

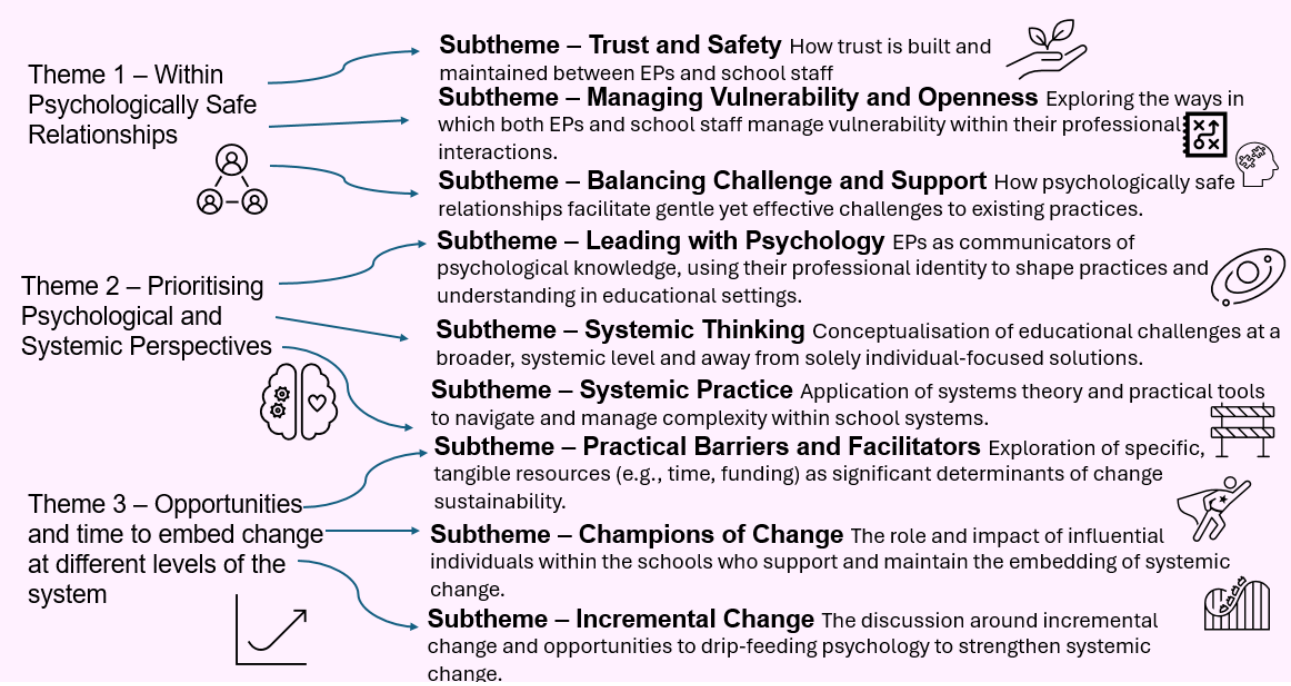
In answer to the research question: three themes were developed: Within Psychologically Safe Relationships, Prioritising Psychological and Systemic Perspectives and Opportunities and time to embed change at different levels of the system. Within each theme, three subthemes were highlighted, see Thematic Map below.

Reflection Box	No sub-themes?
I debated whether or not I should have subthemes within my three themes. When I completed my first analysis of the data, I ended up with three themes with subthemes within them (see appendix 6.10). With the current data analysis, I tried to write some sub-themes as I thought it would help the reader make sense of my data and my analysis more easily, however I found it more difficult this time. The process of coding, generating initial themes and refining my themes didn't naturally produce subthemes as easily. Some sub-themes were easier than others, for example I thought one of my sub-themes within my 'psychologically safe relationships' could have been 'relational risk', but other sub-themes weren't as easy to define, as there was overlap and complexity had to define within a sub-theme and doing so made my data fragmented. Braun and Clake emphasise the importance of capturing the complexity and richness of qualitative data. They argue that sub-themes can sometime narrow the focus too much, potentially missing broader patterns and the nuanced interplay between different aspects of a theme. Subthemes might also encourage a more rigid, hierarchical organisational of the data that contradicts the flexible and organic nature of reflexive thematic analysis. Therefore, sub-theme was disregarded to ensure a holistic understanding of the data. Edit 10/4/25 However, upon further reflection, support via supervision, discussions during my VIVA as well as taking time away from my data and coming back with a fresh mindset, I realise that sub-themes would help capture the complexity and nuance within my data as well as helping with readability and clarity. Developing the sub-	

themes came with some challenge as there is natural overlap between subthemes and sometime themes. However, it is hoped that the subthemes remain fluid enough to account for overlap, ensuring they enhanced rather than constrained thematic meaning.

Figure 3

Thematic Map - Illustrating the Core Themes and Subthemes Identified in the Analysis



4.2.1 Theme 1: Within Psychologically Safe Relationships

4.2.1.1 Subtheme - Trust and Safety

All participants talked about the relationships they had with the school system and individuals within it. The theme is particularly strong in Serena and Megan's data. They described a reciprocal relationship with key members of the system, in which they enjoyed working within the system, talking to staff members, and seeing children.

> Serena: *'I've got a really good relationship with that SENCO'*
>
> Megan: *'I think we are very friendly, but we're not friends. We have a good professional relationship'.*
>
> Grace: '*I already had like a pre-existing relationship with the school even [though] it wasn't my school because I was an assistant'*

Participants also perceived that the members of the system also enjoyed and valued the EP's input. From a Family Systems Theory (FST) perspective, these relational dynamics reflect relational reciprocity and potential relational influence (Kerr & Bowen, 1988), where mutual shaping of behaviour and shared emotional engagement are helpful when aiming to facilitate change within a system.

> Megan: '*I think, well I know because she's told me, that me being there has been a big part of that shift in her that she now feels like a competent, confident professional.'*

Lydia's data highlighted that it can be difficult to work systemically when there is no relationship.

> Lydia: *'they just, I think they conceptualising it seem, they seemed to struggle but I didn't know them, they didn't know me.'*

The findings of the current research illustrate that EPs felt a psychologically safe relationship with key members of the setting's staff was a facilitating factor for organisational change. EPs defined a safe relationship as 'being attuned', 'knowing when to challenge' metaphorically 'hand holding' with 'trust' as it's foundation. A psychologically safe relationship enabled EPs to 'challenge', 'contain' and 'wonder out-loud' and the recipient was able to accept feedback and 'think differently', without feeling 'criticised' and whilst still feeling valued and empowered to pursue change. This balance reflects Bowen's (1978) notion of 'differentiation of self', wherein EPs maintained professional clarity and emotional stability while remaining connected to school staff. Their ability to 'wonder out loud' without over-identifying with staff anxieties or retreating from the relationship demonstrates a well-differentiated stance that supports both containment and challenge.

Literature has attempted to define psychological safety, often rooted in the work of Schein and Bennis (1965), who suggest that psychological safety is the extent to which a person can feel self-assured and secure in their capacity to accomplish change. Later, Kahn (1990) extended their work by defining psychological safety within a team, organisation, or group of people. Kahn suggests that an outcome of psychological

safety is when an individual or group of people feel comfortable working without fear of negative consequences to their status, career, or self-image. Individuals need to be supported to feel trusted and have trust in others. Newman (et al., 2017) systematic literature review concluded that psychological safety is an essential ingredient for numerous possible workplace outcomes.

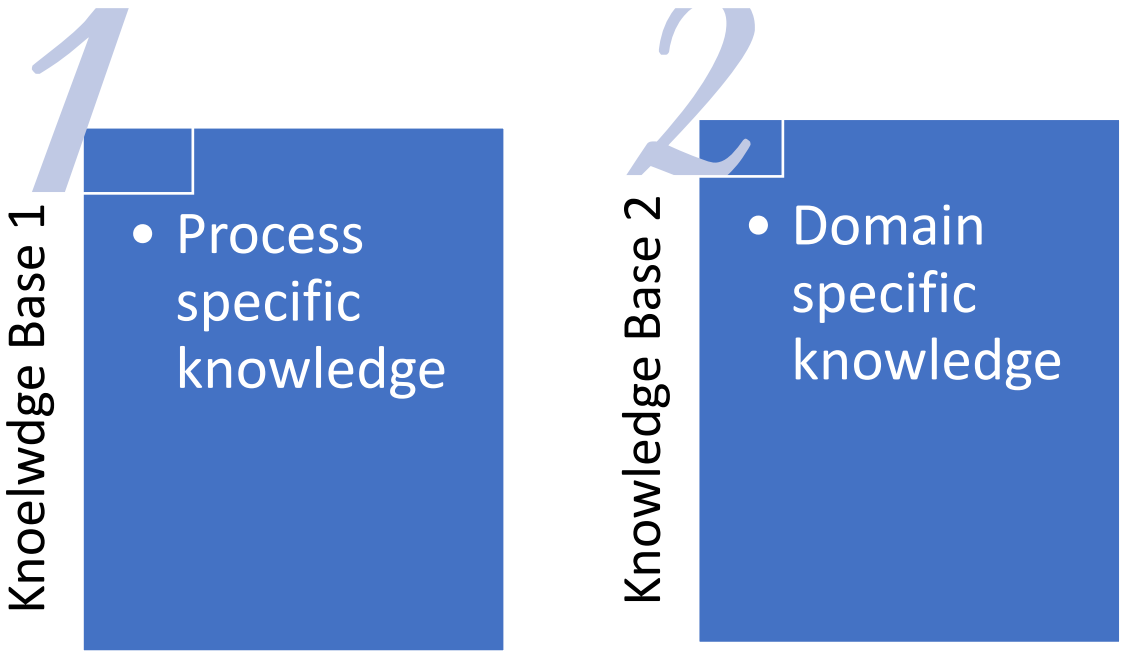
Process consultation, closely associated with the work of Schein (1988), is an approach that has psychological safety at the core. The model stresses the importance of the relationship between the consultee and consultant as well as the consultee's behaviour, mindset, feelings, and beliefs. As a consultant, the EP's role is not one of expert advice-giving, solving the problem for the consultee, but aims to encourage consultees to use their knowledge and experience to solve problems for themselves. The EP models and asks questions that aim to aid consultees in exploring and better defining problems (Bozic & Carter, 2002). Participants seemed to allude to taking this approach in their interviews.

> *Megan: I don't have the answers. But I think I can contain them and together we might not come to an answer, but we'll come to a better place of understanding.*

Process consultation is an indirect form of service delivery where the skills of the consultant are of paramount importance. The knowledge base of the consultant is also important, as they need to be informed about their areas of expertise, but also be able to communicate with the consultee in such a way that they will feel able and willing to work in particular ways that will benefit their pupils (clients). West and Idol (1987) have provided a useful conceptual framework, which attempts to clarify work in this area, and the model is shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4

The Two Knowledge Bases Identified by West and Idol (1987)



West and Idol (1987) differentiate between two key knowledge bases in the consultant-consultee dynamic. The first knowledge base (Knowledge Base 1) underlies the interactions between the consultant and the consultee, while the second knowledge base (Knowledge Base 2) informs the advice, support, techniques, and insights that are discussed and later applied to benefit the child, class, or school. This distinction is particularly useful for understanding the nature of consultant-consultee relationships. It offers a framework to examine the degree of equality in these interactions and to assess whether the exchanges are coordinated, cooperative, or communicative (Engestrom, 1999). When the consultant draws from Knowledge Base 1, professionals can collaborate on an equal footing, each contributing their unique expertise and experience (Hanko, 2016). The findings from the current research suggest that the relationship between EPs and school staff fosters effective communication and collaboration. Furthermore, this collaborative approach helps create a psychologically safe environment, paving the way for future work.

Nolan and Moreland (2014) explored the process of EP consultation, analysing the discourse of collaborative EP consultation, where the EP is aiming to forge a psychologically safe relationship and when utilising their knowledge base. Nolan and Moreland (2014) found that EPs used seven skills during consultation: (1) directed collaboration, (2) empathy and deep listening, (3) questioning, wondering and challenging, (4) focusing and refocusing, (5) summarising and reformulating, (6)

suggesting and explaining, and (7) restating outcomes and offering follow up. These skills were alluded to in the data as being facilitative of forging a psychologically safe relationship and were put more explicitly by Megan

> *Megan; 'It's not 'just' being friendly. It's more than that isn't it? It's about um, um, mentalising with somebody, um, understanding their point of view, accepting their point of view, starting from their needs.*

Megan used the term 'mentalising'. Mentalisation can be viewed from a neuroscientific perspective (Frith, 2007) and psychological perspective (Bateman & Fonagy, 2016). The term refers to an individual's ability to form imaginative mental activity about others and oneself. When mentalising, an individual will perceive and interpret human behaviour in terms of mental states, e.g. beliefs, desires, and reasons (Allen, 2006). In informal terms, mentalisation refers to the capacity to "hold mind in mind" (Allen, 2006). Although research in psychotherapy, along with much of the literature, hypothesises that mentalisation is a skill that can enhance and deepen a relationship, making it feel safer (Bevington et al., 2013). This is because mentalisation is born in the context of attachment; attachment and mentalising are loosely coupled systems (Slade et al, 2005). Mentalising with another person helps them feel that their talking partner can see the world from their perspective. Mentalisation is a generic way of establishing "epistemic trust"[4] (Fisher et al., 2022; Fonagy & Adshead, 2014). Individual subjectivity being understood is a necessary precondition to learn about the world, become open to new perspectives and challenge established schemas. Such processes align with FST's conceptualisation of emotional systems, where the ability to perceive and reflect on emotional processes is essential to navigating systemic dynamics.

Participants alluded to their use of mentalisation

> *Selena: I think she thought…*
> *Emily: I think it also captured their interest.*
> *Grace: they felt….*

[4] Epistemic trust is defined by Fonagy and Allison in 2014 as an individual's willingness to consider new knowledge from another person as trustworthy, generalizable, and relevant to the self (p 4)

Lydia: I don't think … people really understood…

Mentalisation offers an 'easy to train' approach which can be applied to practical scenarios (Bevington et al., 2013). Bevington et al. (2015) suggest that an individual's ability to mentalise with others can impact their interpersonal relationships, potentially indicating its importance to the current theme.

Fonagy et al. (2003) hypothesised that understanding another person's thoughts and feelings can foster connection between people. They propose, therefore, that mentalising plays a key role in a 'therapeutic relationship'. This is in contrast to cognitive behavioural perspectives, where the therapeutic relationship reflects interpersonal schemas, childhood attachments and emotional processing and the need for validation and compassion (Moorey & Lavender, 2018). In addition, it is recognised that mentalising is 'imaginative' as the individual is required to imagine what others may be thinking/feeling (Fonagy, 2006). Therefore, should the practitioner's imaginings be inaccurate, they run the risk of limiting or negatively impacting the therapeutic relationship.

Furthermore, the concept of trust and the creation of psychologically safe relationships can potentially extend beyond individual relationships to include those between organisations or services. For example, Serena discusses how she was able to think differently about a problem (possibly taking a relational risk) due to the school's existing relationship with her and the previous EP. It seems that the SENCO, through her interactions with individual EPs, may have been building a relationship with the entire Educational Psychology Service.

Megan adds that it's possible for an individual to form a relationship with a service as a whole. She shares.

> Megan: *In fact, [SENCO name] mentioned this the other day. I think she sees our values as a team. I'm not sure if that makes sense here, but she's had [EP name] and [EP name] involved, and they didn't feel dissimilar. She viewed it as a service where our values are evident when we're out there… And even though we probably didn't do anything similar in practice, she felt like interacting with us wasn't wildly different."*

Similarly, Lydia describes her experience working with multiple schools, teachers, SENCOs, and headteachers. Although she didn't have specific relationships with individuals at these schools, it's possible to suggest that the schools developed a relationship with the service itself. This may have enabled new ways of thinking about problems, ultimately facilitating organisational change.

4.2.1.2 Subtheme - Managing Vulnerability and Openness

All participants highlighted the importance of having a systemic focus within these relationships. The EP saw their role as supporting individuals within a school to view their system systemically.

> Serena*: 'It's those meetings where you come out of school and there's a feeling that you have inside, and you think …. There's been something going on there…. It's that kind of that learning that happens from conversations, isn't it?... Not the fact that … I'm gonna go in and ask these questions, which might be curious questions in which might be facilitative of that (systemic thinking). But if you haven't got that trust and that relationship, it's not gonna grow as much.'*
>
> Grace: *'They might need an EP or another professional to hold their hand and support them [when attempting change systemically]*
>
> Emily: '*I'll be mindful of mentioning it and I've also been doing quite a lot of consultations in the school'*

The member of staff and EP are both vulnerable in this exchange as they are both without answers and solutions, which can feel uncomfortable and perhaps even risk the perception that they are not confident and competent in their job. EPs described feeling anxious about their involvement and worrying that they will be able to work in a different way than is typical. FST emphasises the emotional undercurrents of systems. Here, both EPs and staff engaged in vulnerable exchanges that allowed them to explore uncertainty, an approach that mirrors Bowen's (1978) notion of working within emotionally charged environments while maintaining clarity of professional role.

Mason (2015) suggests that professionals must foster a "not-knowing" mindset to explore uncertainties and embrace the unknown so long as a sense of safety and trust

has first been established. This, in turn, allows for appropriate risks to be taken, leading to deeper trust in the professional relationship. Megan reflects on this concept, expressing that she should have been "braver" in taking relational risks earlier if given the chance to do it over. This might suggest that the establishment of trust doesn't always require an extended period of time before risks can be taken.

Taking this step out of the SENCO and/or EP's comfort zone involves a certain level of risk, as it places professionals in a position of "not-knowing." This state requires both parties to engage with genuine curiosity, which can be unsettling for many professionals, as it challenges their sense of competence. Anderson and Goolishian (1992) discuss the "not-knowing" stance, similarly to Mason (2005). Although both authors primarily focus on family therapy and refer to "therapists" rather than "psychologists" or other professionals, the concepts are still relevant to the current research.

Anderson and Goolishian (1988) argued that a therapist should be a "respectful listener" who does not understand too quickly, if ever. They suggested that the quicker a therapist claims to understand, the less opportunity there is for true dialogue, increasing the potential for misunderstanding. Mason (2005) critiques the idea that successful practitioners must always adopt a "not-knowing" approach, pointing out that it is reductive to assume that knowing is absolutist. Anderson (1997) further acknowledged that a therapist's prior knowledge, experience, and cultural background are crucial in shaping how they build relationships with clients.

Mason (2005) also noted that while adopting a "not-knowing" stance can sometimes be limiting, as clients may perceive the professional as withholding help, expressing a clear professional opinion can also feel like taking a relational risk. He concluded that it is vital for professionals to avoid marginalising their clients' perspectives, resist jumping to absolute conclusions, and still recognise the value of their own expertise, knowledge, and experience.

4.2.1.3 Subtheme - Balancing Challenge and Support

EPs described thinking carefully about their relationship with individuals and being attuned to their feelings and needs. EPs need to take 'relational risks' when they feel confident in their relationship with the staff member and become a 'critical friend'.

Megan*: '…knowing when to challenge and when not to. And maybe that idea of um, the goldilocks principle … It's not too hot, not too cold. You want it to be just right. And I think you can only know what's just right through the relationship and kind of being attuned to whoever.'*

Grace*: I might ask some difficult questions sometimes, but I don't, it's all well… intended.*

Lydia*: which sometimes felt strange because I think they think you'll tell them what to do but this way made sure they were reflecting more um, more systemically*

Megan*: 'I'm probably more confident or more able to be that critical friend… And then I think it's about the EP being able to take relational risks within the relationship*

Emily: '*It can feel unusual, maybe too unusual for some, so you have to be careful you've got the balance right.*

Serena: *'Actually, asking if the teachers not gonna implement the, or read the report, then why have we done it that way?'*

In return, school staff may feel that they can reflect openly and without judgment in the knowledge that the EP will emotionally contain them and hold them in unconditional positive regard.

Grace: '*I don't feel like she needed to impress me, she could try some of the things in the letter with me watching, and it was okay if it didn't work because we would just talk and laugh about it at the end…They began to ask me questions, you know, like, like they'll say like they can ask me anything even things that they might not ask their head [teacher]'*

Serena: *'I guess it's that connection. It's that vulnerability.'*

Serena*: 'it almost felt like she'd let her guard down a little bit and didn't feel like she had to prove or almost have to evidence to me that she was getting everything right'*

Interviewer: *So not only can she get it wrong with you, but you can get it wrong with her* Megan*: 'yes'*

Megan*: 'If they're willing to try and put themselves out there to change, then we maybe have to meet them a little bit and hold their hand.*

All EPs mentioned they felt either nervous, under-prepared and/or apprehensive about some aspect of their organisational change work and that they needed to overcome those feelings and take a risk in pursuing the work. Participants indicated this was facilitated by the safety of a relationship either with colleagues within the service or with the SENCO/school staff.

Grace: *'I was like, "oh, can I do that?" Like, am I really like qualified enough to do this? And it took a bit of me to be like, no, I, I, I would know how to help somebody do some these, some of these things. It's a great opportunity for us to actually help them.'*

Lydia: *'I felt pressure to go to, to make sure it went well. But, um, it, you know, it did, it just needed that, uh, somebody to be supportive, you know? My principal helped me.'*

Megan: '*And I have good relationships with other members of staff in that school as well. Not just the SENCO, which is unusual I think, but is very helpful for me and for them.'*

Serena*: 'I've had these conversations with [senior EP] in supervision and it was like, oh yeah, that's a great idea'*

It took bravery on the part of the EP, and therefore could be considered as a relational risk, to view new and different work as an opportunity to develop their own and their system's practice.

Serena: 'I suppose it's willing to try things that you probably feel that you don't really know a lot about as well and just feeling brave enough to do that.'

Megan: '*To take that leap and try something different is brave'*

Grace: 'It feels brave for me'

EPs reflected on their ability to measure the impact of their work.

Serena: 'I dunno how I measure the outcome of that, apart from the fact that I haven't been asked to go in [again] and see those young people.'

All EPs chose their example because they felt their work demonstrated organisational change, but very few could quantify their influence. This made some of the EPs doubt their impact. The researcher wondered if EPs were suggesting that the relationships they had with their systems allowed them to think systemically and become a 'critical friend' without individuals feeling attacked or defensive. The researcher also wondered if those relationships helped to recognise the change.

> *Megan: 'In short-term relationships…maybe you're relying on the other person to tell you about the change, which is hard to do, isn't it? They don't always tell us … the difference that we make or recognise that it was us that made the difference.'*
>
> Emily: '*In the consultations as well, it's been a really good chance to you know see where they're at with everything and let them reflect on some of the things that have been easier or harder than expected'*

Megan and Selena reported wanting to challenge schools and individuals regarding aspects of their practice but feeling unable to do so. The researcher wonders if the relationship wasn't safe enough to allow the challenge to be accepted, and participants were concerned the member of staff would feel criticised, vulnerable, and defensive, potentially negatively impacting their existing relationship. Lydia also reflected on a piece of systemic work she had been involved in at a local authority level, which she had found particularly challenging. She explained that the professionals (mostly head teachers (HT)) didn't see the 'problem' as their responsibility and therefore were not willing to engage in discussions to help solve it. Lydia felt that part of the issue is that many schools have moved from being local authority-maintained to academies. Forming Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs) has meant that schools are more disconnected from the local authority, and the issue of 'problem ownership' has arisen. Despite Lydia's feelings of dismissal when approaching local HTs, Bristow et al. (2007) found that HTs felt that professional developmental opportunities were lacking. Further, Cooper and Woods (2017) found that the move towards academisation has seen a reduction in local authority support for HT. EPs are, arguably, well placed to provide this support and training because of their psychological knowledge base.

The local authority and MAT's disconnection in working together may also be echoed in their relationships. Given the importance placed on psychologically safe relationships within the data, the lack of a psychologically safe relationship between the local authority and MAT could, in part, potentially explain some challenges to the two organisations working systemically.

Lydia reflected that to overcome the 'ownership problem', 'warming the context' was required. Bateson (1972) has been associated with the concept of 'warming the context'; the idea that EPs cannot assume that individuals will be receptive to new initiatives and ideas without first being shown and persuaded of the possible positive outcomes. Lydia seemed to feel frustrated that her efforts to 'warm the context' had not led to any real difference in attitude from her consultees. The researcher wondered if Lydia's lack of a psychologically safe relationship with these individuals meant that structuring a conversation in a way that was facilitative of systemic thinking, collaboration and 'warming the context' was too different for them to engage in.

> *Lydia: I just got blank faces… [when I asked systemic questions such as] If we could, you know, have a city that was at free [of] bullying, what would that look like?*

Nearly all of the participants felt they needed to take risks. In some cases, the risk involved pursuing the work despite feelings of uncertainty, and all took 'relational risks. Participants reported taking relational risks by challenging practice or prompting ways to think differently about a problem. The participants in this study ventured that the psychologically safe relationships they had formed fashioned a relational safety net as they trusted their counterpart would not question their competency. However, Mason (2005) questions the need to secure a foundation of trust before taking risks, as it may be limiting. He volunteered that trust and risk-taking are mutually important and feed into each other. In other words, to gain trust, risks need to be taken.

4.2.2 Theme 2: Prioritising Psychological and Systemic Perspectives

4.2.2.1 Subtheme - Leading with Psychology

Participants viewed themselves as psychologists, with their role primarily being around 'bringing' a psychological perspective.

Emily: '…*because you can read about the psychology in a book, but that might not change something as effectively as hearing someone else talk about it'*

Participants felt they were experts in psychology, making them unique among many other professionals. They felt their role was to deliver psychology in a way that was accessible. Their knowledge of psychology helped in knowing how best to communicate their knowledge base. In the current research, 'giving psychology away' was facilitated directly, e.g. training and/or non-directly, e.g. consultations. With psychology in mind, participants had views and opinions on 'best practice' and therefore aimed to influence the system.

Emily: *'we're [the service] really passionate about emotion coaching for example… hopefully that can potentially rub off on people.'*
Megan: 'We are highly trained. Yeah. Experienced, knowledgeable professionals. We should be able to own our expertise in certain situations.'

Participants felt that their knowledge of psychology and level of training meant that some members of staff placed them in a position of power or influence.

Grace: '*the power of being an EP'.*

Others' perception of the EP role as a position of authority and influence, at times, hindered a collaborative relationship. For example, Serena noticed the SENCO she was working with withdrew from co-delivering the training despite having valuable experience.

Serena: *'I think she thought it needed to be someone different, coming into the school'*

This perhaps reflects the challenge of maintaining 'differentiation of self', holding onto one's identity and expertise while remaining open to co-construction of understanding with others in the system (Bowen, 1978).
When EPs aimed to communicate psychology in order to increase staff's knowledge of a particular area, they adopted more expert approaches to their practice, often

delivering training where they presented themselves as an expert, the holder of helpful knowledge. The individuals within the systems were in receipt of the knowledge.

Serena: *'in the training session, a lot of it was about the kind of theory'.*

As all EPs saw themselves as psychologists primarily, making psychology accessible was seen as a core function of the EP role. In 1969, Miller gave a plea to EPs across the country to 'give psychology away'. Miller recognised that the needs of young people are too vast, complex, and extensive for EPs to be able to support them individually; an alternative approach was required. This included being liberal and generous with EPs knowledge of psychology. With an increase in psychology on the minds of other professionals, it was hoped that others could apply the knowledge to their work in supporting children and young people, thus meaning EPs can focus their efforts on a smaller number of the most complex children.

As Stobie et al. (2005) demonstrate, there is a need for systems to view themselves as learning organisations and responsive to change. This cannot, though, happen by accident. A learning point for organisations is that they perhaps need to see themselves as living and evolving. Often in complex organisations, the idea of shared understanding is missing, and change just happens, which can lead to confusion and people being trapped in the comfort of old practice (Argyris, 2010). Leading with and communicating psychology was seen as a way in which EPs could influence a learning organisation. Gillham (1978) ventured that psychology has the power to bring about positive change for multiple people, emphasising the importance of approaches that expand individuals' sense of possibility rather than reinforcing limiting interpretations of their difficulties.

4.2.2.2 Subtheme – Systemic Thinking

When EPs aimed to influence *belief* in psychology, instead of influencing staff's *understanding* of psychology, they changed their approach (perhaps not necessarily consciously) to reflect a non-expert approach, equal to the individuals they were working with within the systems, often co-constructing and being collaborative in their work. This shift aligns with FST's view of systems as circular and relational. Change is not imposed but co-created, reflecting the principle of 'circular causality' and relational influence (Kerr & Bowen, 1988).

> Megan*: 'how they engage with me as their EP has changed over time. …they're open to thinking differently. … rather than like somebody [EP] going in and doing an assessment and feeding back'*

Lydia reasoned that if she had come across resistance from a key member of staff, she would have utilised more systems ideas and non-expert approaches in her practice.

One EP mentioned her efforts to *'win hearts and minds'* when working within the setting to facilitate organisational change.

> Emily: '*I feel like there's a phrase like hearts and minds or something…. Like you've got to, you've got to not only understand it but then believe actually this will be helpful and it is beneficial.'*

Reflection Box	First analysis
In my (limited) experience of working as a trainee EP, talking with practicing EPs (including conducting the interviews for the current study) within the local authority as well as trainee EPs, I was struck at how, EP's often voiced strong beliefs about ways of working and supporting children and young people (based on their knowledge of psychology). They sometimes thought of existing school practices as being outdated and unsupportive and, in some cases, even harmful. Yet when practicing consultatively and systemically wanted to adopt a non-expert approach, felt it was important to 'not have solutions or answers' and meet the school 'where they were at' to facilitate reflection and systemic thinking. I was perplexed at how these seemingly opposing perspectives were existing together. I think this is why 'winning hearts and mind' captured my interest. It was said within one of the interviews (Emily) where she was indicating that she needed to work to ensure staff within her setting understood the psychology but also believed it. She proposed that if she achieved this then she would be more successful with facilitating the organisational change. At the time of the interview, I didn't think much of the words, but it caught my interest when coding and initial theme-ing. I googled the term and found it is a military concept where one side aims to come to	

resolution not by force but by making educational and emotional pleas. I think this captured my interest because it spoke to a dissonance I was struggling with. Winning perhaps implies a fight, or a struggle, where there is a winner and loser. It implies that EPs wanted to influence the system to create the change that they deem as necessary for the system and they do that by helping staff understand and believe in the psychology they are communicating.

I thought this was represented within the data:

Winning minds – mostly done through sharing psychology in training, workshops and consultations

Winning hearts – Emily thought about sharing an example of a school who had already adopted the systemic change she was promoting with her system to help them believe that the change is possible and beneficial. Participants though consultations talked about examples where the psychology has been used successfully in other settings and made use of supervisions to talk with individuals about their experience of attempting to make the change.

In Lydia's data, the system (before her involvement) already had the heart to change (they felt they needed to change, wanted to, and were prepared to change) but didn't know how (minds), therefore change was not able to take place. Lydia's work did not need to facilitate the winning of hearts and she described her role being largely as imparting knowledge and upskilling individuals (winning minds)

Reflecting more on winning hearts and minds leads me to think about evolution vs revolution (another military concept). Winning hearts and minds is often linked to a more evolutionary approach to military operations. I felt that participants experiences fitted with either a evolution or revolution approach to systemic change

Evolution – take place over a long period of time, drip feeding psychology and working collaboratively with key stakeholders. EPs often shared similar values and beliefs with key stakeholders within the system

Revolution – takes pace over a shorter period of time, values of EP and system don't always align, an increased reliance on recruitment of a 'champion' within the system, staff need assistance to view their system systemically to see and believe in the need for the change.

I felt that Serena and Megan's experiences could be described as evolution whilst Lydia, Grace and Emily's experience could be described as revolution.
When I took this analysis/theme to my tutor, she reflected that it was important I didn't take a couple of words from one interview too far and that I needed to stay close to the data. She warned about portraying EP's as manipulating the systems they work with. Words like 'manipulating' and 'revolution' have some negative connotations and therefore could not look good for the EP profession. After looking at my coding, it was decided that a re-analysis was required.
I found this difficult, largely because I had put a significant amount of effort into coding, theme-ing and writing and it felt upsetting to have to go back to square one. But it was also important to me that the data was reflective of what my participants were saying. It was also not my intent to paint the profession in a bad light.
I hope that with the new analysis and write up is closer to what the participants were saying. By including the theme 'leading with psychology' hopefully speaks to the idea that the EP's within the research had beliefs around best practice based on their knowledge of psychology and hoped to communicate their knowledge and opinions through working systemically with the system. I think this is a more palatable way of presenting the data and is accurate and representative.

Whilst, I am happier with the second analysis, I felt it important to include this reflection box as my feelings towards my thesis are tied up in my first analysis. It wouldn't be very 'reflexive' of me to mention my first analysis and pretend it didn't happen but I also want my writing to be relevant and I don't want to spend too much time talking about an analysis I did not end up using.

Emily wanted the psychology she was communicating to not only be understood but also believed it would be helpful to the setting and lead to more 'buy-in' from the system. Winning or influencing 'hearts and minds' - EPs explained how they aimed to find gentle ways to challenge perspectives, communicate psychology and encourage belief in an alternative way of organisational functioning.

> *Serena: 'we'd had that conversation … and she'd gone away and, and looked at it and looked at some of the stuff around executive functioning and thought,*

yeah, no, actually this is really, really relevant and this is what, you know, I think we need to be doing'.

Serena: *'I think it's about that non-expert model'.*

Megan: 'I've felt resistance shift and melt away during a conversation.

However, in both approaches (expert and non-expert) it could be argued that EPs are still positioning themselves as knowing a better way for the organisation to work or prioritising psychology. Megan talked about feeling *'frustrated'* when she identified an organisational change that she felt would make a positive difference within the system, but was met with some resistance. This suggests that despite not positioning herself as an expert, she still holds beliefs around best practice.

Megan: 'I don't have the answers. But I think I can contain them and together we might not come to an answer, but we'll come to a better place of understanding.'

Systems thinking views organisations as dynamic, interactional, and meaning-making. This moves practitioners away from viewing systems as mechanistic to biological. Biological systems adapt and respond to the demands of their environment.

EPs can be thinking systemically when engaging in consultation – but not always. When consultation is seen as a collaborative process where the EP is acting in a way that is non-expert and is co-constructing new ways of seeing problems, this is systemic thinking. Practitioners can think systemically at a group or individual level. For example, when EPs work with CYP using Solution Focused Brief therapy, the focus is on the solutions, not problems. Megan discusses what it is like to work in this way; she notes her experience as feeling like it is hard to pinpoint her role in the substantial organisational changes within one of the settings she supports. She expressed that she didn't 'do' anything, she discussed and asked questions. Macready (1997) suggests that EPs are resources for change when they ask the right questions and lead practitioners to make new meanings of their problems.

School staff being part of identifying the change was seen as a facilitating factor for organisational change work. This concept stems from Solution-Focused Psychology. Morgan (2016) found that one of the major successes of the solution-focused interventions in his study is that they give a sense of ownership to the organisation,

with individuals feeling in control of their future and destiny. Onyett (2009) suggests that this allows participants to stay within their own sphere of influence rather than participating in dialogues regarding issues that are outside of their control. Morgan (2016) found that participants felt a sense of weariness and helplessness when organisational change needs were highlighted to them as they began to see that change elsewhere was needed. This seems to suggest that telling a system to change, coming from an 'expert', would have negative consequences for the organisation.

Often, EPs are identified with being 'non-expert' in their approach to facilitating organisational change. They suggested that if the system comes to the organisational change independently and organically, then they will be more likely to make the effort and be more accountable for making the change.

> *Emily; 'if you're [school staff] in the school and you've been part of … identifying it [organisational change] yourselves, maybe then you feel more empowered to make the change and more passionate about it.'*

EPs thought about making systemic psychology accessible by reflecting on different ways to consult, for example, the use of systemic tools/ consultation. Psychologists in the current study felt that communicating psychology served to increase understanding in the research but also increase *belief* in the learning, having positive impacts in their setting and practice for the children and young people they support - winning 'hearts and minds'. Participants did this in different ways. Two participants talked about the possibility of creating a 'case study', showcasing a school that had already adopted a particular organisational change and highlighting the positive outcomes of the work. They wondered if presenting the case study to other schools would encourage them to believe that the organisational change is possible and is beneficial. Participants also viewed systems tools and consultation as useful to aid belief in the *need* for organisational change, as they offer frameworks and opportunities through which staff can engage in systems thinking. The two examples above are similar in that participants hoped to encourage belief in psychology, but differ in how this is communicated. Presenting case studies could be viewed as more direct or expert. It seems to say, 'this psychology works, it is a solution to your problem, perhaps you should try it'. Whereas consultation could be seen as more indirect and

non-expert, where EPs facilitate systems thinking through questioning, not jumping to a stance of knowing and wondering out loud, staff would solve their own problems and/or identify an organisational change need.

Yet, helping an organisation to identify its own needs created conflict for some participants who held strong opinions about best practice or at least unhelpful practice.

> *Emily; 'but the… score could go in a completely different direction [to the one the EP had in mind] and [the school could] be like "our vision is for every pupil to leave with ten As" or something… Like we had an underlying agenda and that's around supporting children looked after and pupils with SEMH needs. Maybe …[the] school wouldn't … prioritise that'.*

Therefore, the conflict between EP agendas (stemming from their knowledge of psychology) and the possibility that their perspectives do not match the school's envisaged organisational change meant EPs seemed to need to influence hearts and minds in order to convince the 'system' of their view.

Emily seems to worry that taking a non-expert approach could lead the direction of the project away from the psychology when EP and the school system's values and agendas don't align. However, being non-expert in approach doesn't mean EPs don't/can't challenge thinking. Mason (2005) suggests the need to offer a psychological perspective as a 'useful influence'. Both parties (consultant and consultee) should have mutual stimulus, which therefore allows the psychologist as much room as the consultee for opinion and expertise. Mason proposes a phase as simple as "This is what I am thinking based on some of the things you are saying here and/or my experience/research" (2005, pg. 162). Byng-Hall (2004) emphasises this point by warning that a professional who fails to own their expertise runs the risk of doing a disservice to their clients.

Interestingly, though, whilst all but one participant reflected on the positives of systemic tools (e.g. particular organisation change consultation models) for offering the space to have such systemic conversations, none of them had used one in their examples. Lydia alluded to not needing to encourage staff to think systemically since she didn't encounter any resistance.

Lydia: 'I'd use those skills [facilitation of systemic thinking] more when I think if it was, um, other others having a consultation with someone or, or I felt that somebody was being oppositional to the ideas, then I might be more systemic.'

Lydia felt that she had adequate 'buy-in' from the secondary schools she worked with and therefore didn't feel the need to facilitate systemic thinking in the same way other participants did. Perhaps this indicates that the schools already had an accurate understanding of the 'problem' and the need for organisational change, and/or that Lydia's values and agendas aligned with the secondary schools she was working with. She reflected that there were a number of different factors leading schools to have the level of 'buy-in' that they had. Some of these factors include;

- context – at the time, bullying was seen as a significant problem facing all secondary schools, with a lack of knowledge and initiatives that aided schools in tackling the problem,
- time - the work was conducted prior to schools' academising, meaning that they had a stronger connection and trust in the local authority,
- capacity – Lydia dedicated half her working hours for two years to the project, meaning she had time and resources dedicated to implementation. This meant schools were receiving an intense amount of support and were therefore held more accountable (EP capacity is further discussed in theme three).

Lydia reflected that because of the 'buy-in' she had in place, she felt like the project 'ran itself'. This is a contrast to other participants who reflected on the difficulty of facilitating organisational change, especially when they came across resistance.

EPs in the current study were sometimes put into a position of 'power' due to their knowledge of psychology and the perception of them as an expert. Serena found that the SENCO withdrew from co-delivering the training despite her extensive experience in the topic, seeing Serena as more influential than herself in communicating information to her colleagues. Serena hypothesised this was due to feeling like she wasn't valued as an expert by other staff within the school. Additionally, Lydia found that Head Teachers (HTs) looked to her as the expert for answers rather than working collaboratively around a shared problem. Interestingly, the perception of EPs being the 'expert' led to Grace feeling like she acted in ways to take a problem out of the hands of the busy SENCO, who perhaps didn't have the 'thinking energy' to bring

about any organisational change. Grace also went on to wonder if SENCOs not only want but also need an external professional in a perceived position of power to promote change.

> Grace: '*actually as much as sometimes the power of being an EP makes, we wanna vomit in itself, that is really helpful for our systems to be able to say, well somebody else has noticed that a change is important.'*

From the quote above, Grace also indicates that being placed in a position of power feels uncomfortable to her. This is perhaps because it places her in a position of 'fixer', 'gatekeeper' and 'knower of answers' when the EPs in the study felt that they were not necessarily any of those things, causing cognitive dissonance.

4.2.2.3 Subtheme - Systemic Practice

When looking across data sets, it was noticed that all participants' experiences were different. Their aims, objectives and outcomes all varied, yet they also seemed similar. This similarity appears to be related to a 'systemic' approach to practice. A way of being which values being respectful and compassionate to individual experiences, wishes and requirements. Working systemically emphasises safe and trusted relationships and inclusive learning environments. Serena felt it was important that staff responded to children differently in light of executive functioning differences, rather than being thought of as 'naughty'. Lydia placed emphasis on setting up peer counselling services rather than assessing and moving 'bullies'. Emily helped to facilitate a more trauma-informed approach to behaviour and emotions rather than a behaviourist perspective. EPs in this dataset were driven by their beliefs and values relating to working systemically.

Prioritising working systemically does not necessarily answer the question 'how do EPs facilitate organisational change?' - Another group of EPs may all have approached organisational change differently. However, the theme does suggest 'why?' This group of EPs were driven to embark on organisational change projects - because they value a systemic thinking approach. They appear to believe that organisations that adopt a systemic way of thinking are better able to meet the needs and support the strengths and emotional well-being of their children and young people. Thinking in this way also impacts how EPs facilitate organisational change. EPs provided a model of systemic thinking and thought critically about their work. For

example, Grace wondered about the ethics of her involvement and the importance of all staff members consenting to strategies, recognising that all professionals have differing levels of confidence and competence.

In most cases, EPs felt they had to battle against their preferred way of working (working at an organisational level) and the perceived role of an EP (working at an individual level).

> Lydia*: 'initially they wanted me to like, um, assess all the, um, bullies <laugh> can, you know, give them sort of plans or well the statements then, or get them moved into alternative provision.'*
> Grace: '*the child (individual assessment) is the, is the kind of the doorway to an EP coming in (and facilitating organisational change work).'*

EPs had the perception that their systems viewed them as 'assessors of SEND' and working at an individual level rather than a group or systems level. All EPs voiced a preference for working at an organisational level but felt they needed to 'fly the flag' for systemic practice. Safe relationships with staff were seen as a facilitating factor to allow these conversations to take place (see theme 1). Three out of five of the participants explained that their work evolved from individual pieces of casework, suggesting school systems initially wanted individual assessments and EPs were required to reframe staff perceptions of the EP role.

> *Grace: 'Because … how do they know what we do if we don't tell them what we do?'*

EPs were excited by facilitating organisational change work and found it to be one of the more valuable aspects of the role. They talked about feelings of 'making a difference' after completing the work and thanked the researcher for the opportunity to talk about work they were proud of.

In the 1960s and 70s some professionals were concerned by the individual pathologising of children and began to work with families rather than individual young people (Fox, 2009). This family work, underpinned by systems thinking, essentially changes 'problems' from individual to relational, which is echoed within the EP's experiences within this research. Attempting to understand and value the relationships, communication, and interactions within the family and between systems

is essential to understanding the child (Fox, 2009). In the 1970s, many EPs took this perspective and applied it to the school system, and began to develop systems work in schools using organisational psychology as a basis for their interventions.

This perspective, which emphasises the interdependent and complex nature of the links between a variety of personal, contextual, and interpersonal variables (Cameron, 2006), involves:

●Distinguishing that human problems have different layers, ranging from within-person to within-home, community, and school, for example.

●Espousing an interactive rather than single-factor view of problems (Cameron & Monsen, 2005).

●Understanding and seeing the value of perspectives and attributions of different people and professionals (Miller, 1999)

Without exception, all participants found that by attempting to work in this way (away from individual assessments that pathologised children and young people and towards an approach that valued different perspectives, inclusion, and prevention) they were having to battle against the perceived role of an EP by other professionals. Participants found that school staff expected them to work at an individual level to assess 'what was wrong' with individual children. They had to fly the flag for systemic practice and challenge the narrative that EPs are 'IQ providers'. Grace appeared particularly passionate about moving away from individual assessment, explaining that this motivated her transition from clinical psychology to educational psychology. This indicates that for Grace, she felt EPs are well placed to work systemically and preventatively.

Reflection Box	Language 'battle'
I debated the use of the term 'battle' as it felt quite strong and potentially emotive. I could have written 'they were working to address the perceptions of an EP's role held by other professionals, but then going back to the data, this language seems appropriate. Two examples: G - I was quite strict [with school staff in ensuring I was working systemically] in some ways.. saying well I'm not, it's not just for one adult or child it's for the team L- "You can see all the bullies and get them assessed and sorted out" <laugh> We went to something very different. We told them, we're not doing this big piece of	

work if you want us to do that, it has to be, to be more sensitive and systemic than that. I'm not sure they were too impressed but, yeah that was it'.

Ashton and Roberts (2006) noted that EPs often focused on psychological assessments of a child's special educational needs, such as writing EHC Needs Assessment Advice, but felt these activities were less valuable compared to more preventative and systemic work. Festinger (1957) suggested that professionals may experience cognitive dissonance when the methods they use most often differ from those they believe to be the most effective. The famous quote by Goethe (n.d., as cited in Goodreads, 2025), 'Things which matter most must never be at the mercy of things which matter least', may resonate with many EPs with this view. Tasks that appear to have limited impact on the lives of the children and young people they support often dominate their professional work (Jensen et al., 2002), a sentiment echoed in some interview comments.

Lydia: I didn't have statutory assessments, you know, to get in the way of it.

It is perhaps also reflected in the views of some EPs who contemplated participating in the research but decided not to. In one case, the researcher had a discussion with an EP who didn't feel she had made any contribution at an organisational level and that she rarely had the opportunity to do so.

From all of the EPs, Lydia appeared to facilitate the most widespread systemic changes supporting many of the secondary schools within the local authority to run regular peer counselling groups, the impacts of which were recognised in the local newspaper and have legacy impacts for years following the work. Lydia reflected that the facilitating factor which had the biggest impact was her time and capacity. Lydia was reflecting on the work she did when the Educational Psychology had a different climate. EPs were not required to complete EHCN Assessments, meaning their time and effort could be focused on more preventative work. Lydia shared her perspective that she now feels this type and size of work is impossible given EP's current capacity. EPs seemed to model working systemically and thought critically about their work. Grace wondered about the ethics of her involvement and the importance of all staff members consenting to strategies, recognising that all professionals have differing levels of confidence and competence.

As the practice of EPs has become more multi-agency based, the findings by Daniels et al. (2007) suggest that professional anxiety may be a response to the challenge of working with different agencies. Blurred professional boundaries and a lack of role-clarity create hurdles for multi-agency working. Robinson et al. (2005) show that a key factor underpinning positive professional attitudes is the enhancement of individual professional identity; this helps to positively support the development of successful organisations. Whilst none of the EPs in the current study alluded to uncomfortable feelings around their professional identity, this research is important to bear in mind for the profession.

4.2.3 Theme 3: Opportunity and Time to embed change at different levels of the system

4.2.3.1 Subtheme - Practical barriers and facilitators

EPs reflected on how difficult it is to help facilitate organisational change within a setting. They explained it can take time and considerable effort on the part of all parties. EPs noted that a barrier to systemic change is often the school system being overwhelmed. A lack of funding and time was named as significantly contributing to schools being too overwhelmed to make big efforts to achieve large-scale changes. In addition, EPs noted that SENCOs and other members of staff often saw systemic issues in an 'isolated' way, not having the time, space, or capacity to view them in different ways without the support of an EP or other professional.

> Grace*: 'being more systemic in their … approach to things is in my experience, less well fulfilled. …I think because it's … everything's a well-intended plan, but then the practicalities of school just kind of, and there's something else always at top trumps in a priority.'*

Organisational change requires significant effort on the part of the system, which can be difficult for already overwhelmed schools. This conflict means that the EPs needed to be empathetic when responding and working within their systems.

> *Emily: 'we appreciate things are so busy in schools … and that going in like a month later and sort of saying "what, what have you taken forward from this is?" probably really unrealistic and not fair…. to expect there's gonna be massive mass change.'*

Large organisational change is extremely difficult to achieve, even with time and commitment (Miller, 2003). In research outside of Educational Psychology and into organisational and business, change is documented to have unfavourable odds with only 30% of organisational change is successful (Schein, 2010).

An EP in the current study (Emily) remarked that a school had found implementing organisational change so overwhelming that they thought of ways to make the change less overpowering by applying the change with only a smaller number of pupils, despite the EP suggesting the change should be adopted at the whole school level and would benefit all children and not a just a group of children. This could be considered a defensive routine (Argyris, 1990).

Another participant reflected that although she was working systemically with one small group, she felt her work served to 'take away the problem' from the SENCO and the larger (whole school) system, as they didn't have the time and resources to implement change.

> *Grace: '…am I just taking that problem from them? Or is it still helping them as a system?*

Grace's data could be considered an anomaly in this respect, as her work was with a small group within the system (a sub-system). However, she did wonder if the impact of her work went beyond the sub-system after learning that SENCO had used her therapeutic letters with other groups of children in the school. In all other interviews, EPs talked about making changes that affect the whole system, and therefore not taking 'a problem' away from just one part of the system.

Whole-school developments require a significant amount of time and additional resources to become embedded in the school's culture, which can create tensions as educational settings are notoriously overwhelmed by constrained resources, multiple demands from different stakeholders and pressures related to academic attainment (Humphrey, Lendrum & Wigglesworth, 2010). Many programs fail at the implementation stage or lack sustainability in the long run. This might be due to contextual factors relating to the functioning of educational settings and their unique circumstances that are often difficult to control (Lendrum & Humphrey, 2012).

EPs working to influence ‘hearts and minds’ in their organisational change work may serve to overcome the barrier of ‘an overwhelmed school’ and convince the system that organisational change is worth the effort and is possible and probable.

One of the ways in which EPs worked to influence hearts and minds was to deliver training to the system. The majority of EPs offered and delivered training. However, training was only seen as one aspect of the package of support. EPs felt that continued opportunities to embed the change were required in order for the change to be fully adopted.

> *Serena: ‘I think it's a, a piece of training that actually was more than training.’*
> *Emily: ‘I'm hoping to keep it moving forward… to again bring it to the forefront of their minds.’*

EPs did this via continued training efforts, workshops, supervision, modelling of concepts, and explicitly applying learning to individual casework. With these efforts, participants felt that school staff were better able to generalise and internalise their learning from training.

However, it was noted that this requires a capacity on the part of the EP, something that EPs felt they didn’t always have.

> *Emily: ‘…we haven't necessarily kind of had the time maybe or the capacity to kind of have lots of ongoing discussions with the school.’*
> Grace: ‘*if only I could, … for … numerous children for me to be coming in for six, seven sessions, things like that… It's a massive commitment.’*

EPs felt that it was a facilitating factor to have continued opportunities to revisit new concepts, model the application of concepts and engage in continued discussions about the change. Patel (2013) highlighted that for many staff, training resulted in little change in their practice and that many had forgotten the training altogether. Chidley and Stringer (2020) identified a ‘transfer problem’ - transferring new knowledge into action. Whilst extensive research efforts have explored the transfer problem, very little literature has explored the issue within the field of educational psychology. Like the EPs in the current study, Chidley and Stringer (2020) call for EPs to work beyond

singular training efforts and towards effective implementations. They recognised that EPs are well placed to provide further support. Fixsen et al. (2009) identified some possible strategies for implementation, which include consultation, coaching and supervision. All of which were demonstrated by the participants within this study.

To achieve this, however, sufficient time and capacity for EPs is essential. A DfE (2023) research report titled *"Educational Psychology Services: Workforce Insights and School Perspectives on Impact"* highlighted that the limited capacity of EPs is becoming an increasingly urgent issue. The growing number of EHCPs has significantly reduced the time and capacity available for EPs to engage in preventative and systemic work, such as the work explored in this study. The DfE (2023) described this as a 'vicious cycle' that contributes to potential dissatisfaction with workloads.

Grace (trainee EP) reflected that her work met part of her course expectations and therefore felt it would be unrealistic to expect to be able to facilitate such intensive work in the future once she has qualified due to limited capacity. Lydia reflected on her work prior to the SEND Reforms (DfE, 2014) when EPs did not have the same statutory duties which they do now. Lydia felt that her time and capacity were significant facilitating factors to her work. She worried that EPs can no longer dedicate so much of their time to influence systemic practice and work in more preventative ways.

Cameron (2006) notes that EP practice is evolving in a challenging environment, which has affected professional morale. He suggests that pressure from central and local government to adapt to new service models has led to increased professional self-reflection. Ashton and Roberts (2006) further explore the challenges EPs face in defining their professional identity, showing that many EPs feel uncertain about the unique contributions they can make to schools and organisations.

> Serena*; 'Organisational change can sometimes feel difficult so it's good to remember it isn't impossible and that I've actually do…helped a school do it.'*

EPs suspected that change also felt threatening to the system. Perhaps because the systems they were working with were overwhelmed and systemic change felt too vast and effortful whilst managing all other expectations and standards of practice. EPs

reflected that schools often resist change due to feeling safer with the 'norm' despite being presented with a better alternative.

> *Grace: 'Because if they [the system] start believing themselves that they needs loads of change, then they could just crumble… And although awareness might be helpful, awareness with no one to support you through that, it's quite dangerous, isn't it? It could just kind of, it can become like a bit of a spiralling thought, can't it? "oh this is really terrible" and then it can make positives hard to hear and you might start being a bit like a self-fulfilling prophecy or "we don't do that very well".'*
>
> *Emily: 'Doing what … you know, that feels so much safer doesn't it? In what is already a stressful job and environment at times. Like it feels safe and more comfortable to stick with even I suppose even when you might know at times this is isn't working.'*

EPs explained that they understood the complexities of working with systems. That the system is full of individuals, all of whom will be driven by their own values, beliefs and principles, as well as having varied levels of confidence and competence. As well as the system being made up of individuals, the system is also made up of sub-systems, e.g. classes, phases, subject groups, parents, governors, etc., who will all have varied ways of working, agendas and preferences. EPs felt that knowing the setting (individuals, groups, culture, ideologies, etc.) well was a facilitating factor in their practice. EPs discussed the difficulty of trying to influence change when there are so many potentially juxtaposing ideologies.

In FST terms, schools, like families, are complex systems. Each sub-system has implicit 'boundaries' (Minuchin, 1974) that regulate influence and emotional expression. EPs' efforts to navigate and influence these subsystems reflect attention to these boundary dynamics.

> *Serena: '…some staff that were really keen and really excited … And others… One guy fell asleep on the table.'*
>
> Emily: *'I also get the impression that maybe there are some pockets of staff who might not see as much value in it maybe and that probably would require a lot more unpicking.'*

Megan described a largely harmonious way of working between the sub-systems, making organisational change smoother, but not easy. Megan explained that she worked mainly with senior leaders, but did know some of the sub-systems (phase teams, subject teams, parents) well. However, other EPs reflected that they found it helpful to have contact with as many individuals and sub-systems as possible in order to facilitate the change. The researcher wondered if the more interactions the EP has with individuals within the system, the more likely they are to influence 'hearts and minds' and therefore whole school organisational change is more probable.

> *Emily: 'So it feels like you have some sort of input or interaction with the majority of the people within the system… people in the system feel .... part of that journey'*
>
> *Serena: 'I think sometimes if I'd done the alternative would've been to do training with a smaller number of staff, but then I think, well, maybe that would've been okay. We might have been able to look in at a little bit more detail and have discussions, but then not every member of staff would've got the underlying theory behind it or even started using that, that language around executive functioning.'*

The two quotes above, perhaps demonstrates two EPs seeking contact with as many individuals from their systems to influence their practice.

In some cases, participants described SENCOs seeking EP support as EPs were seen as more influential on the system. Serena described how, despite the SENCO having relevant and useful knowledge and experience, she was still reluctant to facilitate the change without the support of the EP. Serena felt that the SENCO didn't feel supported enough within her setting to make the change independently, commissioning the EP to introduce the psychology and facilitate the application of it was a way of making the change.

4.2.3.2 Subtheme - Champions of change

EPs' passion for working systemically was supported by the service. The service's support of EPs' preferred practice and systemic work was seen as a facilitating factor; however, conflict arose when EPs reflected on their capacity to work in their preferred way. EPs' limited capacity (as discussed in theme 2) and others' perception of the EP

role as being a SEND assessor were seen as barriers to the successful embedding of change. Therefore, having a champion for the change helped to overcome the barrier of time and capacity in order to embed different levels of the system. EPs reflected that champions who were passionate, resourceful, knowledgeable, proactive, and influential (part of a school's Subject Leadership Team) were especially facilitative.

> *Serena: 'She (SENDCO) referred to them as champions, actually, executive functioning champions for each kind of year who produced some resources based on the, some of the things that I'd sent over to her after the training, um, to embed that in lesson plans.'*

Champions (often SENCOs) were able to fill gaps where EP's limited capacity meant they could not facilitate any further. The champions were able to have ongoing discussions (without the EP) at different levels of the system to embed change. They also had the benefit of existing relationships within their setting and knowledge of the functioning of the system. However, EPs felt it was important that they still have ongoing discussions with the champion and setting, to ensure they were thinking systemically and not feeling a sense of 'stuckness'. Champions became a professional who would provide expertise and tools to help educators identify aims and objectives for the change; they ensured ongoing monitoring, support (Latendre & Ostrander, 2016; Leung et al., 2019); they acted as a sounding board for practitioners, helped educators stay focused, generate new ideas and make progress towards the development and implementation of their actions plans (Osher, 2018); they provided regular consultations, on-site coaching and booster sessions (Anyon et al., 2016). In the literature cited above, external professionals also acted as a champion. However, due to EP capacity, all (with the exception of Grace – trainee EP) recruited champions from the school's staff to act as leaders to implement the change.

Reflection Box	Exception - Grace
Grace could be considered an exception as she was the only participant who didn't recruit 'champions' within the systems she aimed to support. Grace's work was also different because she was going into the setting every week and therefore the involvement was intense. Perhaps, Grace didn't need a 'champion' because she was the champion. Grace had the capacity to be the champion	

because the work partly met the assessment criteria for her course (Doctorate for Applied Educational and Child Psychology) and therefore didn't have the same statutory expectations upon her. The school also didn't pay for her involvement (since it was part of her course) and therefore limited school funding wasn't an issue.

4.2.3.3 Subtheme - Incremental change

Participants found regular opportunities to embed change and to be reflective about the change helpful. This way of viewing organisational change aligns with Tushman et al. (1986), who suggested organisational change is incremental, involving fine-tuning to better align an organisation's people, processes, strategy, and structure. This is different to a static view of organisational change, moving from point A to point B with the help of feedback. Nelson (2003) observed that static models of organisational change are being replaced by more dynamic models. This also aligns with Argyris's view of organisational learning. Argyris (1990) believed that double-loop learning was essential for organisations to adapt and thrive in complex, changing environments. Therefore, he viewed effective organisational learning as dynamic, particularly when organisations engage in double-loop learning, which encourages continuous questioning and evolution of underlying assumptions and practices. It also speaks to the systemic thinking way of viewing organisations. In the current study, school staff's thoughts, feelings and views on the change may evolve as they attempt to utilise and apply the psychology and therefore, EPs needed to be flexible and available in order to help facilitate the application and entrenching of the change. Megan spoke about the importance of not having to 'get it right in the moment' but that she and the SENCO could continually come back together to discuss progress, additional thoughts, reflections, and feelings and wonder together. All participants felt it was important to continually revisit the school to embed the change at different levels (individual, group, and whole school). Some EPs commented that they wished they had increased capacity to do this more, feeling that their impact could have been boosted and organisational change adopted more thoroughly if they had had more opportunity to drip feed psychology and think systemically with school staff.

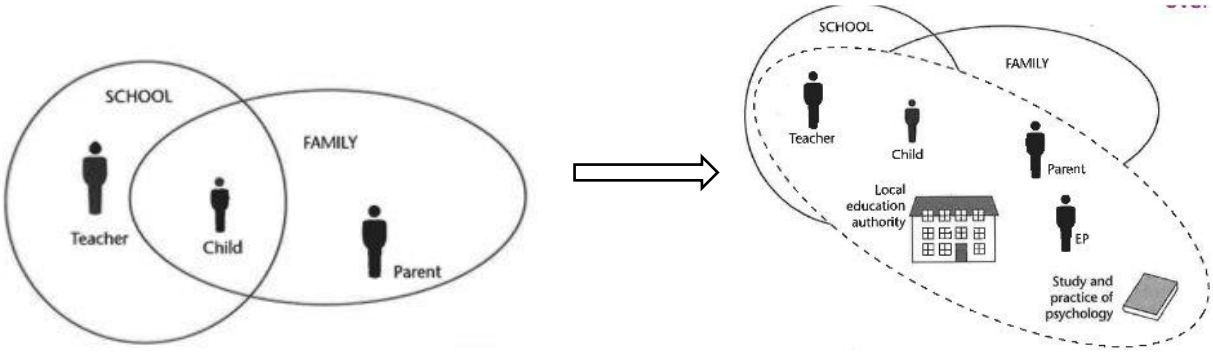
Most participants acknowledged that having knowledge of the systems they were supporting was beneficial, particularly in understanding the school's culture. Dalin (1993) describes organisational culture as the "way things are", the written and

unwritten rules that shape behaviours, the standards and values upheld by the organisation, and the stories and "myths" of its achievements. The researcher found it interesting that participants had varying levels of knowledge about the organisation's culture. The extremes were illustrated by Lydia and Megan. Lydia mentioned that she didn't visit all the school systems where changes were implemented, while Megan reflected on whether her relationship with the school SENCO had evolved into a 'friendship,' noting that her presence on school grounds had become routine for many pupils.

Miller (2003), in his book *"Teachers, Parents, and Classroom Behaviour: A Psychosocial Approach,"* introduces the concept of boundaries. Before EP involvement, school culture exists within boundaries where tensions may arise between policy, culture, and teachers' views regarding a particular 'problem.' Within these boundaries, teachers, pupils, and parents are constrained by the norms of the culture (Figure 5). When an EP becomes involved, a new, temporary overlapping boundary is created. This is similar to De Shazer's (1982) concept in family therapy, where a 'therapeutic suprasystem' forms between the family and therapist, creating a new system. This new system or temporary boundary allows participants to explore the 'problem' without the constraints of previous policies, culture, or history, enabling them to reconstrue meaning.

Figure 5

Illustration of the Overlapping Boundaries Identified by Miller (2003)



This model perhaps speaks to how EPs within the current study were able to facilitate organisational change, by creating a temporary boundary in which members of the school system were able to think systemically without the constraints of culture limiting their way of thinking.

> *Megan: …that was something she was already thinking about kind of in that isolated way that SENCOs sometimes do.*

However, Megan alluded to being 'part' of the system, having formed professional relationships with many members of the system and some of the children and young people, knowing her well when she visits. Despite this, she was still able to support the SENCO 'widen her lens' and view 'problems' in a less 'isolated' way. The researcher wonders if, despite her [Megan's] concentrated relationship with the system, she still wasn't constrained by its norms and culture. Megan's data perhaps demonstrates the possibility of EPs being able to create a temporary boundary and facilitate systemic thinking, despite (or possibly with the aid of) a close relationship with the system.

Kanter et al. (1992) argue that the first step to implementing change is building coalitions of stakeholders, including employees and sponsors, such as local authorities, whose support is essential. A leader must be able to influence others, create a vision, communicate it, empower people, and build teams to realise the vision. The EPs in the current study thought about how they can interact with different individuals and groups of people across the system in order to influence their 'hearts and minds' to empower them to make changes in line with the psychology they attempted to communicate. However, Kanter et al. (1992) use the term 'leader', which the researcher suspects the majority of the participants within the study would not identify with.

> *Megan: I wouldn't have the confidence to say, oh, [school name] do a forest school. They've got a nurture provision. … Um, they've embedded ELSA within their school. That's cuz of me… But it, it's because somewhere along the way I think I've been part of that.*

> Grace; '*now the way they speak about children is so reflective and they weren't in that position beforehand. And I dunno if that directly links to that piece of work, but it is notable in the school.'*

However, perhaps opposing this view, Lydia positioned herself as a 'leader' within her work. Her view is that:

> Lydia*: I think when we are in control of it, I think we can do it*.

This was in the context of facilitating organisational change at a local authority level. Her perspective is that EPs must take ownership and leadership of the change due to issues such as 'problem ownership' and head teachers' connection to the local authority, with the increasing number of academies. These issues have been discussed in an earlier chapter.

Ultimately, these findings reinforce the idea that organisational change in schools is rarely a single leap from point A to point B; rather, it is a gradual, cyclical process of fine-tuning. EPs in this study potentially acted as catalysts within temporary boundaries, enabling systemic thinking and reflective dialogue that challenged assumptions. While capacity constraints limited the depth of this work, participants' experiences suggest that meaningful change emerges through small, sustained interactions, drip-feeding psychology, revisiting systems, and nurturing relationships over time. This echoes Tushman et al.'s (1986) view that effective change is incremental, evolving through continuous alignment of people, processes, and culture, rather than through static, one-off interventions.

Reflection Box	Write up – discussion and analysis
I am wondering if I should have merged the analysis and discussion sections together in the write up. I think my analysis feels like a discussion at times, especially in themes 2 and 3. Maybe if I had merged them might allow for a more seamless integration of the theme and my interpretation. Plus, I think Braun and Clarke would say that it is difficult to separate the stages as being discrete. My motivation for keeping them separate was to ensure I could present my themes and interpretations in a logical way and to ensure I didn't get lost in the write up of my analysis. Also, traditional expectations for writing up a thesis or research would say the two sections need to be separate, however in lots of ways Braun and Clarke's Reflexive TA deviates for more traditional and scientific method of analysis. However, at this stage in my write up (with days before submission) I will keep the two sections separated. Edit 10/4/25 With the luxury of time and thinking space completing my amendments has allowed for, I have made the decision to merge my analysis and discussion sections for the justifications given above.	

4.3 Conclusion

4.3.1 Summary of Key Findings

This research explored how EPs facilitate organisational change within educational systems. The research question guiding this study was: *How do EPs facilitate organisational change in schools and systems?* Three central themes emerged from the Reflexive TA, each comprising distinct subthemes:

Theme 1. Psychologically Safe Relationships:

Subtheme: Trust and Safety: Participants consistently identified mutual trust, attunement, and emotional containment as foundational for successful organisational change. They frequently described these relationships as enabling candid dialogue, which was viewed as essential for collaborative and reflective practice.

Managing Vulnerability and Openness: EPs highlighted the necessity of embracing uncertainty and vulnerability to foster openness in exploring new

approaches to systemic change. This openness allowed professionals to explore systemic issues without fear of negative judgment or repercussions.

Balancing Challenge and Support: Participants outlined the careful balance required between challenging established practices and providing emotional support. They emphasised that effective challenge was underpinned by relational trust, relational risk taking and ensuring that constructive feedback was received positively rather than defensively.

Theme 2. Prioritising Psychological and Systemic Perspectives:

Leading with Psychology: EPs utilised psychological theories and knowledge to inform their work, emphasising psychology's relevance in practical contexts. They saw their role as important in translating complex psychological concepts to help staff make sense of 'problems'.

Systems Thinking: EPs consistently promoted systemic thinking by fostering reflective discussions and collaborative problem-solving among school staff. They helped school staff conceptualise challenges as interconnected rather than isolated, moving away from within-child perspectives that attribute difficulties solely to individual deficits. Instead, EPs encouraged school staff to consider broader relational, contextual, and systemic influences contributing to children's experiences and behaviours. This shift was highlighted as essential for creating holistic and sustainable solutions to organisational issues.

Systemic Practice: Participants demonstrated a flexible and responsive approach to their practice, adapting strategies to evolving needs within educational systems. EPs often employed systemic tools such as training, workshops, circular questioning and reframing, facilitating shifts in perspective that supported lasting organisational change.

Theme 3. Opportunities and Time for Embedding Change:

Practical Barriers and Facilitators: Participants identified practical constraints such as limited resources, competing priorities, and systemic pressures as significant barriers. They acknowledged the importance of incremental change and realistic goal setting to manage these challenges effectively.

Champions of Change: EPs found it highly beneficial to identify and support internal champions within schools, who played a crucial role in sustaining and embedding organisational change initiatives. These champions acted as intermediaries, reinforcing and maintaining momentum when EPs were not directly involved.

Incremental Change: Participants generally advocated incremental change strategies that involved regular, cyclical engagement with school staff. This allowed for ongoing reflection, adjustment, and reinforcement of systemic changes.

4.3.2 Systemic Positioning

From the outset, no specific systemic theory was consciously adopted by the researcher. However, on reflection, General Systems Theory (GST) (von Bertalanffy, 1968) aligns most closely with the research intent because of its broad view of systems as dynamic and interconnected. GST provided a flexible framework for exploring how EPs support systemic change beyond individual-level interventions. Participants often described organisations in ways consistent with GST's definition of a system as an 'organised whole' in which relationships are processes which matter more than isolated parts. For example, EPs' use of reflective conversations and training showed an appreciation for the interconnectedness within school teams and practices.

As the analysis progressed, the researcher observed that the participants' accounts placed greater emphasis on relational and interactional processes, consistent with Family Systems Theory (FST) (Bowen, 1978; Minuchin, 1974). Participants highlighted the importance of trust, communication, and psychologically safe relationships - principles central to FST. Practices such as circular questioning, reframing, and curiosity were evident, as seen in Grace's therapeutic letters, Emily's trauma-informed training and Megan's 'not-knowing stance' (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). These approaches reflect systemic thinking, focusing on emotional processes and relational patterns to enable sustainable change.

Although participants did not explicitly state their theoretical stance, their work resonates with FST's view of interconnected systems and relational focus. This suggests that EPs within this study often navigate systemic work through relational processes.

Rather than a mismatch, this shift highlights the value of theoretical flexibility. While GST and Organisational Learning Theory offer strategic, systems-level perspectives, FST provides practical tools for engaging with real-world dynamics. EPs may benefit from fluency across multiple frameworks, GST for organisational analysis, FST for relational work, and Ecological Systems Theory for contextual understanding. Such adaptability can strengthen their role in facilitating organisational change in complex educational environments.

In conclusion, GST aligns with the overarching aim of understanding systemic and organisational change, while FST reflects how systemic work is enacted in practice, through trust, collaboration, and emotionally attuned relationships. Integrating both may enhance EPs' ability to facilitate meaningful, sustainable change.

4.3.3 Trustworthiness

As in any research, it is important to ensure a high-quality research process as much as possible. Whilst it is not the aim to produce results free from bias and subjectivity or be able to generalise results across the national population of EPs, it is the aim to accurately represent the meaning-making of the participants and researcher. More empirical data would be concerned with rigour and objectivity (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Qualitative data would be concerned with 'trustworthiness' (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Lincoln and Guba (1985) highlighted four areas qualitative researchers should consider: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. The researcher will now consider each of these four areas in relation to the thesis.

4.3.4 Credibility

Guba (1981) and Shenton (2004) define credibility as the extent to which the researcher has accurately presented reality. Positivist researchers are often interested in the concept of validity – does the study measure what it intended to measure? (Shenton, 2004). Credibility in qualitative research asks the question, 'How congruent are the findings with reality?' (Merriman, 1998). The researcher made some steps to ensure the 'credibility' of their research, which are highlighted in the following bullet points.

- '*The development of an early familiarity with the culture of participating organisations'* (Shenton, 2004). Since the researcher was on placement at the host Educational Psychology Service from September 2021 and throughout the research process, they were very familiar with the culture of the organisation

and established a relationship of trust and professional friendship with the EPs in the team, including the participants. This led to an increased understanding and appreciation of systemic, organisational, group and individual expectations, priorities, and values. This nuance of understanding could not have been achieved by a researcher external to these systems. However, Dado et al. (2023) warn that prolonged engagement is not always positive, as the researcher may become so immersed in the culture of the organisation that their judgements may be biased. This may be the case, and some of the researcher's reflections in their reflexivity journal reflect this. However, the epistemological and ontological stance of the research acknowledges this and recognises that the researcher can never be objectively removed from the research process. Furthermore, whilst the researcher was very familiar with the Educational Psychology Service's culture and organisational workings, they were less familiar or not at all familiar with the systems and organisational structures of the schools in which the participants' work took place and were reflecting on.

- '*Tactics to help ensure honesty in informants*' (Shenton, 2004). As highlighted in the 'ethical consideration' section of the methodology, the researcher made it clear that EPs within the service were not required to participate and if individuals wanted to take part, then they volunteered their expression of interest. Therefore, it might be presumed that all participants were eager to participate and ready to offer their insights freely.
- '*Peer scrutiny'* and '*debriefing*' with supervisor (Shenton, 2004). Regular supervision was sought when coding, theming, and refining the stages of analysis. Shenton (2004) explains that different perspectives on the data should be welcomed so that assumptions are challenged. This was a helpful addition to the reflexive journal that allowed the researcher a 'fresh pair of eyes' when the researcher's closeness to the data inhibited perspective.

4.3.5 Transferability

Researchers opting for a strict positivist epistemology are concerned with external validity. External validity aims for the findings of one study to be generalised to other situations or populations (Merriam, 1998). Since the research is concerned with a small number of individuals in a particular environment, it is challenging to generalise in the same way (Shenton, 2004). Bassey (1981) proposed that if individuals believe

that their situations are similar to what is described in the study, they may feel the findings are more applicable to them. Therefore, adequate contextual information should be disclosed about the 'fieldwork sites' to enable individuals to make a call about the transferability of the study to their context/lives (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Although this should come second in priority to the researcher's ethical duty of confidentiality and anonymity. Transferability is therefore an inference the reader must make rather than claims from the researcher (Shenton, 2004). However, the extent to which sufficient information about participants and the phenomenon is communicated may depend on what the researcher values as being important and unimportant (Firestone, 1993). This subjectivity may mean that readers may never be able to confidently transfer findings of a study to their own context. The researcher of the thesis hopes to highlight important contextual information about the parameters and boundaries of the study, with the acknowledgement that full transferability may never be possible. Shenton (2004) recommends communicating the following:

- 'The number of organisations taking part in the study and where they are based.'
- 'Any restrictions in the type of people who contributed data'
- 'The number of participants involved in the fieldwork'
- 'The data collection methods that were employed'
- 'The number and length of the data collection sessions'
- 'The time period over which the data was collected' (See Appendix 6.6)

The researcher hopes these indications have been made clear throughout this methodology section.

The contextual features of the service in which this research took place (see section 3.2.4.2. Service Context) may hold some implications for the transferability of the study's findings. The local educational psychology service, in which the research was situated, is shaped by a distinctive culture informed by systemic and relational approaches, particularly those rooted in family therapy. These influences, while enriching the depth and coherence of the data, also created specific assumptions and shared language among participants. This homogeneity may have limited the diversity of views expressed, particularly around systemic practice and organisational change.

Reflexive Box	Influence of dominant thinking within the service

One important reflection is how much the Principal Educational Psychologist's (PEP's) background in Family Therapy has shaped the way systemic practice is understood in the service. Their enthusiasm and expertise in this area have clearly influenced the team culture, including how people talk about and carry out systemic work. The principal EP delivers training on FST to any new (A)/(T)/(S) or main-grade EP starting with the service. FST seems to be deeply rooted within the culture of the service. As someone who trained and now works in this environment, I've likely picked up a way of thinking that leans quite heavily on family therapy ideas, like relational risk-taking, holding a 'not-knowing' position, and working with 'safe uncertainties'. This has definitely helped me to see the value of relational and reflective work, but it may have also limited my perspective. I might have focused more on certain kinds of language or ways of thinking about systems, and organisation change while unintentionally overlooking other valid approaches or perspectives to organisational change. This influence probably affected both the parts of the data I found most interesting and the way I interpreted what participants said. While it adds depth and context to my analysis, I recognise it also narrows the lens. Reading more widely around other systemic models, outside the family therapy space, could have helped bring more variety and balance to the way I made sense of the findings.

Participants in the study, with one exception, were trained at the same professional institution. This shared background likely contributed to a similar interpretive lens and professional discourse. While this coherence may have enhanced the internal consistency of the findings, it potentially constrained the transferability of the findings to EPs trained in alternative paradigms or working within differently structured services (Hart & Stringer, 1989). Transferability is therefore mediated by the degree to which other services operate with similar relational values and systemic orientations.

Reflexive Box	Similar training background of participants
Another thing to reflect on is that all the EPs who took part in the study (apart from the PEP) trained at the same university, which wasn't the same one I'm training at. On one hand, this probably helped them share a common language and way of	

thinking, which made for smoother conversations and consistent reflections. But it also means their views might have been shaped by the particular theories and ideas emphasised during their training, which could limit how varied their perspectives were. That might mean the findings don't reflect the full range of views across the profession. From my side, being trained elsewhere meant I was potentially coming at the data with a different background and way of thinking. That's not necessarily a bad thing, it helped me notice things they might not have, but it also meant I had to be careful not to read too much of my own training influences into their words. This difference in perspective was valuable, but it called for a lot of reflexivity to make sure I stayed grounded in what participants were really saying. I think this limitation explains some of the challenges I faced when trying to conceptualise and define what I meant by systemic practice change and think I have been on a journey with this understanding. It is possible that I started the research with one understanding of systemic practice/change and by the end a different understanding.

Furthermore, the influence of the service's leadership, specifically the emphasis on family therapy-informed systemic thinking, may have shaped the way systemic practice was described and valued. While this provided a strong relational and reflective grounding for the research, it may also have narrowed the conceptual scope of what counted as 'systemic'. Approaches grounded in organisational development, implementation science, or ecological systems theory may have been less visible in the data (Fixsen et al., 2009; Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Readers are encouraged to critically consider the particularities of their setting when judging the extent to which findings may be applicable to other professional or geographical contexts. The strong relational and systemic identity of the service, while a strength in many respects, highlights the importance of contextually grounded interpretations in qualitative research.

4.3.6 Dependability

In empirical research, if a researcher were to repeat their experiment with the same participants, in the same context, utilising the same methods, the same or similar findings should be achieved. This is the concept of reliability. In qualitative research, the phenomenon being explored is often ever changing meaning reliability is difficult to achieve (Marshall and Rossman, 2014) Dependability can be a more helpful way of

viewing the trustworthiness of the research, therefore researchers should be explicit and detailed in the way they have described their research so that if another the study was to replicated it would be possible to do so accurately (Shenton, 2004). The researcher made steps to ensure the 'dependability' of their research, which are highlighted in the following bullet points.

- Described what was planned and executed (Shenton, 2004)
- Describing the details of what was done (Shenton, 2004)
- Communicating a reflective appraisal of the project – how effective was the process of the inquiry? (Shenton, 2004)

4.3.7 Confirmability

Confirmability is concerned with minimising researcher subjectivity in the analysis and findings of their study. However, the epistemological stance taken (critical realism) in this research acknowledges that the participants and researcher would impact each other, and that the researcher's assumptions, beliefs and values would impact (both consciously and unconsciously) on the facilitation of the interviews and the interpretation of the data. This stance means that the researcher can never be truly objective. However, the researcher aimed to be transparent (as much as possible) to name and minimise overt subjectivity. In order to encourage reflexivity and to be self-questioning, thoughtful and interrogating their positions, values and practices, the researcher adopted a 'reflective research journal'. This was started at the beginning stages of research, prior to settling on any particular research design or deciding fully on the research question.

4.4 Methodological considerations and limitations in the research

4.4.1 Thematic Analysis Limitations

Reflexive TA aims to analyse and interpret patterns across a qualitative data set to develop themes (Braun & Clarke, 2022). This methodology was best placed to analyse the research question and suited the critical realism stance of the research. The aim was to explore EP perspectives on how they facilitated organisational change within a system. Reflexive TA offered flexibility and a systematic method of coding and interpreting data. However, as with all methodologies, there are some strengths and limitations which ought to be considered.

Since the current research is considered inductive, theoretical assumptions were not relied upon, however the literature review considered different psychological

frameworks, models, and paradigms, it is possible that the Reflective TA and the analysis is, to some degree, theoretically located. Braun and Clarke (2022) considered that the traditional style of writing up research in the conventional literature review, methodology, findings, and discussion chapters resonates with a more objectivist, scientific, positivist model of research. Braun and Clarke (2022) recognise that Reflexive TA doesn't necessarily fit into this model well. A particular impact of this on the current research was having two separate chapters for findings and discussion. This was problematic as it led to some repetition of the interpretation of the data. In the future, merging the findings and discussion chapters would be considered as a solution to this particular issue and would sit more in line with Reflexive TA's epistemological stance and less in line with an objectivist- scientist model of research.

4.4.2 Interview limitations

This research adopted a semi-structured interviewing methodology. The questions were shared with the participants prior to the interview at the recruiting stage. The semi-structured questions allowed participants to know what to expect, whilst allowing the interviewer room to be spontaneous and explore participants' answers in more detail. However, some challenges arose. One of which was around the need to keep interview questions the same throughout to ensure the trustworthiness and credibility of the analysis, despite the semi-structured nature of the interviews. Braun & Clarke (2022, p. 270) describe this as 'positivism creep'. The need to ensure a 'scientific method of data collection'. This illustrates how psychologists are trained to be objective and that working reflexively is both rewarding and challenging.

On the other hand, it was also important that the interview schedules didn't veer too far away from the planned questions. Being reflective and reflexive in between interviews meant that it was tempting to explore particular concepts and themes that emerged from previous interviews. It was important that the questions stuck close to the planned schedule and any deviations were solely based on participant's answers, were open-ended and unbiased, whilst also acknowledging the researcher's own perspectives will be subconsciously determining the unscripted questions asked.

A further consideration was around sharing interview questions prior to the interviews. It was important that the participants fully understood the interests and aims of the research so that their answers were relevant to the research question. In addition, it was reflected that the research question around working at an organisational/systemic

level could be seen as difficult to answer since the EP role is largely viewed as working at an individual level and fulfilling statutory work. This is exemplified by one potential participant taking up the offer for a pre-interview discussion, where she voiced her concerns about her feeling like she had not completed any work relevant to the research question. Sharing the research questions was hoped to foster confidence and comfort in potential participants in their ability to answer the questions. It also allowed those participants who wanted to participate but didn't feel confident to answer the questions to decide whether or not to participate. This allows an ethical advantage as the consent can be viewed as 'full'.

On the other hand, having shared the questions with participants prior to the interviews meant that potentially some spontaneity was lost. Participants could think and reflect about what their answers could be prior to answering, they could formulate their answers in a way that makes them look the way they want to, the way that they think they should be, or how they think the researcher might want. One participant was also supervising the researcher, meaning they were an active part in formulating the research question, were fully aware of the researcher's interests, beliefs, placement experiences, research journey and aims. Therefore, they could have tailored their answers more specifically in line with what they thought the researcher wanted to hear. In addition, participants would have had time to consult with others, meaning their answers may not only reflect their own opinions but also the opinions of others.

4.4.3 Sample Limitations

The epistemological and ontological position of the current research means that seeking generalisability of the findings is not appropriate. Reflexive TA does not aim to generalise findings but instead analyses the data to gain insight into the subjective experiences of the participants (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

By looking at the sample, the trustworthiness and transferability of the research can be considered, and this is done so in the above chapters. There was a small sample size of five participants due to the time restraints of the current study; however, this sample size is considered appropriate for a TA methodology. Having five participants allowed for a detailed and rich analysis of the data set. However, limitations within the participant sample will now be discussed.

Due to the nature of voluntary recruitment, the EPs that were happy to take part in the research may not be representative of the wider EP community or of the EP community

specific to the Educational Psychology Service where the research took place. Demonstrating this, an EP voiced their concerns around her wanting to participate in the research but felt she didn't have an experience of facilitating organisational change that was of a 'good enough' quality to talk about. She decided not to participate, meaning that her work was not included in the analysis. Therefore, the data in the study may only represent EPs who were confident enough in the quality of their work. This may have limited the representativeness of the data and perhaps some nuance of different EPs practising in different ways with different preferences.

4.4.4 Theoretical Positioning

As noted in the Conclusion, no specific systemic theory was consciously adopted at the outset of this research. However, upon retrospective reflection, General Systems Theory (GST) (von Bertalanffy, 1968) aligns most closely with the original research intent due to its broad conceptualisation of systems as dynamic and interconnected. Whilst participants appeared to conceptualise organisations and systems closely aligned to GST's definition of a system, their systemic thinking and practice aligned more closely with Family Systems Theory's perspectives (Bowen, 1978; Minuchin, 1974).

Reflecting on whether providing or establishing a definition of systems, systemic thinking, and systemic practice at the outset would have enhanced clarity and coherence, several considerations arise. Explicitly defining systemic thinking and practice according to General Systems Theory (GST) may have shaped participant reflections by potentially limiting their expressions predominantly within GST's framework. This could have inadvertently restricted the rich diversity of perspectives shared, particularly the evident emphasis on FST thinking and practice. Allowing participants the freedom to articulate their implicit understandings without constraining them within GST definitions facilitated a more nuanced exploration of their personal constructs and experiences of systemic change.

However, GST as an overarching or umbrella theoretical framework offers a broad and inclusive conceptualisation of systems as organised wholes with interdependent components and interactions (von Bertalanffy, 1968). Due to its generality, explicitly establishing GST's definition at the outset might not have significantly altered participants' reflections, as their implicit understandings already broadly resonated with this definition.

Establishing a shared definition at the outset could have facilitated greater resemblance between literature review findings and participant reflections, enhancing the coherence or 'golden thread' throughout the research. Such a structured approach might have encouraged more consistent alignment between the theoretical grounding and findings, potentially strengthening the overall narrative and interpretative clarity of the research.

In summary, the absence of a predefined shared understanding allowed participants to articulate a broad spectrum of systemic perspectives, enriching the data's depth and variety. Nevertheless, a clearly defined theoretical starting point could have provided greater structural coherence, ensuring consistent alignment between the theoretical underpinnings and findings throughout the study.

4.5 Dissemination of Research Findings

This research's findings will be shared with participants and the Educational Psychology Service in which the researcher and participants work. The research will be presented in a way that is accessible and fully reflects the analysis and journey of the research. This will most likely be during a staff meeting, where participants and other EPs, Assistant EPs and Trainee EPs will be given the opportunity to reflect back and discuss how the interpretation of the data and if they feel like the research has impacted how they think about working at an organisational level and potential future implications for practice.

4.6 Distinct contribution of the current research

EPs working at a systemic and organisational level is an area that is not without research and literature. To name just some examples, Morgan (2016) explored how EPs can facilitate organisational change using a solution-focused approach, Hughes et al. (2019) wonder how person-centred planning can contribute to organisational change, Sparling et al. (2022) evaluated a whole-school development project with a focus on social, emotional and mental health needs and Kan and Stringer (2020) present an 'Implementation Framework' following their critique of one-off training approaches. However, the current research offers a broader examination of how EPs can facilitate organisational change within the systems they work with. The current study does not limit the analysis to systemic change within a particular area or with the use of a particular approach/tool; it captures the wide-ranging and varied nature of systemic work. No two participants approached the change with the same tool or

framework, but all facilitated systemic change. In some interviews, participants were asked 'why did you do .... and not ….?', participants reflected and responded saying that approaching the work with a different tool or framework would have perhaps led to a similar outcome. This speaks to there being no right or wrong way to facilitate organisational change so long as the EP has psychologically safe relationships, leads with psychology, thinks systemically and factors in opportunities and time to embed change across different levels of the system. For this reason, this research is unique and is an original contribution, as this particular research question has never been asked of the EPs within the Education Psychology Service.

4.7 Implications

The current research aimed to provide an opportunity for EPs to voice their experiences of facilitating organisational change. However, Flutter (2023) raises the critical question: *what value does 'voice' hold if it is not genuinely listened to?*' Therefore, the following sections will consider how the current research can provide some contribution to the practice of EPs, schools, and Local Authorities, despite the limitations outlined above.

4.7.1 Possible implications for Educational Psychologists (EPs)

Educational Psychology has already acknowledged that EPs are well placed and have an important role in supporting schools at a systemic and organisational level. The EPs participating in the current valued working systemically as opposed to individually, and meeting statutory demands. This preference is echoed by other EPs in the literature. The current research hopes to offer EPs a framework (through themes) when considering working at an organisational level. For example, EPs may consider their relationships with SENCos and schools' staff and wonder if they (the SENCo and EP) feel safe enough to talk systemically about the issues arising in the school. The current study acknowledged that this may lead to feelings of vulnerability as the SENCOs would perhaps need to acknowledge to an external professional that there were issues within the system or that perhaps aspects of teacher/SENCO practice weren't working as effectively as they could be. Perhaps EPs might consider spending time and energy in fostering their professional relationships and consider their attunement, mentalising and consultation skills to nurture a psychologically safe relationship.

In addition, the current study recognised that a potential barrier to EPs facilitating organisational change is if EPs do not fully embrace opportunities to work at this level. Nearly all participating EPs reported volunteering the potential work idea to schools in the contracting stages of planning. They were responsible for 'flying the flag' for systemic and organisational work, and none of the EPs reported that the work was proposed by the school. Perhaps this is because school staff see an EP's role as working from the individual level and are SEND assessors (Ashton & Roberts, 2007). Further, nearly all participating EPs reported that there were times when the work felt daunting, unfamiliar, or scary. All these participants expressed that they needed to overcome these feelings and attempt to view the work as a different opportunity, exciting and potentially rewarding. Therefore, the current study hopes to empower EPs to have (or continue to have) conversations with schools, which could lead to engaging in systemic work.

4.7.2 Possible implications for schools

The findings of the current study indicate that schools and SENCOs are under many different pressures. Pressures from the government, their stakeholders, policies, curricula, assessments, and other services. They have to meet the ever-growing (and changing) lists of demands placed upon them. The participants in the current study voiced their concern for individual staff being highly stressed and overall 'overwhelmed' schools. This research does not aim to add another recommendation for school staff, but hopes that SENCOs and Head Teachers will view EPs as a valuable resource to facilitate systemic changes that could lead to improved outcomes for their children and young people, manage growing pressures and consider what is best for their staff and key stakeholders. This research found that one of the barriers for EPs aiming to facilitate organisational change was the perception of their role as working on an individual and casework basis, assessing SEND by members of school communities. Therefore, this study hopes to challenge this perception and encourages teachers, SENCOs and Head Teachers to consider how an EP could aid their school development.

4.7.3Possible implications for Local Authorities (LAs) and the wider government

The current study hopes to highlight that EPs are well placed to facilitate organisational change, that it is difficult but possible. Part of this difficulty is that it takes significant capacity on the part of the EP. For example, it would not be efficient to facilitate organisational change via a one-off piece of training. The third theme (opportunities

and time to embed change) hopes to highlight the importance of an ongoing dialogue between EP and the school to ensure the best chances of complete change adoption. It is hoped that this study contributes to an overall view that EP work in systemic and preventive ways is an efficient and valued use of EP time, especially compared with individual case work, and that, for this work to continue and grow, funding and EP capacity should be prioritised.

The study perhaps also has some recommendations for Educational Psychology Services. It is recommended that services consider how much discussion their EPs are having with schools and other services about ways in which systemic conversations can be prompted. For example, organisational/systemic development could be a standing item at termly planning meetings with schools, prompting discussion regarding policies, professional practice, processes, and school structure rather than retaining a focus on individual casework.

Furthermore, despite the low number of interviews and participants being part of a small Educational Psychology Service, the impressive range of experiences documented speaks to the varied differences EPs can make in schools. Participants reported enjoying sharing and reflecting on their experiences. Other members of the Educational Psychology Service have voiced an interest in hearing about the data and colleagues' experiences in working systemically with the aim of learning from others. Therefore, a further recommendation could be for Educational Psychology Services to find opportunities to celebrate their EPs' contribution to working systemically, organisationally and preventatively. Sharing experiences allows EP to celebrate interesting and successful work as well as offering opportunities to consider their own practice.

4.8 Suggestions for future research

The current research highlighted relationships as a key theme for how EPs facilitate organisational change, and because the majority of the EPs in the study explained that they worked *with* school staff rather than enforcing change or approaching the change from an 'expert' stance. Therefore, an important future research paper could explore SENCO and/or Head Teachers' experiences of having EP involvement to facilitate organisational change. Whilst EPs in this current study valued and thought their unique contribution was the ability to bring and share psychology, facilitate systemic thinking, and find opportunities to embed change, would school staff view this as the contribution of the EP role or something else? Would they even value the

EP role when attempting to bring about organisational change, or feel they are best without external support? It would have been interesting to talk to the EP's corresponding SENCO/Head Teacher they worked with in the current study to gain their perspective on some of the facilitating and hindering factors to the change; however, the time limitations of the research meant this was not possible.

Future research could also ask a similar research question from another group of EPs within another Educational Psychology Service. The Educational Psychology Service in the current research has a strong focus on relationships; the EP's professional relationship and young people's relationships are often talked about within the team meetings and often appear in psychologists' formulations around children and young people's strengths and needs. This leads to potential wandering around the first theme (within psychologically safe relationships). Perhaps another group of EPs would not have had such a focus within their answers to similar questions. Future research could go some way to explore the extent to which a psychologically safe relationship is needed to facilitate organisational change.

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6 Appendices

6.1 Information Sheet

School of Psychology

Information Sheet

Title of Project: An exploration of how Educational Psychologists view their role in facilitating organisational change when working with Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators

Insert Ethics Approval Number: S1460 Researcher: Chloe Cheshire (chloe.cheshire@nottingham.ac.uk) Supervisors: Dr Victoria Lewis (Victoria.lewis@nottingham.ac.uk)

This is an invitation to take part in a research study on exploring Educational Psychologist's role in conducting work with a focus on 'organisational change'.

I am looking for Educational Psychologists (EPs) who would be interested in talking to me about their experiences in contracting and carrying out work which led to 'organisational change'. This type of work refers to efforts to extend the 'individualized problems' of the child or young person and search for contribution to improve matters for all/groups of children by intervening at accessible levels of the context, be it in regard to class, school or local authority policy development.

You are not required to take part in this research. If you are interested in participating, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully.

If you participate, I will ask you to attend one interview of approximately 45 minutes with me where you will be asked to talk about your experiences in contracting work leading to organisational change. Each session will be audio recorded and later transcribed for the purposes of data gathering.

The interviews will take place in the ground floor conference room at the service's office.

Participation in this study is totally voluntary and you are under no obligation to take part. You are free to withdraw at any point before or during the study. All data collected will be kept confidential and used for research purposes only. It will be stored in compliance with the Data Protection Act. The data gathered will not only be accessible

to the researcher, but may also be accessed by the supervisor, and could in principle be requisitioned by a regulatory authority in the event of a suspected ethical breach or academic misconduct.

6.2 Interview Schedule

I plan to use the following questions in the interview. Please consider the questions and how you might answer them prior to the interview taking place. As the interview is semi-structured, I may ask additional, follow up questions.

· Can you think of an example of where you feel you made a difference in a school at an organisational level?

· What happened? What was the reach to your work? I.e. who did your work impact?

· What were the facilitating factors and barriers to your involvement?

· Were there any considerations/ reflections you had before/during/after that conversation/piece of work took place?

· In hindsight, how do you think/feel that experience went? Would you have done anything differently?

After the study, I will present my findings to the EPS. You are not obliged to attend the presentation. If you have any further questions or reflections following the study or presentation, you are more than welcome to get in touch.

If you have any questions or concerns please don't hesitate to ask at any stage of the research. We can also be contacted after your participation at the above address.

First point of contact: Chloe Cheshire (Researcher) – chloe.cheshire@nottingham.ac.uk

Second Point of contact: Dr Victoria Lewis (Researcher's Supervisor) – victoria.lewis@nottingham.ac.uk

If you have any complaints about the study, please contact:

Stephen Jackson (Chair of Ethics Committee) stephen.jackson@nottingham.ac.uk

6.3 Interview Schedule 2

· Can you think of an example of where you feel you made a difference in a school at an organisational level?

· What happened? What was the reach to your work? I.e. who did your work impact?

· What were the facilitating factors and barriers to your involvement?

· Were there any considerations/ reflections you had before/during/after that conversation/piece of work took place?

· In hindsight, how do you think/feel that experience went? Would you have done anything differently?

6.3 Consent Form

School of Psychology

Consent Form

Title of Project: An exploration of how Educational Psychologists view their role in facilitating organisational change when working with Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators

Ethics Approval Number:S1460 Researcher(s): Chloe Cheshire (chloe.cheshire@nottingham.ac.uk) Supervisor(s): Dr Victoria Lewis (Victoria.lewis@nottingham.ac.uk)

The participant should answer these questions independently:

· Have you read and understood the Information Sheet? YES/NO

· Have you had the opportunity to ask questions about the study? YES/NO

· Have all your questions been answered satisfactorily (if applicable)? YES/NO

· Do you understand that you are free to withdraw from the study? YES/NO

(at any time and without giving a reason)

· I give permission for my data from this study to be shared with other researchers provided that my anonymity is completely protected. YES/NO

· Do you agree to take part in the study? YES/NO

“This study has been explained to me to my satisfaction, and I agree to take part. I understand that I am free to withdraw at any time.”

Signature of the Participant: Date:

Name (in block capitals)

I have explained the study to the above participant and he/she has agreed to take part.

Signature of researcher: Date:

6.5 Privacy Notice

Privacy Notice

Research participant privacy notice

Privacy information for Research Participants

For information about the University's obligations with respect to your data, who you can get in touch with and your rights as a data subject, please visit: www.nottingham.ac.uk/utilities/privacy/privacy.aspx.

Why we collect your personal data

We collect personal data under the terms of the University's Royal Charter in our capacity as a teaching and research body to advance education and learning. Specific purposes for data collection on this occasion are completion of a research study investigating EP experiences of organisational change work.

Legal basis for processing your personal data under GDPR

The legal basis for processing your personal data on this occasion is Article 6(1a) consent of the data subject.

Special category personal data In addition to the legal basis for processing your personal data, the University must meet a further basis when processing any special category data, including: personal data revealing racial or ethnic origin, political opinions, religious or philosophical beliefs, or trade union membership, and the processing of genetic data, biometric data for the purpose of uniquely identifying a natural person, data concerning health or data concerning a natural person's sex life or sexual orientation.

The basis for processing your sensitive personal data on this occasion is Article 9(2a) the data subject has given explicit consent to the processing.

How long we keep your data The University may store your data for up to 25 years and for a period of no less than 7 years after the research project finishes. The

researchers who gathered or processed the data may also store the data indefinitely and reuse it in future research. Measures to safeguard your stored data will include storing data on a secure server in a password protected folder, which only the researcher will have access to. Additionally, voice recordings will be deleted once transcribed and after this point all data will be anonymous.

Who we share your data with Anonymous extracts of your data may be disclosed in published works that are posted online for use by the scientific community.

6.6 Timeline of research

Ethics Proposed – September 2022

Ethics Agreed – October 2022

Data collection – January 2023 – May 2023

Data analysis – May 2023

Data re-analysis – June 2023– July 2023

Write up- July 2023– August 2023

Break (see reflection box) – August 2023 – July 2024

Finish write up - August 2024

VIVA – December 2024

Finish write up including amendments – December 2025

Reflection Box	Break from research
In August 2023, I was experiencing significant distress relating to my thesis write up and analysis. I sought help from my colleagues, where we had regular 'reflecting teams'. It was around this time that the reflecting team recommended, I stopped attempting to write my thesis as it was causing too much harm to my mental health. They recommended that regular and continued 'reflecting teams' would be required to understand and come to terms with the difficulties I was facing. These sessions have been and continue to be helpful but extremely difficult as I had to be extremely vulnerable. We discussed and understood my emotional response to writing and completing my thesis as being a trauma response.	

Part of this response meant that I felt (and often continue to feel) unable to access support provided Nottingham university, I understand that this was/is unhelpful and likely frustrating for the teaching and tutorial team on the course. I sincerely apologise for this.

It took around 10 months for the reflecting teams to move from talking about my distress and mental health to talking about my thesis again. After my request for extension was turned down in June 2024, I made the decision to try to meet the deadline of August 2024 (with the support of supervision). This was scary as I feared the deadline would send me back to where I was a year ago or worse. Luckily, I have been able to withstand the pressure of finishing my thesis with a pending deadline without too much emotional distress.

6.7 CASP Quality Appraisal

Table 6

CASP Quality Appraisal – Ratings and Justifications

Allen and Bond (2021)		
CASP Question	Rating	Justification
1.Clear aims?	Yes	The study aims to explore how psychological frameworks inform EP practice in response to CSE. The objectives are stated and align with an identified gap in the literature.
2. Appropriate methodology?	Yes	A qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews and reflexive thematic analysis is well-suited to the exploratory, experiential nature of the research question.
3.Research design appropriate?	Yes	The design (interviews) matches the study's exploratory aim. The authors acknowledge limitations in sample size and make no generalisability claims.
4.Recruitment strategy appropriate?	Yes	Recruitment initially aimed for broader inclusion across disciplines, then adapted to target EPs through opportunistic sampling. This strategy was justified in light of recruitment challenges.
5.Data collection method appropriate?	Yes	Semi-structured interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and analysed using a qualitative framework (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Member checks were not mentioned.
6.Consideration of researcher-participant relationship?	Yes	Ethical implications of power, reflexivity, and possible emotional impacts were discussed. Additional supervision was offered. The authors demonstrated sensitivity to the relational dynamics.
7.Ethical issues considered?	Yes	Ethical approval was obtained from a university ethics board. Informed consent, anonymity, and participant support were considered. The study navigated sensitive topics responsibly.
8.Rigorous data analysis?	Yes	Analysis followed Braun & Clarke's reflexive thematic approach. Themes were rich, theoretically grounded, and

		presented with illustrative quotations. The process was transparent.
9.Clear statement of findings?	Yes	Findings are structured into three overarching themes and mapped onto a conceptual diagram. Participant voices are integrated with analytical commentary.
10.Value of the research?	Yes	The study fills a gap in educational psychology practice literature on CSE and offers actionable insights for systemic and contextual safeguarding responses.
Overall CASP Quality Rating		10/10 – High Quality
Burnham (2013)		
CASP Question	Rating	Justification
1.Clear aims?	Yes	The study clearly aims to explore EPs' epistemological positions and how these influence their professional practices.
2.Appropriate methodology?	Yes	A qualitative, biographical methodology is appropriate given the focus on lived experience and belief systems.
3.Research design appropriate?	Yes	The interview, thematic analysis format aligns with the research goals and is justified in the paper.
4.Recruitment strategy appropriate?	Yes	EPs were recruited through a voluntary response to a conference invitation. convenience-based
5.Data collection method appropriate?	Yes	Interviews were semi-structured, recorded, transcribed, and member checked. Clear effort to allow deep reflection.
6.Consideration of researcher-participant relationship?	Yes	The researcher is reflexive, discusses positionality, and even invited participants to amend transcripts. Strong attention to power dynamics.
7.Ethical issues considered?	Yes	Participants gave informed consent, chose the interview setting, and retained control over data presentation. Ethics are embedded throughout.
8.Rigorous data analysis?	Yes	Thematic analysis was guided by Braun & Clarke's model. Coding and theme development are explained.
9.Clear statement of findings?	Yes	Findings are organised into three main themes, illustrated with quotes, and linked back to the research aims.
10.Value of the research?	Yes	The study offers insight into the philosophical basis of EP practice and raises important questions about the profession's identity.
Overall CASP Quality Rating		10/10 – High Quality
Elms and Higgins (2022)		
CASP Question	Rating	Justification
1.Clear aims?	Yes	The aim is stated: to explore how EPs might support schools working with young people (YP) with eating disorders (EDs), based on the perspectives of parents, staff, and EPs.
2.Appropriate methodology?	Yes	A mixed-methods design grounded in Critical Realism and Contextualism is appropriate given the systemic and experiential nature of the research questions.
3.Research design appropriate?	Yes	The two-part structure (questionnaire and interviews) is justified and builds depth. The design explores both perceptions and systemic issues.

4.Recruitment strategy appropriate?	Yes	Recruitment through schools and services was logical. The authors acknowledge the limitations of self-selection and sample size.
5.Data collection method appropriate?	Yes	Data collection via online questionnaires (n=91) and interviews with 8 EPs was detailed and sensitive to topic complexity. Piloting added rigour.
6.Consideration of researcher-participant relationship?	Yes	Reflexivity and ethical sensitivity are demonstrated. Power imbalances and emotional burden are discussed, particularly in relation to sensitive ED topics.
7.Ethical issues considered?	Yes	Ethics approval was obtained. Confidentiality, informed consent, and participant welfare (especially given ED sensitivity) are covered.
8.Rigorous data analysis?	Yes	Quantitative data used descriptive stats. Thematic analysis followed Braun & Clarke's reflexive model. Validity checks added depth.
9.Clear statement of findings?	Yes	Findings are thematically rich and illustrated with quotes. Tables and figures (e.g., thematic maps, venn diagrams) help clarify insights from all three participant groups.
10.Value of the research?	Yes	The study contributes insights into the role of EPs in systemic MH support for EDs, a previously under-explored area. Practical implications are outlined.
Overall CASP Quality Rating		10/10 – High Quality
Lee and Wood (2017)		
CASP Question	Rating	Justification
1.Clear aims?	Yes	The study clearly investigates the changing role of EPs within traded service models, aiming to understand service delivery, contribution, and perceptions.
2.Appropriate methodology?	Yes	A mixed-methods multiple case study design grounded in critical realism is appropriate for the complex, contextual nature of service reform.
3.Research design appropriate?	Yes	The use of two contrasting EPSs (emerging and established trading) and mixed data (interviews, focus groups, documents, audits) suits the exploratory aim.
4.Recruitment strategy appropriate?	Yes	Participants were recruited with clear inclusion criteria. A balanced mix of EPs, commissioners, and EPS leads was involved.
5.Data collection method appropriate?	Yes	Data sources included interviews, focus groups, service brochures, and internal audit data. forms of triangulated data were collected.
6.Consideration of researcher-participant relationship?	Yes	The study acknowledges relational risks within case study work, especially among colleagues, and outlines ethical steps to reduce bias.
7.Ethical issues considered?	Yes	Full university ethical approval, informed consent, confidentiality, and data protection were observed. Case-specific ethical dilemmas were acknowledged.
8.Rigorous data analysis?	Yes	Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used; a second coder helped confirm reliability Cross-case analysis increased trustworthiness.

9.Clear statement of findings?	Yes	Six superordinate themes were developed and described, with supportive quotes from multiple perspectives (EPs, leads, commissioners).
10.Value of the research?	Yes	The study offers policy-relevant insights into the role of EPs under marketised conditions and practical implications for future EPS strategy.
Overall CASP Quality Rating		10/10 – High Quality
Morris and Atkinson (2018)		
CASP Question	Rating	Justification
1.Clear aims?	Yes	The study explores how EPs can extend practice to support young people's mental health in Further Education (FE), framed by two explicit research questions.
2.Appropriate methodology?	Yes	The use of Appreciative Inquiry (AI) within an Action Research (AR) framework is justified for co-constructing practice development with EPs.
3.Research design appropriate?	Yes	A four-stage AI cycle (Definition, Discovery, Dream, Design) involving focus groups with EPs was designed to capture collaborative professional dialogue and change.
4.Recruitment strategy appropriate?	Yes	Participants were purposively sampled from one EPS based on interest and role relevance. The sample was small but fit the aims of an exploratory service-focused AR study.
5.Data collection method appropriate?	Yes	Data were collected via four AI-informed focus groups, plus a fieldwork diary. Engagement was high, and the sessions seemed interactive and reflective.
6.Consideration of researcher-participant relationship?	Yes	Reflexivity was discussed, especially concerning power dynamics and co-construction within AR. The first author's dual role as facilitator and insider was acknowledged and critically examined.
7.Ethical issues considered?	Yes	University ethical approval was granted. Informed consent, confidentiality, and participant welfare were addressed. Limitations due to positionality were transparently reported.
8.Rigorous data analysis?	Yes	A two-level analysis process was used: participatory theme development during focus groups and thematic analysis of transcripts from the "Dream" and "Design" phases. Coding and theme refinement were described.
9.Clear statement of findings?	Yes	Six themes and associated subthemes were presented in tables and narrative form, supported by participant quotes and linked to relevant literature.
10.Value of the research?	Yes	The study contributes insights into post-16 EP work, including systemic support, therapeutic group work, and transition planning, potentially underrepresented areas in EP literature.
Overall CASP Quality Rating		10/10 – High quality
Overall CASP Quality Rating		
Schulze et al, (2019)		
CASP Question	Rating	Justification
1.Clear aims?	Yes	The study aimed to explore how EPs in England understand and engage with social justice, addressing a significant research gap

2.Appropriate methodology?	Yes	A qualitative, exploratory design using semi-structured interviews aligns with the study's aim to understand complex, subjective professional experiences.
3.Research design appropriate?	Yes	A thematic analysis of interviews with nine EPs fits the study's exploratory nature and constructivist/critical-realist framework.
4.Recruitment strategy appropriate?	Yes	Purposive sampling of practising EPs was appropriate, though the authors note self-selection bias due to the topic's relevance.
5.Data collection method appropriate?	Yes	Semi-structured interviews provided rich data. Questions were structured around four research questions.
6.Consideration of researcher-participant relationship?	Yes	Reflexivity was explicitly discussed, including the lead researcher's positionality as a practitioner and social justice advocate.
7.Ethical issues considered?	Yes	Ethical approval was obtained, and BPS/HCPC codes were followed. Anonymity, informed consent, and participant welfare were respected.
8.Rigorous data analysis?	Yes	Braun & Clarke's thematic analysis applied. Trustworthiness steps included co-coding, member checks, and audit trails.
9.Clear statement of findings?	Yes	Findings were presented, structured by research question and themes, and illustrated with participant quotes.
10.Value of the research?	Yes	This is a seminal UK-based study, extending the literature on EPs and social justice., with practical and policy implications.
Overall CASP Quality Rating		10/10 – High Quality
Sedgwick and Stothard (2019)		
CASP Question	Rating	Justification
1.Clear aims?	Yes	The study clearly aims to explore EPs' perceptions, knowledge, and practices concerning SLCN, a topic of policy and practice relevance.
2.Appropriate methodology?	Yes	Semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis are appropriate for exploring EPs' subjective experiences and insights.
3.Research design appropriate?	Yes	The use of interviews with eight EPs, purposively sampled for diversity in service and background, supports the study's exploratory and reflective goals.
4.Recruitment strategy appropriate?	Yes	Participants were selected to reflect a range of settings, experience, and roles. The rationale for the sampling strategy was explained and justified.
5.Data collection method appropriate?	Yes	Semi-structured interviews were piloted and revised. Interviews were recorded, transcribed.
6.Consideration of researcher-participant relationship?	Yes	Reflexivity and positionality were acknowledged. Efforts were made to reduce bias, including co-coding and member checking.
7.Ethical issues considered?	Yes	Ethical approval was obtained, informed consent secured, and confidentiality maintained. The research followed professional guidelines.

8.Rigorous data analysis?	Yes	Braun & Clarke's six-phase model was used. Co-coding, member checking, and negative case analysis were employed to enhance credibility.
9.Clear statement of findings?	Yes	Findings were structured around research questions and supported by thematic maps and direct participant quotes. Multiple perspectives were represented.
10.Value of the research?	Yes	The study identifies practice gaps, role ambiguity, and joint working challenges, potentially adding value to professional development and systemic reform discussions.
Overall CASP Quality Rating		10/10 – High Quality
Zafeiriou and Gulliford (2020)		
CASP Question	Rating	Justification
1.Clear aims?	Yes	The study aims to develop a grounded theory explaining how EPs support young people's mental health through school-based casework. The aims are clear
2.Appropriate methodology?	Yes	A constructivist grounded theory (GT) approach seemed appropriate for developing theory from EP practices in school mental health.
3.Research design appropriate?	Yes	The iterative GT design allowed for theoretical sampling and deep analysis. The structure (interviews, memos, theoretical sampling) was justified.
4.Recruitment strategy appropriate?	Yes	Purposive sampling of 5 EPs from a single local authority, later supplemented with theoretical sampling, was appropriate for GT. Participants were diverse in experience and background.
5.Data collection method appropriate?	Yes	Data collection involved intensive interviews, with follow-up interviews guided by emerging theory. Reflexivity and depth were built into the process.
6.Consideration of researcher-participant relationship?	Yes	Researcher reflexivity is discussed in depth. The study acknowledges the relational dynamics and insider knowledge of the author.
7.Ethical issues considered?	Yes	University and BPS ethical frameworks were followed. Informed consent, confidentiality, and participant welfare were thoroughly addressed.
8.Rigorous data analysis?	Yes	GT coding stages (initial, focused, theoretical) were transparent. Memo writing, diagramming, and constant comparative analysis were used,
9.Clear statement of findings?	Yes	A coherent GT was presented, with four main conceptual categories and two interacting processes. Illustrative quotes and figures were provided.
10.Value of the research?	Yes	This offering theoretical framework for EP mental health consultation that integrates emotional containment and cognitive reframing.
Overall CASP Quality Rating		10/10 – High Quality

6.8 Example extract for Framework Synthesis (Oliver et al., 2008) using the predfined category of 'EPs are scientist practitioners' (Fallon et al., 2010) and data extracts

Framework Synthesis

Key

Support's Fallon's definition

Does not fully support Fallon's definition

EPs are Scientist-Practitioners

Allen and Bond (2021)

- The study reinforces EP as a scientist-practitioner
- EPs in the study demonstrated reflective practice grounded in psychological theory, e.g., using Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy, Personal Construct Psychology, and Ecological Systems Theory.

Burnham (2013)

- participants were ambivalent about this identity; most valued practical utility over scientific rigour.
- EPs often prioritised outcomes and usefulness: "we're not bothered about the truth… we want to perhaps create a change" (p. 25).
- Participants generally rejected positivist notions of truth; most aligned more with pragmatism than scientific realism.
- EPs can be understood as *bricoleurs* (Burnham, 2013, p. 26), flexibly assembling methods to suit individual contexts rather than following fixed, scientific protocols.

Elms and Higgins (2022)

- EP participants demonstrated some alignment with this identity, though with caveats:
    - They showed reflexivity and a desire to use psychological research to inform practice.
    - EPs acknowledged limitations in their own knowledge bae around eating disorders (EDs), noting the need to "upskill themselves" (p. 167).
    - While evidence-based practice was valued, there was little indication that participants actively engaged in research themselves.
- EPs recognised the value of critical thinking, systemic understanding, and contextual responsiveness.

Lee and Woods (2017)

- Participants did not explicitly use the term "scientist-practitioner," but their views suggested partial alignment.
- EPs valued reflective, evidence-informed practice and welcomed the opportunity for innovation (often enabled by trading).
- However, demands for measurable outcomes shifted some EPs toward more directive, less exploratory practice (e.g., "I try not to be totally directive, but I definitely have noticed that shift").
- The focus on measurable outcomes and packages may undermine exploratory psychological formulation.

Morris and Atkinson's (2018)

- Participants did not explicitly refer to themselves as "scientist-practitioners" but perhaps demonstrated some reflective, exploratory, and evidence-informed thinking.
- The study used action research and appreciative inquiry, encouraging EPs to generate and co-construct knowledge, a form of participatory scientific practice.
- They reflected critically on the need o evidence impact and considered how best to demonstrate psychological value to FE commissioners.

Osborne et al. (2019)

- Participants did not explicitly refer to themselves as "scientist-practitioners".
- However, many perhaps demonstrated reflective, applied, and context-sensitive thinking, particularly in relation to trauma, attachment, and emotional wellbeing.
- Some EPs highlighted the need for more research to evidence their impact.
- EPs acknowledged the lack of objective outcome measures, noting that much of their contribution remains subjectively perceived.

Schulze et al. (2019)

- Participants did not explicitly refer to themselves as "scientist-practitioners".
- but their engagement with critical reflection, constructivist epistemologies, and appreciative inquiry methods suggests alignment with the scientist-practitioner framework.
- They demonstrated awareness of the ethical, political, and power dynamics of practice, perhaps indicating an reflexive approach.
- For example, participants challenged the expectation that they should "come in, do a cognitive assessment and then vanish," instead favouring relational and contextually driven work (p. 387).

Sedgwick and Stothard (2019)

- Participants did not explicitly identify themselves as *scientist-practitioners*.
- However, there was a recognition of the need for evidence-based and practice-based approaches:
- "We should be evidence-based in our approach… [and] in a nice position of creating… practice-based evidence."p
- Despite this, most EPs acknowledged gaps in their training or knowledge around speech, language and communication needs (SLCN), and some questioned their professional identity in this area.
- The lack of consistent service policies and reliance on informal peer consensus (rather than empirical standards) limits full realisation of the scientist-practitioner model.

Zafeiriou and Gulliford (2020)

- EPs perhaps demonstrated this identity through hypothesis formulation, evidence gathering, and reflective decision-making.
- EPs actively engaged in "joining theory with evidence" and "formulating psychological hypotheses" based on observations, assessments, and consultations.
- The study explicitly referred to this identity in its focused code: *"being a scientist-practitioner"*.

6.9 Extract of generating initial themes (first analysis – not used)

Systems

Overwhelmed systems

Lack of school funding

Systems work serves to take the problem away from the system or 'problem holder'

Responding empathetically to overwhelmed schools

Schools are businesses – SC can be viewed as cost-effective

Systems work seen as a 'magic wand' by schools who have made SC.

School not sure what support they need from the EP

SC is seen as unobtainable

Change is threatening

Schools feel safer by making efforts to minimise the overwhelming feeling of whole school/systems change. They make efforts to ensure they can paddle before jumping in.

Prospect of change is scary/threatening (fear of the unknown). There is comfort and safety in the norm.

Starting the change process can feel unusual

Schools need to be open to SC and willing to put in effort, think differently

EP and SENCO recognising different systems within and around the school system and working to facilitate change with in the sub-systems.

Systems are made up of individuals

Subsystems

Proactive, confident and competent SLT champion as driver for change

Systemic work led to a change in language and ways of viewing CYP

EP working with different levels (individual, group, whole school)

SC can occur after small and simple differences.

EP knowledge and practice

Making psychology accessible

One off piece of work as Training/workshops as SC tool

EPs feeling unsure and unconfident but doing it anyway

Strength based coaching as tool for SC

EP undervalue their role/efforts in facilitating SC

Consultation as SC tool

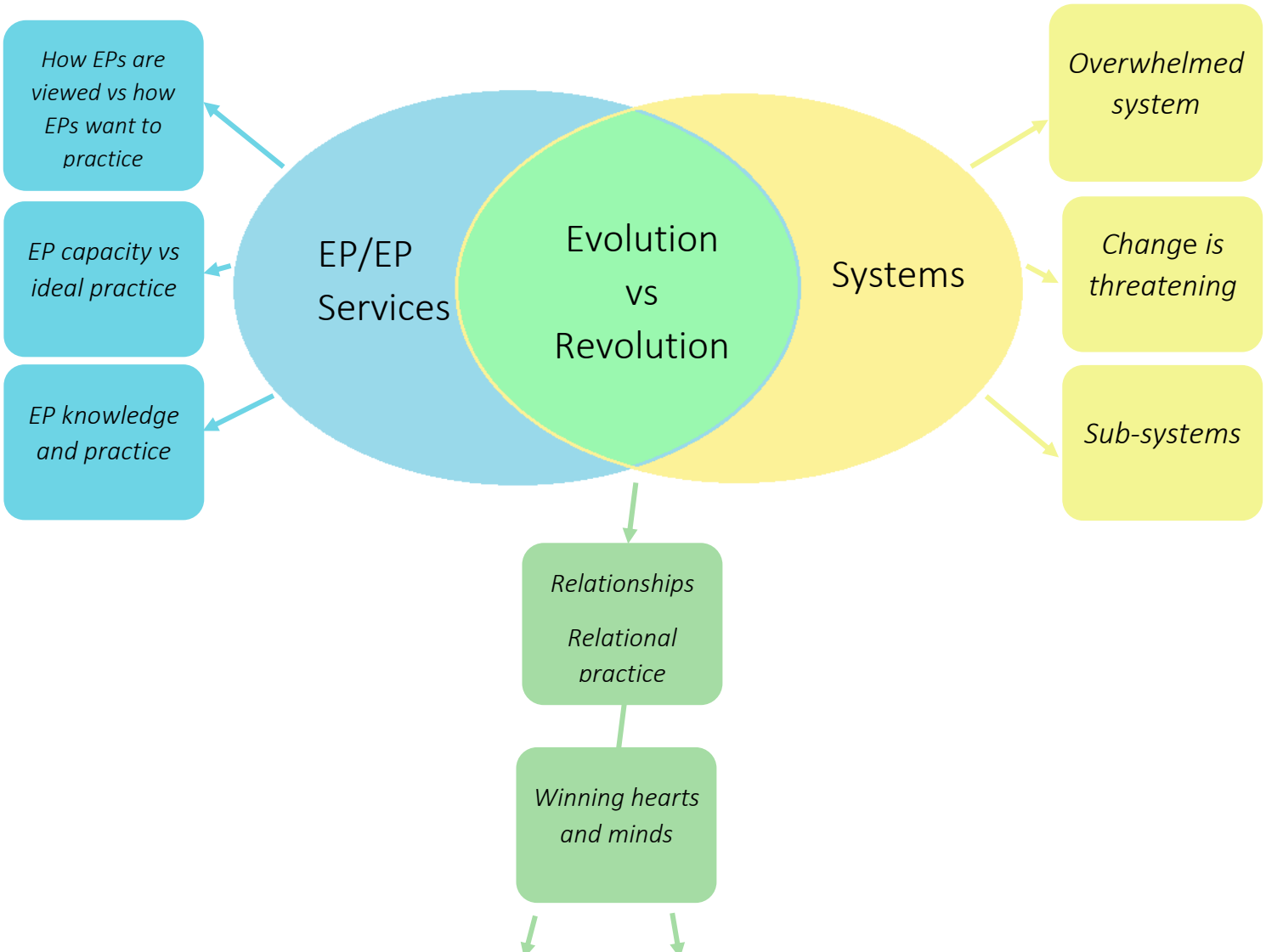
Local authority initiative as catalyst

measuring the impact of systemic work

6.10 Thematic Map (first analysis - not used)

Figure 6

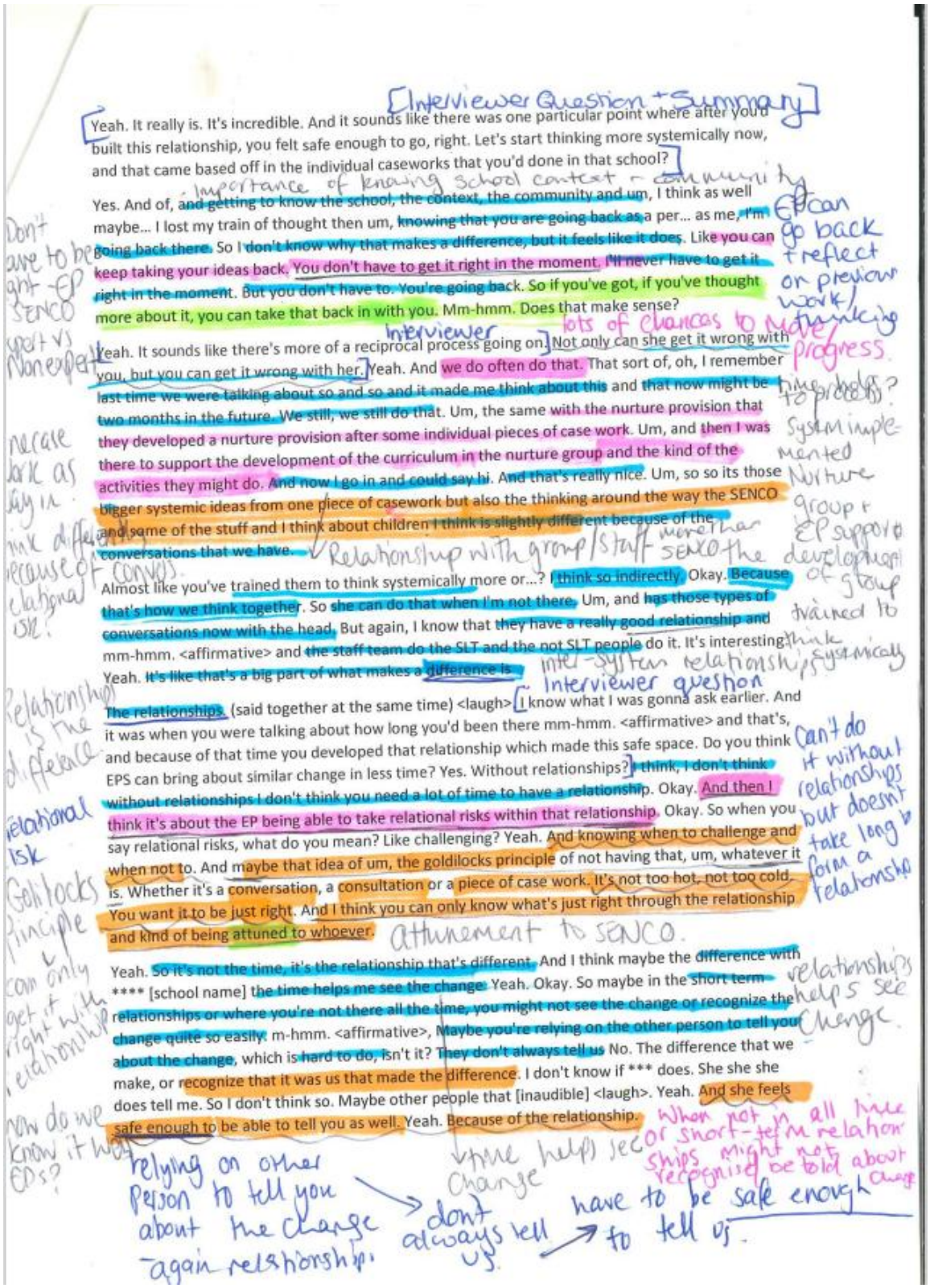
Thematic Map Showing Themes and Subthemes from the First Analysis (not-used)



6.11 Example of a highlighted page of transcript showing written codes (second analysis – used)

Figure 7

Example of a Highlighted Page of Transcript Showing Written Codes (Second Analysis – used)



6.12 Excerpt showing how codes marry to data extracts (second analysis – used)

Table 7

Excerpt Showing how Codes Marry to Data Extracts (Second Analysis – used)

theme	Codes	Evidence	Participant
Within psychologically safe relationships	Scary to suggest something new	*it's quite scary to maybe be the first to do that [ask about something new/different]*	E
	Ask questions to EP that they wouldn't ask other	*they began to ask me questions, you know, like, like they'll say like they can ask me anything even things that they might not ask their head*	G
	Stopped the conversation that wasn't systemic	*maybe I stopped the conversation and said, it seems like we are talking about very similar things each time we have PCM and some of these cases*	S
	Wondering	*But as our relationship progressed, we were, I was more able to kind of wonder about things with her.*	S
	Practicing in a way staff don't expect	*which sometimes felt strange because I think they think you'll tell them what to do but this way made sure they were reflecting more um , more systemically*	L
	Difficult questions	*I might ask some difficult questions sometimes, but I don't, it's all well-intentioned intended.*	G
	Brave to admit need support with system	*But then to inherently say to a service like an EP service, oh, something's not right in our school and we dunno what to do is scary but they did*	G
	Suggest thinking differently	*I stopped the conversation and said, it seems like we are talking about similar things… cab we approach this in a different way?*	S
	challenging	*But because I knew her better, I was able to say, well, actually I don't think that the best thing to do*	G

	Proposing a different way of working	*We've wiped that away now and I proposed to work differently*	S
	Brave to move from the norm	*I dunno, if I'm brave enough.*	S
	Systemic thinking is vulnerable	*how you put that into words, but it's, I guess it's that connection. It's that vulnerability.*	S
	Scared of being wrong	*I think they're scared of getting it wrong, you know these leaders*	L
	Scared to work collaboratively	*scared to work collaboratively*	L
	Need to be right – avoid systemic thinking/relational risks	*Maybe because they need to be right or the expert so they avoid more reflective, uncomfortable discussion.*	L
	Pointing out things are not working	*Actually, asking if the teachers not gonna implement the, or read the report, then why have we done it that way?*	S
	Relational risk to ask staff to think about practice that is very different from their norm	*I guess that if you've got a very kind of behaviourist policy or very zero tolerance, I can see how for some staff members it might feel more difficult to think about*	E
	Training could feel too unusual – relational risk	*It can feel unusual, maybe too unusual for some so you have to be careful you've got the balance right.*	E
	Taking a risk with relational policy	*Because I think there can sometimes be a fear that if we kind of change our policies from maybe a traditional behaviourist type policy, that actually everything's gonna, its gonna be chaotic*	E
	Feels safer to not take risk even when practice isn't working	*Like it feels safe and more comfortable to stick with even I suppose even when you might know at times this is isn't working*	E
	Relational risk – highlighting unhelpful practice	*Pupil or groups of pupils are just continually coming into contact with the behaviour system. And like when you talk about that it, people recognise that actually, yeah it's, it's not working but it, it's just what we've always known.*	E
	Questioning if practice should change?	*So what would we do differently?*	E
	Relationships allows EP to take relational risk and be open to think differently	*Because of conversations that we have and the relationship that we've built up, they're open to thinking differently. They're open to suggestions*	M

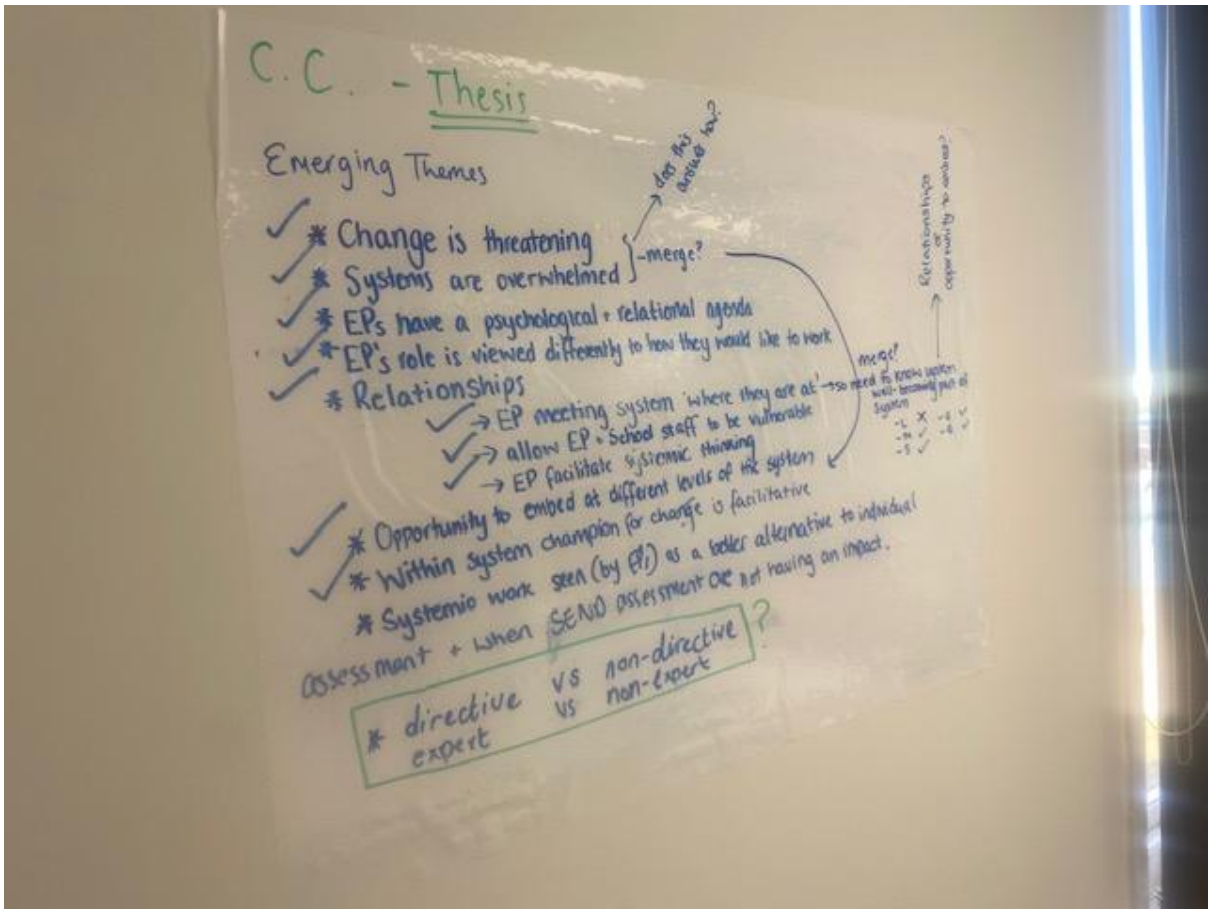
	Relationship enabled EP could be critical friend	*I'm probably more confident or more able to be that critical friend*	M
	Agreeing to follow norm unhelpful	*Somebody going in and nodding and saying yes to everything they're already doing.*	M
	Individual assessment unhelpful	*Like somebody going in and doing an assessment and feeding back*	M
	Relationship allows critical, constructive, and reflective discussion	*I think when you've got that relationship, you can be more critical and reflective and constructive together*	M
	Relational risk to suggest we need to think differently	*How can we think about children like this in a different way?*	M
	Relationships enabled EP and staff to think differently	*And because of the relationship we had at that point, it was easier to have those conversations*	M
	Don't need to be right	*You don't have to het it right in the moment*	M
	EP taking relational risk	*And then I think it's about the EP being able to take relational risks within the relationship*	M
	EP knowing when to challenge	*And knowing when to challenge and when not to*	M
	Relational risk needs to be careful - goldilocks	*The goldilocks principle … its not too hot, not too cold. You want it to be just right*	M
	Attunement and relationships allows EP to get relational risk right.	*And I think you can only know what's 'just right' through the relationship and kind of being attuned to whoever.*	M
	EP willing to work differently	*EPs willingness to work in different ways*	M
	Trying new things is scary	*Try new things that maybe you're less familiar with at first might be quite scary*	M
	Conversations about OC can feel scary/ out of your depth	*Some of those conversations can be quite scary because you are not always, you might feel out of your depth*	M
	Scary but willing	*That's like, that's scary. But I automatically say, yeah of course, of course I can support you to do that [que panic]*	M
	if system is ready to change then EP	*If they're willing to try and put themselves out there to change, then we maybe have*	M

	needs to be willing to support	*to meet them a little bit and hold their hand.*	
	Resistance shift in conversations – EP skills in asking questions	*I've felt resistance shift and melt away during a conversation… that's because of my skills in asking questions*	M
	Relational skills helps lower resistance	*It might be those relational skills to help someone feel more confident to…lower their resistance*	M
	Do something different is brave	*To take that leap and try something different is brave*	M
	Relationship supports vulnerability	*The relationship helps facilitate those conversations and facilitate that open space where you can be…quite vulnerable*	M
	Teacher taking relational risk with EP.	*For a teacher to come in and say to me, I dunno what I'm doing is quite scary (for them)*	M

6.13 Generating initial themes (second analysis – used)

Figure 8

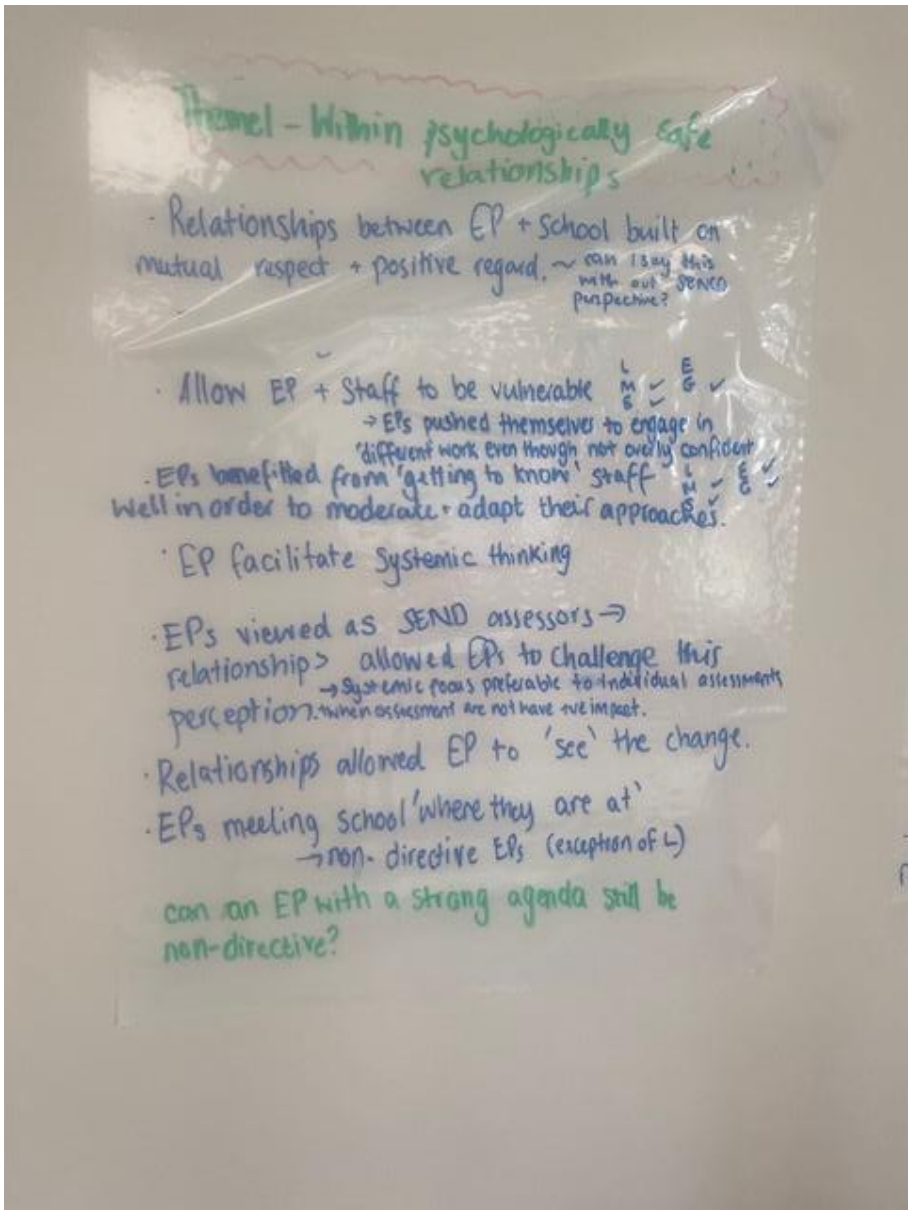
Image Illustrating the Process of Generating Initial Themes (Second Analysis – used)

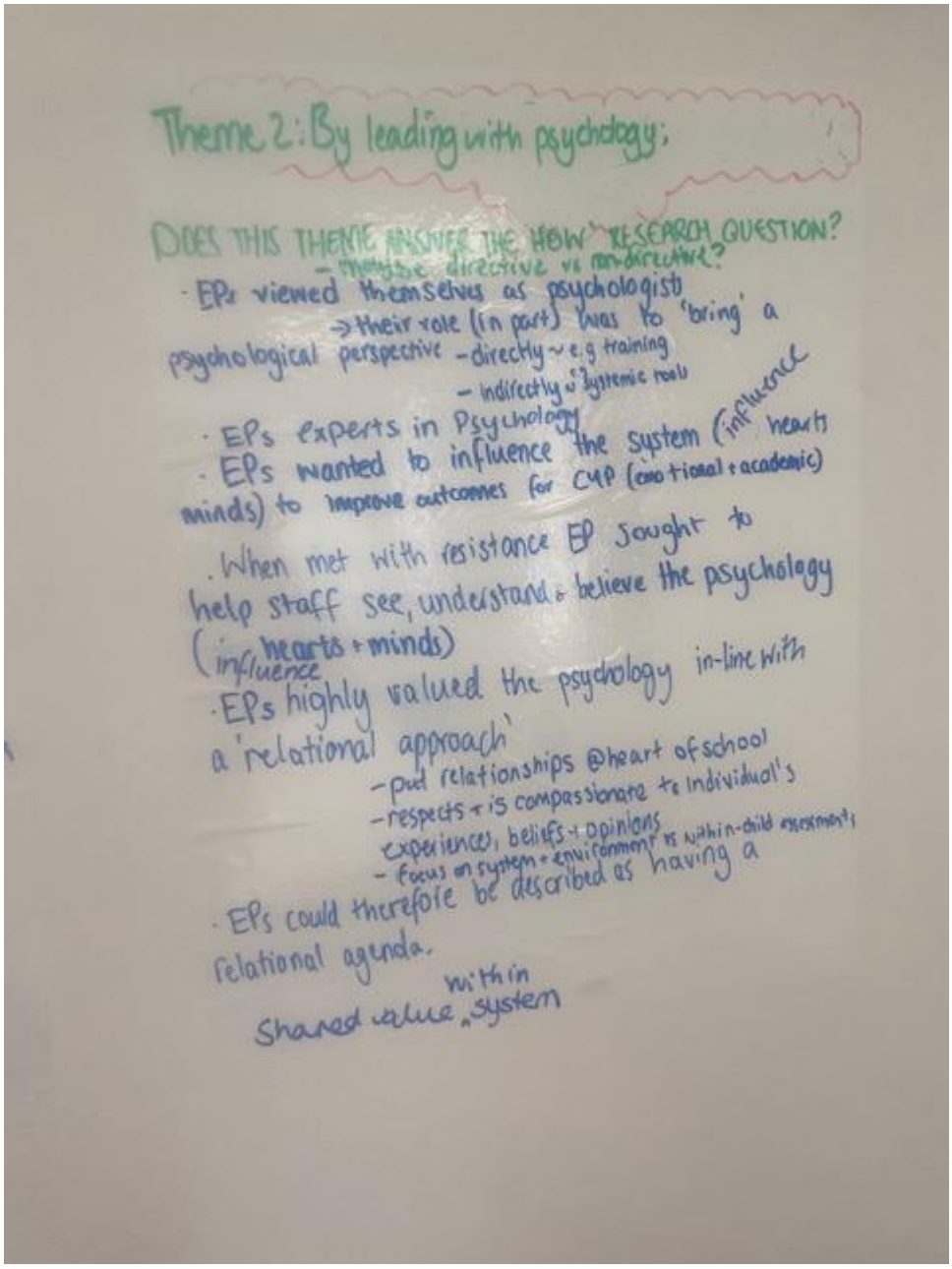


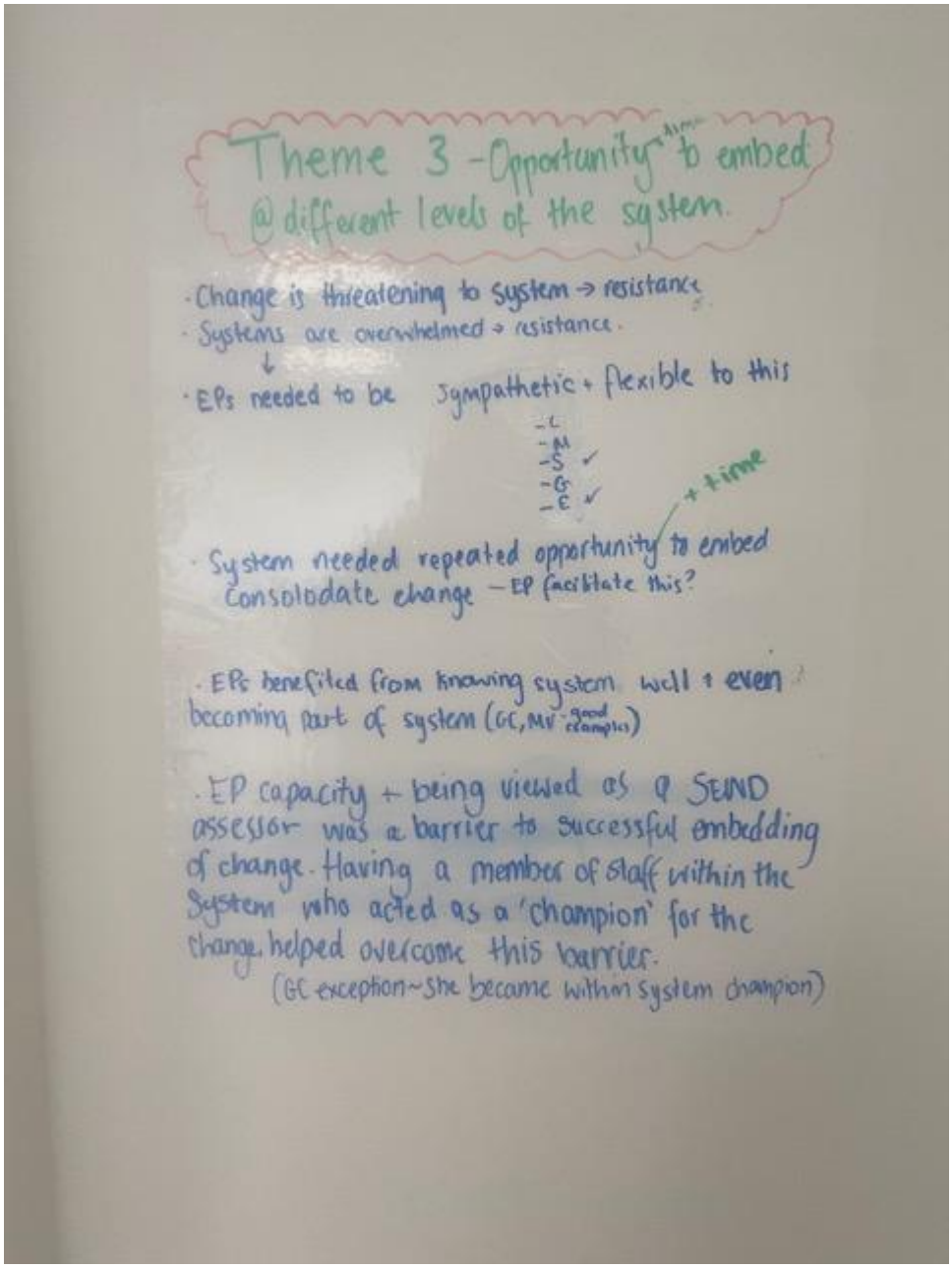
6.14 Attempting to refine and define themes (second analysis - used)

Figure 9

Images Illustrating the Process of Refining and Defining Themes (Second Analysis – used)




Theme 2: By leading with psychology;
DOES THIS THEME ANSWER THE 'HOW' RESEARCH QUESTION?
- maybe directive vs non-directive?
- EPs viewed themselves as psychologists
→ their role (in part) was to 'bring' a psychological perspective - directly ~ e.g training
- indirectly ~ 'systemic tools
- EPs experts in Psychology
- EPs wanted to influence the system (influence hearts minds) to improve outcomes for CYP (emotional + academic)
. When met with resistance EP sought to help staff see, understand & believe the psychology (influence hearts + minds)
. EPs highly valued the psychology in-line with a 'relational approach'
- put relationships @ heart of school
- respects + is compassionate re individual's experiences, beliefs + opinions
- focus on system + environment vs within-child assessment
. EPs could therefore be described as having a relational agenda.
Shared value within system



6.15 Codes within their themes and subthemes (second analysis – used)

Table 8

Excerpt Showing Codes Within their Themes and Subthemes (Second Analysis – used)

Theme 1 - Within psychologically safe relationships	
Subtheme – Trust and safety	
codes	codes
Relationship with staff/SENCO	Without trust, learning/change can't grow
Allowing SENCO to think and reflect with someone they trust	Spending time together
Co-attunement and connection	Importance of trust in each other

Strong friendship	Relationship key
I can also be ‘wrong’ – can be wrong together	Relationship meant she didn’t need to be ‘right’ all the time
Didn’t feel she needed to ‘prove herself’	Connection
Let guard down	Very friendly but not friends
Psychologically ‘holds’ SENCO’s ‘hands’	Struggles to conceptualise systemic change without first knowing each other
EP helped SENCO feel competent and confident	Relationship with the service, not just individual EPs
Pre-existing relationship	Social connection
‘Good’ relationship	Relationship over time
Staff feel safe	EP and SENCO thinking about what works well
EP and SENCO ‘get along’	Being a ‘sounding board’
Importance of a supportive SENCO	Can’t do it without the relationship
Attunement to the SENCO	Doesn’t take long to form a relationship
The relationship was the difference	Nurture each other
Relationships with staff wider than the SENCO	Enjoy each other’s company
Link ep for a number of years – helps relationships	Trust in our service
Relationships with staff wider than the SENCO	Nurture each other
The relationship was the difference	Doesn’t take long to form a relationship
Can’t do it without the relationship	Attunement to the SENCO
Struggles to conceptualise systemic change without first knowing each other	Spending time together
Being a ‘sounding board’	Importance of a supportive SENCO
Relationship with staff/SENCO	Trusted relationship
Subtheme – Managing vulnerability and Openness	
codes	codes
Scary to suggest something new Vulnerable when there are ‘no answers’ – feels uncomfortable	Scary when feeling of incompetence arises
Wondering	Scared to work collaboratively
Scared of being wrong	Need to be right – avoid systemic thinking/relational risks
Mentalising with each other	Ask questions to EP they wouldn’t ask others
‘Trained’ staff to mentalise with each other	Letting barriers down and accepting vulnerability
Willing to try new and different things	EP taking a leap of faith
EP needed a support system	EP felt they needed to be brave
Felt pressure	Worry about own ability to facilitate change

Break down what people think an EP is and show EPs are human too	Containing staff
Collaborative relationship	Lacking confidence in own ability
EP felt underprepared	Questioning ability
Systemic thinking is vulnerable	Brave to admit need support with system
Doing something different is brave	Trying new things is scary
Emotional openness	
Subtheme – Balancing Challenge and support	
codes	codes
Stopped the conversation that wasn't systemic	Practicing in a way staff don't expect
Difficult questions	Relational skills help lower resistance
Suggest thinking differently	Relational risk
Challenging	Goldilocks principle – can only get it 'just right' with a relationship
Proposing a different way of working	Brave to move from the norm
Pointing out things are not working	We can help work some of that difficulty out
Relational risk to ask staff to think about practice that is very different from their norm	Continued discussion
Modelling to build confidence	Taking a risk with relational policy
Feels safer to not take risk even when practice isn't working	Relational risk – highlighting unhelpful practice
Problem solving together	Questioning if practice should change?
Our passion can 'rub off' on people	Relationships allow EPs to take relational risks and be open to think differently
Repeated visits and interactions with staff	Relationship enabled EP to be a critical friend
Reciprocal relationship	Individual assessment unhelpful
Relationship allows critical, constructive, and reflective discussion	Relational risk to suggest we need to think differently
Relationships enabled EP and staff to think differently	Nurturing their needs as well as mine
Don't need to be right	Conversations about OC can feel scary/out of depth
EP taking relational risk	Scary but willing
EP knowing when to challenge	If system is ready to change, then EP needs to be willing to support
Relational risk needs to be careful – Goldilocks principle	Resistance shift in conversations – EP skills in asking questions
Attunement and relationships allow EP to get relational risk right	EP willing to work differently
EP reflecting on relationship with SENCO/school staff	Teacher taking relational risk with EP

Feels strange when going against the grain	EP as critical friend within the relationship
School staff don't feel a need to impress anymore – relationship	It's okay if things didn't work – we'd laugh, talk, and move on
Ask EP questions they wouldn't ask the headteacher	
Theme 2 - Prioritizing Psychological and systemic perspectives	
Subtheme - Leading with Psychology	
codes	codes
Giving psychology away EPs are primarily psychologists	EP role to share psychology Making psychology understandable and contextual
Sharing psychology in an accessible way	Delivering training
Workshops to embed psychology	communicating EPs' knowledge base
Communicating understanding of best practice	EPs are highly trained
EPs deliver psychology	EPs are experts in psychology
Passionate about evidence-based practice	EPs know the evidence behind different practices
Experienced and knowledgeable professionals	Doctorate-level education
Strong views on what works/doesn't	EPs should own their expertise
Modelling psychology	High level of training
Knowledge and expertise = power	Hope knowledge rubs off
Expertise gives influence	EPs should harness that influence
EPs hold power	People will listen to an EP
EPs communicate psychology to increase knowledge	Expert approach in training
Share theory in training	Be explicit about the lens used
SENCO felt psychology should be shared by EP	EPs choose lenses over others
EP = holder of helpful information and knowledge	SENCO withdrew from psychology sharing
Subtheme -Systemic Thinking	
codes	codes
Change more likely when staff come to it themselves	Empowered when they see the potential impact
EPs support system to notice their own change needs	Belief in psychology
Whats my bias?	EP named the 'stuckness' in the system
EPs help staff/system arrive at answers	EPs facilitate organic, independent thinking
Psychology leads to better understanding	EPs don't always have the answers
Staff feel the psychology is relevant	Resistance shift
System must buy into psychology	Frustration when staff resist

Training helps staff grasp psychological theory	Non-expert approach boosts belief
Staff need to understand the psychology	Staff need to believe psychology will help
Change in psychological approach	Shifting approach to help staff buy in
Non-expert approach helps implementation	Prioritising psychological theory
Staff receive psychology	Winning hearts and minds
EP noticed repeating themes across consultations	EP helped school find a “new story” about the problem
EP held a systemic formulation rather than diagnosis	EP resisted being triangulated into school-parent conflict
System kept putting the same ‘labels’ on students or teachers	Problems understood in context of relationships, not individuals
EP reflected back the system’s own narrative	EP noticed resistance was a sign of system protecting the status quo
Small changes triggered strong reactions, signalling disruption to homeostasis	EP explored how behaviours were part of a wider system, not isolated
EP helped staff understand the system was ‘stuck’ but not broken	EP encouraged reflective curiosity, not defensiveness
EP framed resistance as the system trying to stay safe	EP helped school wonder what function the problem might be serving
EP explored what might happen if nothing changed	Not jumping to conclusions
EP worked with staff to tolerate the discomfort of change	Allowed to wonder out loud with staff to explore what might be happening
EP encouraged staff to sit with the tension, not fix it too fast	EP offered containment while the system adjusted
EP used humour and reframing to shift stuck narratives	EP observed that weak boundaries led to burnout and confusion
EP used reflection to shift from blame to understanding	EP helped staff renegotiate role clarity and expectations
EP asked who benefits and who struggles when things stay the same	EP asked staff to consider how their responses shaped student behaviour
People expect change after hearing psychology	
Subtheme – Systems Practice	
codes	codes
Tensions when system and EP identify different change needs	What to prioritise – psychology or system perspective?
Conflict in EP and system agendas	EPs use psychology to influence perspective
Value of systemic thinking	Empathy
Holistic view of ‘problems’	Move away from ‘within child’ thinking
Respect for individuals	Systems prefer within-child focus
Staff resist when EPs don’t assess individual children	EPs expected to assess SEND
EPs champion systemic thinking	EPs fly the flag for systemic work

EPs excited about systemic over individual work	Systemic work seen as more impactful
EPs proud of their systemic contributions	Systemic changes seen as long-lasting
More than a ‘broken’ child/individual	Policy level ‘problem’
Shifted focus from child to context	Systemic insight challenged individual blame
EP modelled thinking in terms of systems, not silos	Contextualising problems created compassion
EP helped school ‘zoom out’ from the problem	Staff began thinking about whole school patterns
EP mapped influences beyond just one child	Systemic lens helped explain repeating issues
Staff shifted from fixing people to shifting systems	
Theme 3 – Opportunities and time to embed change at different levels of the system	
Subtheme - Practical Barriers and Facilitators	
codes	codes
Systemic change is time-consuming	Change needs sustained effort
System overwhelmed to think differently	Lack of time blocks systemic reflection
Capacity limits EPs' systemic involvement	Workload prioritises statutory duties
EP wants to return but can’t	Capacity and competing demands
Limited EP input risks superficial change	Change requires repeated interaction
Need to keep change on school’s radar	Training alone is not enough
Whole-school change is a huge task	Subsystems might adopt change more easily
Culture change takes time	Organisational change is emotionally demanding
Overwhelmed schools need empathy	Schools retreat to what feels safe
Safer to continue familiar practices	EP acts as a temporary boundary for new thinking
EPs hold safe space outside school culture	Systemic impact emerges over time
Schools pick what’s manageable	Change happens when school sees relevance
Without EP support, reflection unlikely	Hard to know if EP made the difference
Attribution of impact is unclear	Sustained effort needed across system levels
Temporary change vs embedded practice	Return visits matter for longevity
EP needs organisational knowledge	Knowing staff and culture helps change
Fragmented contact limits impact	Wider engagement improves buy-in
Capacity affects what EPs can offer	Current system limits ideal EP practice
EPs frustrated by mismatch of ideal vs reality	Systemic change requires leadership alignment

Organisational momentum is hard to sustain	External accountability pressures impact change
Subtheme – Champions of Change	
codes	Codes
Champion within school crucial	SENCO as internal leader of change
Champion keeps momentum going	Champion helps embed change post-EP
EP needs to hand over leadership	Empowering staff to carry on change
EP as change facilitator, not implementer	School owns implementation
Reluctance to engage without EP leadership	Perceived power of EPs sometimes needed
EP felt like the 'champion' due to time	Trainee role enabled depth of input
SENCO became the bridge between EP and staff	Internal champion carries the emotional labour of change
Enthusiastic staff member helped spread the thinking	EP momentum fades without a school-based lead
Champion gave legitimacy to systemic work	Change held in the hands of one motivated person
EP can plant the seed, champion helps it grow	Internal leadership makes or breaks implementation
Champion's capacity shaped the scale of the change	Champion needed credibility and trust among peers
Champion helped "translate" psychology for school context	EP needs to nurture the champion, not just the system
Subtheme - Incremental Change	
codes	codes
Systemic change felt too vast	Cannot do systemic change in one-off visits
System resists due to threat of change	Small steps helped build staff confidence
Systemic alignment supports change	Different teams move at different paces
Disconnect between sub-systems	Change enabled by emotional support
Feeling safe to try something new	"Knowing" change is needed is scary
Change must be drip-fed	Workshops help embed psychology
EPs "remind" schools of learning	Emotional labour of EP role
Systems need to feel supported too	Incremental change feels safer
Small wins build confidence	Implementation can stall without support
EP's ongoing presence matters	Systemic shift needs internal and external buy-in
EP plus school staff must both believe in change	Incremental application used as coping
Staff panic when change feels too big	Big ideas needed to be broken into manageable chunks
Slow introduction reduced resistance	Patience was a professional skill in itself
EP adjusted pace to meet relational readiness	Too much change too fast felt threatening

Staff more likely to engage when change feels possible	Slower pace allowed for feedback and adaptation
Small experiments led to deeper learning	Gentle pace allowed reflection to deepen
Rapid change risks overwhelming the system	Staff needed time to 'sit with' new ideas
Quicker change required significant support from ep and champion	Momentum can be lost if pace is too slow

6.16 Reflexive commentary following interviews

Reflection Box	Interview 1 – Megan interview questioning

Following first interview with Megan

I was really nervous to do my first interview and treated the interview as a trial run to ensure I was happy with the interview schedule. I wanted the interview to feel conversational hence why I had chosen a semi-structured interview schedule. I did ask all the questions I had down but also summarised, asked follow up questions and reflected on what Megan was saying. I feel more comfortable with this but need to be aware of how much my unscripted responses might steer the conversation.

Reflection on my reflection

I've done some readings on the boundaries between structured/semi-structured/structured interviewing schedules because I am worried about how much my unscripted responses are leading the interview. Semi-structured interviews allows the researcher some flexibility within their interview and can therefore deviate from the schedule so long as they are guided by the core questions. I feel comfortable that I was guided by my core questions at all points in Megan's interview. Deviations allow the researcher to explore interesting points. But what I find 'interesting' might steer the interview. For example, I found the idea of 'relationships' interesting in Megan's interview and continue to wonder about this now. If there is a sniff of 'relationships' in future interviews I might explore this further as it is interesting to me, but the interviewee might not have intended to talk or have thought it important to the organisational change they facilitated. I need to be careful of this. After a tutorial, I need to be aware and conscious of this moving

forward with my other interviews as I am not adopting an iterative interviewing approach as I might if I was using grounded theory.

Reflection on my reflection

I ended up using the questions and therefore (with the permission of Megan) used the trial interview as part of my data set.

Reflection Box	Interview Megan - relationship

Following my interview with Megan

I don't think I need a sensitive analysis methodology to know that 'relationships' was a big theme to Megan's interview. I don't want to start analysing Megan's data before I go through the process of familiarisation, coding etc but there is no denying that 'relationships' was important for Megan and her organisational change experience. I wonder how much this will come out in other interviews.

The emphasis on relationships is surprising to me. I wasn't expecting it to be so strong of a factor for Megan or any EP supporting a school to make organisational changes. I think I was expecting more 'process' lead facilitating factors. Also the importance of 'relationships' wasn't hugely evident when I was writing my literature review. I came out thinking that the uniqueness of the EP and SENCO's relationship is what made all those changes possible. Of course, this isn't the case as Megan has been able to facilitate organisational change within other systems and other EP's have been able to facilitate organisational change. But does the SENCO need to have a certain quality to be open to organisational change, or can EP's facilitate organisational change anywhere with anyone?

Reflection on my reflection

After working in this local authority for a while now, and a while since writing this reflection box, it makes total sense why 'relationships' was a key theme in Megan and other participant's data. With the Principal EP's background in family therapy, EPs within service often talk about relational approaches/therapeutic relationships/relational risk and thinking systemically and so they also naturally occurred within my data. However, this does make me wonder if the theme of

psychologically safe relationship and systemic thinking would be so strong if I had interviewed EPs within other local authorities. I was never hoping for my finding to be generalised to other EPs and services however, it will be important for the reader to bear in mind when reading this thesis.

Reflection Box	Interview Serena

Following second interview with Serena

Serena reflected heavily on her relationship with the SENCO and school without me asking. I felt like I was sticking more closely to the interview schedule than I did with Megan, through fear of being too directive. Despite this, Serena spoke a lot about the dynamic between her and SENCO, the SENCO and the service and SENCO and the head teacher.

I couldn't help but reflect on my wonderings after Megan's interview - does the SENCO need to have a certain quality to be open to organisational change, or can EP's facilitate organisational change anywhere with anyone?

Serena and the SENCO seemed to have a relationship where they were able to work together almost seamlessly to facilitate organisational change. They were both pro-active in creating the change. Serena almost described a magical partnership that even she couldn't put her finger on. She describes facilitating organisational change/systemic thinking as a feeling a connection, nothing specific.

This wasn't what I was expecting to hear. I went into this research thinking I would come to the conclusion of, if your and EP and want to facilitate organisational change then you need to do X,Y and Z. Instead, I'm finding organisational change/systemic thinking to be less defined – more fluffy. This makes me feel uncomfortable. I don't think I am a competent researcher and therefore wanted to research something that was 'straightforward'.

Reflection Box	Interview Emily

Following the interview with Emily

Emily's experience felt different from Serena's and Megan's. I think this might be to do with how the organisational change experience came about with it being a local

authority initiative rather than coming from the school staff. Whilst the change wasn't easy for Emily or school staff, it did seem more linear and more defined. Emily was able to reflect on steps she and staff took to facilitate the change and didn't place as much importance on the 'fluff' of psychology (Serena's reflection).

In other ways the Emily's experience was similar. At this point I don't think I can articulate in what way they were similar – perhaps in the psychology that they used? But all three used different psychological frameworks. Not sure. I am trying to practice patience – it is okay to be unsure at this stage in the process and need to stop looking for 'the answers' when I haven't even transcribed the interviews yet let alone start coding/theme-ing.

Reflection on the reflection (after first analysis)

Having now transcribed and analysed the data. I think the difference between Emily (and Lydia's) data from Megan and Serena's is that I could describe Emily and Lydia adopting a revolution approach. The change she facilitated happened quickly (after the LA decided a change was needed), since the LA commissioned the work Emily could not be sure that the motives and values, she held were the same as the schools so attempted to 'win hearts and minds' to help the school understand and believe in the change.

However, Emily's data felt similar to Megan's and Serena as the psychology paradigms (working relationally and systemically) aligns with Megan and Serena.

Reflection on the reflection (after second analysis)

I think Emily's data felt similar to Serena's and Megan's because all three (and other participants) valued a relational/systemic approach to their organisational change experience. That they all valued wanting to understand individual experiences, beliefs, and opinions rather than thinking about individual difference or within child perspectives. They all valued the importance of relationships between all individuals and systems. Asking questions such as 'what's happened to you?' rather than 'what's wrong with you?'

Despite this, Emily experience was different to Serena's and Megan's experiences because the work was commissioned by the local authority and therefore didn't

come up organically through systemic conversations (although systemic thinking was utilised throughout).

Reflection Box	Interview Grace

Following the interview with Grace

Grace was very passionate about making sure her work efforts supported more than one individual. She seemed cross at the systems in place that made working in way that is not within child difficult. She seemed to feel that it was her duty as a TEP to keep pressing schools to work systemically. I wonder if Grace's passion for my thesis topic is what drove her to participate in the study. Would her thoughts and opinions on her experiences, what she perceived to be facilitating factors and barriers be different if she wasn't so passionate about the topic. Did she have an agenda in participating rather than simply reflecting on her experiences?

Reflection Box	Interview Lydia

Following the interview with Lydia

I think I came out of Lydia's interview feeling a bit frustrated. Lydia speaks about systemic thinking a lot within the service and thought that she would talk about an experience that really highlighted her values and belief in systemic thinking coming from a family therapy background.

My frustration highlights that I must have been hoping to hear something (not 100% what) and my frustration stems from not hearing that. This shows I am a biased researcher. Which I always knew and will be acknowledged within my methodology chapter, but my initial reaction has highlighted my bias to me.

Lydia shared an example of facilitating organisational change in a context that is no longer relevant to EPs practicing today. Her example was also very expert – which to me goes against practicing systemic thinking. Later in the interview she does talk about systemic thinking as being important to organisational change, but this is when she is talking about organisational change in the current climate and more generally (away from her example). I am frustrated that she chose this example when she will have many other examples that demonstrates her passion for thinking systemically. I wonder why she chose the example she did. I wanted

some of my feelings of uncertainty to go away following Lydia's interview, given her passion, but they haven't. In fact, I think the waters are murkier than they ever have been.

Reflection on the reflection

After the analysis, Lydia's experience isn't so different after so unpicking. In lots of ways her example highlights my findings. For example, I found that organisational change is difficult and requires capacity from the EP and school. Lydia explained that half her time was dedicated to the organisational change project and therefore demonstrate the capacity needed from the EP to facilitate an organisational change at that level. Later in her interview, she talks about some of her efforts to facilitate organisational change that have failed. She talks about some of her attempts failing because she is lacking a relationship with staff, this makes sense with the importance my findings place on working within a psychologically safe relationship.