

THE SPECIFICITY OF THE EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGIST

Juan Fernández

Universidad Complutense de Madrid

The aim of this study is to highlight the specificity of Educational Psychologists with respect to the rest of psychologists and other educational agents. It begins with a brief history of the Educational Psychology division within psychology and continues with an analysis of the three basic components of educational systems: teachers, students and curricula, as well as the two-way interactions between them. It then considers the three major functions of any psychologist working in the field of education: a) assessments, both clinical and educational; b) counselling for students, parents, teachers and educational authorities; and c) interventions: corrective, preventive (primary, secondary and tertiary prevention) and those aimed at optimizing teaching and learning processes. To exercise these functions, psychologists need special academic training: a specific Masters in Educational Psychology with at least 60 ECTS credits. The core modules of this Masters course therefore cover topics that capacitate psychologists for fulfilling these functions. Descriptive studies on the work of psychologists operating in educational contexts strongly confirm that assessment, counselling and intervention are the three major functions of the Educational Psychologist.

Key words: Educational Psychologist, Students, Teachers, Curricula, Evaluation/assessment, Counselling and intervention.

El objetivo del presente trabajo es poner de manifiesto la especificidad del psicólogo educativo con respecto al resto de psicólogos y a otros profesionales de la educación. Se parte de un breve análisis histórico de la división de Psicología de la Educación dentro de la Psicología, para continuar con la exposición de los tres pilares más básicos de los sistemas educativos: profesores, alumnos y currículos, además de las interacciones bidireccionales entre ellos. A partir de aquí, se derivan las tres funciones capitales de cualquier psicólogo que trabaje en los ámbitos de la educación: las evaluaciones, tanto de tipo clínico como educativo; los asesoramientos, a alumnos, padres, profesores y autoridades académicas; y las intervenciones, correctivas, preventivas (prevención primaria, secundaria y terciaria) y optimizadoras. Para ejercitar estas funciones se requiere una especial preparación académica, además del grado o la licenciatura: un máster específico de Psicología de la Educación de al menos 60 créditos ECTS. La troncalidad del mismo ha de venir constituida, en consecuencia, por asignaturas que capaciten en ese trío de funciones. Los estudios descriptivos sobre las labores desempeñadas hasta ahora por los psicólogos que trabajan en contextos educativos ratifican contundentemente que la evaluación, el asesoramiento y la intervención son las tres funciones capitales del psicólogo educativo.

Palabras clave: Psicólogo educativo, Alumnos, Profesores, Currículos, Evaluación, Asesoramiento e intervención.

T HE EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY DIVISION WITHIN PSYCHOLOGY AS A WHOLE

There is little doubt today over the scientific origins of Educational Psychology, which date from the very birth of psychology itself, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Illustrative examples would be the contributions of Binet or Thorndike and the founding of the Journal of Educational Psychology, in 1910. The main focus in these early years was on the study of individual differences, analyzed by means of intelligence tests, and on the diagnosis and treatment of children with

“problems” – that is, with special educational needs (see, for a summary of psychology’s contributions to education, Thorndike, 1910).

As early as the first decades of the 20th century, Educational Psychology took on as one of its principal scientific bases the contributions of behaviourist perspectives. Thus, its academic and professional success was backed up, because such approaches had triumphed within the field of psychology. Around 1950, the rising doubts over behaviourism brought about a crisis in Educational Psychology, though it soon righted itself, assimilating a range of cognitivist approaches as its new scientific bases, without abandoning the most efficient of the behaviourist approaches (see, for more detailed treatments, Mayer & Alexander, 2010; McInerney, 2005; Mittel, 2006; Reigeluth, 1999; Reynolds & Miller, 2003; Wittrock, 1992).

Correspondence: Juan Fernández. Departamento de Psicología Evolutiva y de la Educación. Facultad de Psicología. Campus de Somosaguas. 28223 Madrid. España.

E-mail: jfernandez@psi.ucm.es.

web: <http://sites.google.com/site/jfsprofile/>

Now, with the 21st century well under way, Educational Psychology enjoys the status of a highly vigorous field, even if many challenges still lie ahead for its full theoretical and practical development (Cameron, 2006; Nolen, 2009; Pressley, Harris, & Marks, 1992; Zimmerman & Schunk, 2003). There are abundant indicators of the maturity of Educational Psychology today, and I shall refer to just a few examples – there is a detailed review of the history of Educational Psychology to date in this same issue (Beltrán & Pérez). Among the divisions of the American Psychological Association (APA), two are specifically devoted to Educational Psychology: number 15 (Educational Psychology) and number 16 (School Psychology), together with others referring to problems affecting children, adolescents, adults, the elderly, families, and so on. Worthy of special mention in this context is the American Educational Research Association (AERA), over 100 years old and with more than 25,000 members, which is by any standards one of the most important international professional organizations, and in which psychology, as a discipline, and psychologists, as professionals, have always had a significant presence.

Another highly important indicator is that of specialized journals. In *Journal Citation Reports* from 2009, “Psychology, Educational” reveals a total of 44 journals with their corresponding impact factor; “Education & Educational Research” yields 139, while “Education, Special” yields 30. Naturally, if we are talking about “handbooks”, there are dozens of them whose title includes the term “Educational Psychology” or its equivalent, and moving onto books, the list runs into the hundreds (Alexander & Winne, 2006; Jimerson, Oakland, & Farrell, 2007). Likewise, one can find many descriptive reviews under the heading “Educational Psychology” or “Instructional psychology”. In the *Annual Review of Psychology* alone there are more than 20, highlighting the change from the former term, typically used in the 1950s and 60s (Anderson, 1967; Cronbach, 1950), to the latter, commonly used from the 1970s to the present (Gagne & Rohwer, 1968; Snow & Swanson, 1992). In sum, Educational Psychology is a sub-discipline or division of psychology that has been very well developed and institutionalized, with an abundance of data that reveal its highly positive influence on the improvement of educational quality (see, for a well-documented scientific review, NASP, 2010; as regards the situation in Spain, readers can consult the special issue of the journal *Psicología Educativa*, 17, 2011).

Given what we have seen so far, the essential question (now from a professional point of view) would be: What is the specificity of the Educational Psychologist today, taking into account both the theoretical developments achieved over more than a century and the accumulated professional contributions in the different educational contexts and at the various levels?

EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGISTS: THEIR SPECIFICITY WITHIN PSYCHOLOGY

Figure 1 presents a summary of the main components that clearly differentiate the Educational Psychologist from any other type of psychologist: clinical, work and organizational, social, etc. – and of course, from all other professionals working in the field of education. For the purposes of the present work we include within the scope of this term both Educational Psychologists and School Psychologists (see, for a brief treatment of the differences between them, Lucas, Blazek, Raley, & Washington, 2005).

In the centre of the figure is a triangle, at whose bottom corners are the two basic agents of any teaching/learning process: teachers and students, inevitably bound together by the curriculum (at the top corner of the triangle). It is difficult to talk about education without taking into account, separately or jointly, these essential components. They are what, from the perspective of a large part of US researchers or of APA Division 15, would constitute core characteristics of Educational Psychology as distinct from School Psychology.

From a retrospective and classical perspective, the psychological explanation of the educational content of this triangle did not seem to pose any significant problems. The job of teachers was almost exclusively to fulfil their function as transmitters of knowledge. In turn, students were assigned a complementary duty: to store in their long-term memory all the information provided by the teachers, so that they could recover it when necessary, the first occasion being when they had to take exams. What the former were required to teach and the others to learn was formally set down within a closed curriculum, drawn up by the corresponding political and academic authorities. The assessment of this type of teaching was quite easy, since it merely involved ascertaining the extent to which the students were capable of repeating the information provided by their teachers. The three basic pillars on which this type of approach rested were: the quantity and quality of the curriculum content, the

teachers' ability to transmit it, and the students' ability to memorize it.

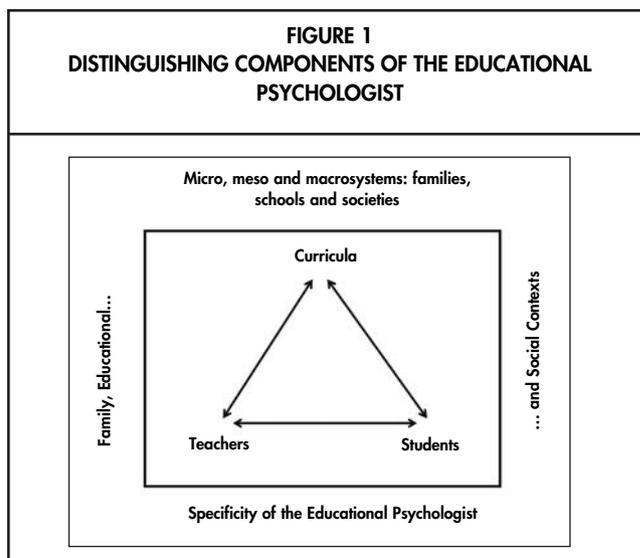
This overall view of education was called into question some time ago, and was the target of criticism particularly over the last quarter of the twentieth century, due in particular to all the approaches derived from the cognitivist perspectives mentioned earlier (Ball, 1984). Now, the guiding principle, from a negative point of view, is that teachers are not mere transmitters of information, just as students are not mere passive receivers of it; nor can the curriculum be something that is completely closed. From a positive, complementary perspective, it has been shown that both students and teachers differ greatly with regard to their corresponding abilities and skills, so that certain relevant curricular adaptations are necessary. As far as teachers are concerned, it is important to know not only about their ability to transmit information, but also about a whole range of dimensions of a cognitive, affective, social or personality-related nature, which can have a considerable effect on teaching quality, such as: their thinking style, their values and beliefs, their efficacy, their strategies, their teaching styles, their motivational and interactional abilities, and their professional attributes and experience, to name but a few of the most widely studied aspects. As regards students, we must bear in mind that today more than ever they should be the builders of their own knowledge, given that all types of information are now permanently at their disposal, in the most immediate fashion, via the Internet. This in no way implies that teachers are unnecessary, since the teaching and learning process must take place within a framework of mediated learning. There are a range of distinctive student characteristics that should be taken into account, including their abilities, their learning styles, their motivations, their cognitive social, affective and personality development, their study habits, their degree of persistence and their special needs, since all such factors have a considerable influence on academic performance.

This new conception of students and teachers likewise requires a new perspective on the curriculum, which should be, above all, open for adaptation to the demands of teachers who are more autonomous, participative and stimulating and who seek optimum learning conditions; to the characteristics of an active and diverse student population, requiring a more comprehensive and self-directed education; and also to the characteristics of a society of information, learning and knowledge in a

permanent state of flux and transformation, obliged to be so by the steady march of scientific and technological progress (Fernández, 2001).

In the triangle in Figure 1, the three basic components are linked by means of two-way arrows, indicating that the interactions involved have become accepted as relevant variables in considerations of the quality of schools. The whole in this case is clearly superior to the sum of the three parts. One of the most significant implications of this new perspective, with respect to the more classical one – clearly one-directional (if the teacher is good the teaching is necessarily good) – is that one must consider at least four types of educational product: a) excellent teachers and students = excellent quality; b) good teachers but poor students = perhaps good quality, but not excellent; c) good students and poor teachers = not very good quality; d) poor teachers and students = poor quality. One should also bear in mind that this four-category typology should be considered in relation to the different stages of the education process.

All of these teaching and learning relations take place within different contexts involving – as in Bronfenbrenner's (1979) conception – three types of system: the micro-, meso- and macro-systems. The microsystem is constituted by families. Their diversity determines different kinds of hidden curricula, various types of expectations and behaviours, varying degrees of involvement in the way the teaching takes place, and different types of discipline and authority, which undoubtedly strongly condition both students' present and teachers' past development. The mesosystem is constituted by the diverse contexts of schools: Their geographical



location, the teaching staff and student body, the institution's social image, its academic record, the way it is run, its size, and the extent to which it has incorporated new technology, among other aspects, become predictor variables to take into account on analyzing the academic quality of schools. The macrosystem is of a more broad-based nature, and is shaped by the influence of the society or country in question – its culture, its degree of economic development, the value it attributes to education, its investment in education, and so on –, factors which also greatly affect the character of an education system.

Taking into account this educational framework – different types of teachers, students and curricula, and highly complex contexts – what should be the main targets of professional attention for the Educational Psychologist?

THEIR SPECIFIC FUNCTIONS

Figure 2, in addition to incorporating the components of Figure 1, indicates, by means of a new triangle, the Educational Psychologist's most basic functions: those of assessment, those of counselling, and those which involve some kind of intervention in schools. This second triangle would represent, for some European researchers or for Division 16 of the APA, the essential components of School Psychology. These three types of function must be in line with the ultimate objective of any educational community (a community of teaching and learning): the excellence of the academic, professional and personal processes/products of its two principal actors (students and teaching staff). On putting processes and products together, my aim is to stress that it seems inappropriate to set them in opposition to one another, as has been and continues to be so common in publications within both psychology and education. Indeed, a detailed analysis of the reality reveals that this relationship is always bi-directional. Products set the horizon and the goal and processes have to do with the means, but goals and means clearly feed off one another due to the circular conditioning between them.

These three functions, which until now appeared to be limited to the field of formal (school, academic) education, now extend to any teaching and learning context – that is, to both formal and informal situations. Clearly, the latter take on great importance in a society such as today's, one of whose core characteristics is our permanent bombardment with all types of information. It is due to the inclusion of these areas of action that I

prefer the term Educational Psychologist to that of School Psychologist.

These functions are tightly intertwined, so that, as mentioned, they condition one another. The process should begin with the assessment – through the valid and reliable collection of information – of curricula, of teachers, of students, of parents, of the various educational authorities, and of course, of the interactions between all of these. This is followed by psychological counselling for all agents of the educational community. And thirdly, interventions, which can be of three types: corrective, preventive, and those aimed at optimizing teaching and learning processes (see Figure 3 for a comprehensive synthesis of these functions).

On talking about assessment, it is important to distinguish between that which is diagnostic, focused on the detection of possible dysfunctions (some of which, as illustrative examples, appear in the last column), and that which is psychoeducational, referring to the identification of psychological problems typical of educational contexts; one should also take into account the three types of system: micro, meso and macro, already referred to in Figure 1.

As far as psychological counselling is concerned, this should involve at least four groups of educational agents: students, parents, teachers and educational authorities. In the first case, after the psychological study of the dimensions in question (intellectual, social, affective, personality-related, among others), the Educational Psychologist will be in a position to help students develop "optimally" (as a goal) in each one of the relevant dimensions. As regards parents, they should act as genuine "paraprofessionals", cooperating in the implementation of programmes designed or selected *ad hoc* by the Educational Psychologist, according to the specific needs of the child. With regard to teachers, it should be stressed that they must receive the corresponding psychoeducational support for satisfying a series of needs in students that go beyond the mere transmission of specialized knowledge. And as far as the educational authorities are concerned, perhaps the most important aspect to highlight is their support in relation to certain decisions, of a psychological nature, that are clearly complementary to those which teachers can and should make. For example: should a student with a certain performance-related difficulty be made to repeat the school year? And if not, what alternatives are available?

As regards intervention, it must be underlined that, as

far as possible, it should never be of a clinical or individual type, but rather community-based – that is, taking into account the specific groups that present particular types of problem. On this basis, interventions may be of a *corrective* nature in cases of, for example, disruptive behaviours in the classroom, or of a *preventive* nature, a category which can in turn be broken down into tertiary prevention (very similar to corrective intervention), secondary prevention (focused on early diagnosis) and primary prevention (to avoid school failure by modifying its predictor variables). The Educational Psychologist should also make room and time for carrying out *optimizing* intervention – that which sets out to improve as much as possible the specific target: an ability, a habit, etc.

Educational Psychologists should also be prepared to refer to other professionals those cases that fall clearly into the clinical field. Furthermore, they are responsible for coordination in relation to treatment prescribed for dysfunctional students in their area of educational activity, advising parents and teachers about the treatment’s implications for the behaviour and performance of the students affected.

Obviously, to be able to fulfil these functions in the most appropriate manner, an adequate academic training is

essential. As I understand it, the psychology degree alone is insufficient in this respect. The holding of this degree is, then, a necessary but not sufficient condition. Hence the need for a Masters qualification, and more specifically, a “professionally-oriented” Masters, rather than one of the many other kinds of Masters offered within the Educational Psychology division.

FIGURE 2
PRINCIPAL FUNCTIONS OF THE EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGIST
(FERNÁNDEZ, 2001)

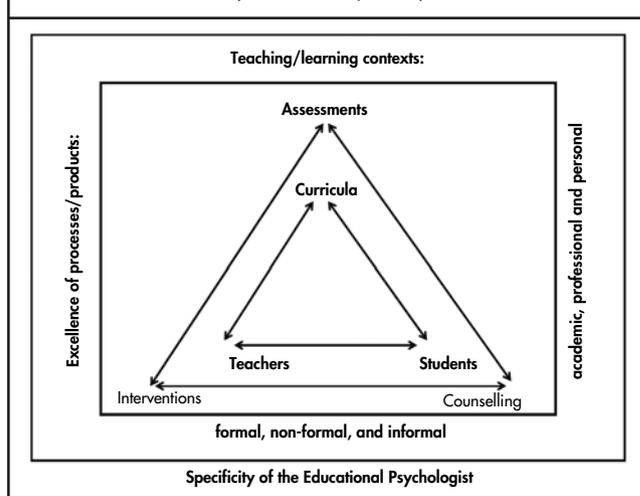


FIGURE 3
EXTENSION AND SPECIFICATION OF FUNCTIONS

Most specific functions of the educational psychologist			
Assessment	<i>Diagnosis</i>	<u>Detection of dysfunctions</u>	Dyslexia, anorexia, ADHD, PDD
	<i>Of educational contexts</i>	<u>Detection of problems</u>	Curriculum-related, school climate, family
Psychological counselling (administrative decisions)	<i>Students</i>	<u>Dimensions</u>	Intellectual, social, affective
	<i>Parents</i>	<u>Paraprofessionals</u>	Intervention programmes: triadic model
	<i>Teachers</i>	<u>Psychoeducational support</u>	Intervention programmes: triadic model
	<i>Educational authorities</i>	<u>Support for decision-making</u>	Formative-type (improvement) and summative type
Community-based interventions	<i>Corrective</i>	{ <u>Tertiary</u> <u>Secondary</u> <u>Primary</u>	Existing disruptive behaviours
	<i>Preventive</i>		Reduction of school violence
			Early diagnosis of learning difficulties
	<i>Optimizing</i>		Avoiding school failure
			Academic, professional, social, family and personal improvement
Referral to other professionals selective mutism	<i>Complementary studies</i>	<u>Treatment of dysfunctions</u>	Eating disorders, elimination disorders, anxiety disorders,

THE ACADEMIC TRAINING OF EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGISTS

The Psychology degree in Spain (*Grado en Psicología*), as did its degree-level predecessor (*Licenciatura en Psicología*), includes a large number of units that clearly belong to the field of Educational Psychology, beginning with the course that bears precisely this name, and continuing with Psychology of Special Education, Development and Education, Psychology of Educational Intervention, Educational Guidance, Psychology of Instruction, Social Psychology of Education, Cognitive Development, and Social Development of the Personality, among others. Moreover, there is another substantial group of courses that are obviously pre-requisites for working appropriately as an Educational Psychologist, such as Psychology of Human Learning and Memory, Psychology of Motivation and Emotion, Psychology of Perception, Psychology of the Personality, Differential Psychology, Psychology of Attention, Psychopathology, Physiological Psychology, Behaviour Modification Techniques, Psychology of Language, Psychology of Thinking, Abnormal Psychology, or Psychological

Assessment. But it is essential to complement this body of knowledge with further training focusing on the specific activity of the Educational Psychologist. In Figure 4 I have tried to set out the subject matter that could serve as a “common denominator” for this “professionally-oriented” Masters qualification, as well as suggesting some possible course programmes.

In line with all of the above, the core modules of the course must involve topics related to the three specific functions of the Educational Psychologist: assessment, counselling and intervention. These can be seen on the right-hand side of the figure. Furthermore, the course core must incorporate, in accordance with European Union law, a practicum and a Masters dissertation. The above-described core modules will account for at least half of the credits (ECTS: European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System) necessary for obtaining the Masters qualification (whether it be a 60- or 90-credit course), regardless of any possible breakdown of the topics so as to adapt them to the credit pattern of each university or other institution. As far as programmes are concerned, we can consider at least three: professional,

**FIGURE 4
EXTENSION AND SPECIFICATION OF FUNCTIONS**

MASTERS IN EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY (MINIMUM OF 60 CREDITS –ECTS)	
Essentials/Core	Assessment: diagnosis and educational
	Psychological counselling for the academic community: students, parents, teachers and educational authorities
	Community-based interventions: corrective, preventive and optimizing
	Practicum (external)
	Masters dissertation
Academic pathways	Professional
	Learning disorders
	Developmental disorders
	Attention to diversity
	Violence in educational contexts
Academic pathways	Prevention of drug-dependence
	Research
	Application of new technologies in educational contexts
Academic pathways	Collection, analysis and interpretation of data
	Specific research lines
Academic pathways	Professional/Research

research and professional/research. Concentrating on what is of most interest to us here – the professional programme – there are a series of topics that would seem basic for Educational Psychologists to be able to fulfil their essential specific functions, though there could obviously be some degree of interchange of these topics with those from the block corresponding to the “research” programme. For example, it is reasonable to argue that the “Application of new technologies in educational contexts” module is also essential for the “professional” programme. Moreover, it is necessary to take into account the topics taught on degree courses in Spain’s different Autonomous Regions (*Comunidades Autónomas*), with a view to avoiding, as far as possible, unnecessary overlap. Where there would be most flexibility is in the “professional/research” programme, since in this case each institution will analyze the suitability of emphasizing one profile or another.

AGREEMENT BETWEEN CURRICULUM DESIGN AND THE CURRENT PRACTICE OF THE EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGIST

Up to now our review has basically revolved around questions of academic knowledge, but what about the activities psychologists have been carrying out, and still carry out, in educational contexts? Table 1 is quite eloquent in this regard (Santolaya, Berdullas, & Fernández, 2001).

What emerges is that the theory (what we have seen in the previous sections) and the reality (as reflected here) fit almost perfectly with one another. In either case, assessment, counselling, intervention, and coordination or cooperation with other professionals clearly constitute the essential core of the Educational Psychologist’s work. The professionally-oriented Masters qualification will

represent, therefore, the definitive recognition of these education professionals, and this will undoubtedly help to achieve the longed-for improvement of our education systems, on preparing them specifically for putting into practice these functions that distinguish them from the rest of psychologists and from other professionals working in the different educational contexts.

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TABLE 1	
Functions of the Educational Psychologist	Percentage*
Intervention	91.4%
Assessment	91.0%
Detection and prevention	83.5%
Counselling for parents	82.8%
Counselling for teachers	74.6%
Psychopedagogical guidance	67.7%
Collaboration with special education teachers and class tutors	56.6%
Counselling for school management personnel	55.6%

* Percentage of Educational Psychologists carrying out the different functions

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