

# Letter writing to pupils; an approach used to develop a therapeutic alliance with pupils?

**Laura Craven**

*Doctorate in Educational Psychology (DEdPsy)*

2013

## Summary

The current research study explores the use of letter writing to pupils as a tool used within educational psychology practice to develop and enhance a therapeutic alliance. The first section will entail a comprehensive and in-depth review of the existing literature with regards to letter writing and therapeutic alliance. The empirical study, found in the second section, aimed to explore the relationship between letter writing and the development of a therapeutic alliance, the theoretical approaches underpinning the letters and pupil perceptions of receiving a letter from an EP. Semi-structured interviews were used with both EPs and pupils. The interviews were analysed using Thematic Analysis. Strong themes of personal, task and goal alliance emerged from both EP and pupil interviews, suggesting that letter writing is an effective tool used by EPs to contribute towards developing and enhancing a therapeutic alliance. Identical themes such as the 'process of change' and the 'power of the written' word were found between both groups. A specific theoretical framework does not generally underpin letters written by EPs but they reflect EPs eclectic use of psychology. EPs reported that they are more likely to write to older, more able pupils with Social, Emotional and Behavioural difficulties (SEBD). Pupils generally reported positive outcomes from receipt of a letter. Implications for practice, with regards to the use of letters, are discussed.

## DECLARATION

This work has not previously been accepted in substance for any degree and is not concurrently submitted in candidature for any degree.

Signed ..... (candidate)      Date .....

### **STATEMENT 1**

This thesis is being submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of .....(insert MCh, MD, MPhil, PhD etc, as appropriate)

Signed ..... (candidate)      Date .....

### **STATEMENT 2**

This thesis is the result of my own independent work/investigation, except where otherwise stated.

Other sources are acknowledged by explicit references.

Signed ..... (candidate)      Date .....

### **STATEMENT 3**

I hereby give consent for my thesis, if accepted, to be available for photocopying and for inter-library loan, and for the title and summary to be made available to outside organisations.

Signed ..... (candidate)      Date .....

### **STATEMENT 4: PREVIOUSLY APPROVED BAR ON ACCESS**

I hereby give consent for my thesis, if accepted, to be available for photocopying and for inter-library loans **after expiry of a bar on access previously approved by the Graduate Development Committee.**

Signed ..... (candidate)      Date .....

## Acknowledgments

I would like to thank all people who have helped and inspired me during my doctoral study. With the greatest appreciation, I would like to thank the participants, who gave their time to take part in this research, as well as the DEdPsy tutors for their support, especially Dr Jean Parry for her guidance and speedy responses in times of need.

I'd like to show my gratitude to my family and friends who have shown much patience and understanding when my time and attention has been focussed on completing this research. Thank you all for your unconditional love and support.

More specifically, I would like to give thanks to my fiancée, Rob, and my mother, Catherine.

Rob, I appreciate so much the effort that you have gone to in order to help me survive the intensity of the last three years with some sanity intact. Thank you for your patience. Whenever I became stressed, spending time with you helped me to see the light at the end tunnel. You are my soul mate and I am looking forward to spending the rest of my life with you.

Mam, without your support, guidance and motivation this research project would not have materialised. Thank you for keeping me on track and always showing an interest in whatever I am doing. Nothing is 'too much' for you. You continue to inspire all those around you and I am always indebted to you.

Thank you to you all.

Laura

**Contents Page**

Title Page .....i  
Summary .....ii  
Declarations .....iii  
Acknowledgments .....iv  
Contents Page .....v

**PART 1**

**Introduction & Literature Review (9,816 words)**

1.1Introduction ..... 1  
    **Searches..... 3**  
[1.2Literature Review](#) ..... 3  
    **The Therapeutic Alliance..... 3**  
    **Letter Writing ..... 8**  
    **Letter Writing in Professional Practice..... 10**  
    **The Benefits of Letter Writing ..... 11**  
    **Barriers for Educational Psychologists ..... 23**  
[1.3Conclusion](#) ..... 25  
    **Current Research..... 27**  
    **Research Questions ..... 27**  
[1.4Theoretical Approach](#) ..... 28  
    **Analysis ..... 29**  
    **Literature Review References ..... 30**

**PART 2**

**Empirical Study (5,786 words)**

[2.1Abstract](#)..... 37  
[2.2Introduction](#)..... 37  
    **Conclusion & current research ..... 43**  
    **Research Questions ..... 43**

<a href="#">2.3</a>	<b>Methodology</b> .....	44
	<b>Details of participants recruited</b> .....	44
	<b>Ethical Considerations</b> .....	45
	<b>Procedure</b> .....	46
	<b>Materials</b> .....	46
	<b>Data Analysis</b> .....	47
<a href="#">2.4</a>	<b>Results/Findings</b> .....	48
<a href="#">2.5</a>	<b>Discussion</b> .....	56
	<b>Key Findings and Unique Contribution</b> .....	56
	<b>Strengths &amp; Limitations</b> .....	59
	<b>Further Research</b> .....	59
	<b>Practical implications for educational psychology</b> .....	59
	<b>Summary &amp; Conclusion</b> .....	60
	<b>References</b> .....	63
	<b>Appendices</b> .....	66
	<b>Principal EP Letter (Appendix 1)</b> .....	67
	<b>A Head Teachers gatekeeper letter (Appendix 2)</b> .....	69
	<b>An interview schedule for EPs (Appendix 3)</b> .....	71
	<b>Pupil interview schedule (Appendix 4)</b> .....	72
	<b>EP consent form (Appendix 5)</b> .....	73
	<b>EP De-brief form (Appendix 6)</b> .....	74
	<b>An opt out consent form for parents/guardians (Appendix 7)</b> .....	76
	<b>A debrief form for parents/pupils (Appendix 8)</b> .....	78
	<b>A ‘thank you’ letter for pupils (Appendix 9)</b> .....	80

## **Introduction**

A therapeutic alliance refers to the strength of relationship and commitment to the therapeutic process by both practitioner and service user (Glassman, 2000). Bordin (1979) proposed the tripartite definition of a therapeutic alliance, which comprises of personal, task and goal alliance. Personal alliance refers to the emotional aspect of the relationship and is thought to develop when a service user perceives, for example, feelings of empathy, respect, validation and non-judgment from the practitioner. Task and goal alliance refers to the practical aspect of an alliance and occurs when there is agreement between practitioner and service user on tasks, goals and expectations. More recently, Zack, Castonguay and Boswell (2007) developed a new conceptualisation of therapeutic alliance, which specifically relates to adolescents. This includes two components, 'the affective bond' and 'collaboration on tasks'. A therapeutic alliance is considered to be a strong predictor of successful outcomes (Krupnick et al, 1996) as it is more likely to engage the service user in the process of change (Regional Research Institute for Human Services - RRIHS, 2011).

Most of the research conducted has explored the development of a therapeutic alliance associated with therapy, and it particularly relates to the field of psychotherapy. However, practitioners within any profession are most likely to agree on the importance of developing a strong working relationship with service users. Farrell et al (2006) reviewed the role and function of the Educational Psychologist (EP) by exploring the views of EPs, Principal Educational Psychologists (PEPs) along with Head Teachers, professionals and Local Authority (LA) officers. It was found that good working relationships and effective communication skills with school staff, parents and pupils were identified as positive aspects of the EP role. However, the research also highlighted that despite service users rating highly the quality of contact with EPs, the limited frequency of this contact with service users was perceived as a barrier. Research exploring the development of a therapeutic alliance suggests that time plays an important

role in contributing towards establishing and increasing an alliance (Klee, Abeles & Muller, 1990). During therapeutic treatment, the therapeutic alliance is thought to significantly increase during each session. Therefore, although EPs have skills in developing a therapeutic alliance, this may suggest that time constraints might serve as a barrier to the enhancement of a strengthening bond between both parties. In light of this it may be helpful for EPs to consider methods to develop and enhance a therapeutic relationship with service users.

Green (2009) reported that there has been limited research to explore methods of developing an alliance. Moules (2002) reported that letters have been found to indirectly have positive benefits that contribute towards a therapeutic alliance. Therapeutic letter writing is mainly associated with narrative therapy (White & Epston, 1990) and solution focussed brief therapy (de Shazer, 1998). However, the connection between letter writing and the development of an alliance has mainly been recognised with regards to their use within therapy or treatment when contact is frequent.

Different styles of letter writing in the EP profession have been identified for different purposes. For example, solution focussed letters based on the principles of solution focussed brief therapy (Nash, 2000) and consultation letters to parents and school staff (Bozic, 2004). However, there has not been any research conducted to identify the most accepted or widely used method of letter writing within the EP profession, or whether such letters can develop and/or enhance an alliance. This literature review aims to explore the conceptualisation of therapeutic alliance, therapeutic letter writing and the connection between the two. It will also aim to explore the current use of letters within EP practice and their reported benefits. Due to the limited research conducted within the EP profession, the current literature review aims to cover all areas that pertain to these themes. These will include the adult and child therapeutic relationship and letters sent to both children and adults. No specific areas will be excluded; however the review will mainly focus on letters written within a professional context.



## **Searches**

The following electronic search engines were used to conduct a review of the literature: PSYC INFO and ERIC. The keywords used were *therapeutic relationship, therapeutic alliance, educational psychologist, educational psychology, letter writing, and therapeutic letter writing*. Google book searches and government policies were accessed. Direct contact was also made with authors via e-mail. The search was completed in December 2012.

## **Literature Review**

### **The Therapeutic Alliance**

Despite the limited research with regards to methods of developing an alliance (Green, 2009), there has been extensive research conducted to explore the conceptualisation and benefits of a therapeutic alliance. Therapeutic alliance derived from the field of psychotherapy, and the majority of the research has been associated with its benefits in relation to therapeutic treatment. Research suggests that therapeutic alliance plays a significant role in the success of therapy (Krupnick et al, 1996) and the bond between practitioner and service user is generally stronger in later therapeutic sessions (Klee, Albeson & Muller, 1990).

Some forms of therapeutic treatments are also believed to be more likely to naturally develop and enhance a therapeutic alliance. These may include therapeutic methods such as motivational interviewing (Miller & Rollnick, 2002), as it places emphasis on the importance of core skills delivered by the practitioner, for example, unconditional positive regard and active listening (Moyers, Miller & Hendrickson, 2005). Motivational Interviewing was developed by Miller and Rollnick (2002) and is a person centred approach, which emphasises the importance of collaboration, a key element in the development of an alliance with adolescents (Zack, Castonguay & Boswell, 2007). This suggests that, to some extent, therapy and therapeutic

alliance can be thought of as the same thing, which makes it difficult to specifically identify either one as the predictor of success.

Assessment tools such as the Therapeutic Alliance Scale for Children (TASC, Shirk & Saiz, 1992) and the Helping Alliance Questionnaire (HAQ-II, Luborsky et al, 1996) have both been devised in an attempt to provide an indication of the strength of alliance and its correlation to positive outcomes.

Much of the research thus far has focussed on the practitioner's perception of what skills they can employ to help support and develop the emergence of a therapeutic alliance (Campbell and Simmonds, 2011). However, with regards to directly measuring a therapeutic relationship, it is difficult for therapists to determine the strength of alliance in isolation. The very fact that a personal alliance refers to a connection between people suggests that an interactional approach needs to be taken to understand and measure the strength of alliance. In order to report any positive outcomes personal alliance has to be perceived by both parties not just the practitioner (Bickman et al, 2004).

It is not always pertinent to think only of practitioners skills in relation to the development of an alliance, as other factors also play a contributory role (Green, 2009). Service users may struggle with forming relationships, which may have an impact on the development of an alliance. For example, past experiences and attachment difficulties (Hilliard et al., 2000; Kokotovic & Tracey, 1990) may have an adverse effect on developing an alliance. Smith, Msetfi &Golding (2010) conducted a systematic review, which highlighted that service users who rated themselves as having more secure attachments were more likely to rate the therapeutic alliance as stronger.

EPs need to consider individual differences between service users as this can have an impact on the development of an alliance. Research conducted by Bickman et al (2004) indicated that therapeutic alliance is considered to have better outcomes for externalizing problems such as behaviour. However, it was also reported that this might be due to the type of treatment used, rather than the alliance, which tends to be more effective

with externalizing rather than internalizing problems. In contrast, Shirk and Kaver (2003) suggest that it is actually more difficult to initiate a therapeutic alliance with adolescents who present with externalising difficulties such as anger. This may indicate that it may be more difficult to initially develop a therapeutic alliance with this group, although once established, a therapeutic alliance can actually have a significant impact on outcomes.

Other factors, such as the age of the service user, may also have an effect. The majority of research conducted has focussed on the therapeutic alliance between adult and therapist. In general, children and adult relationships are defined by different goals and expectations, which suggest that findings in adult studies should not be generalised to that of an adult-child relationship without due consideration. In an adult-child relationship there may be a perceived power imbalance where the adult therapist is in charge or in control and is more knowledgeable (RRIHS, 2011). This may not be a conscious factor but one that is constructed as a result of the child's previous experiences with adults. Creed and Kendall (2005) suggested that the factors that positively contributed to the therapeutic alliance between child and therapist were collaboration and finding positive ground. They also indicated that a factor negatively contributing to the alliance was urging the child to talk about any concerns or issues.

There are similar statistics relating to the strength of correlation between therapeutic alliances and successful outcomes for children and therapists, as there is for adults and therapists (Shirk and Karver, 2011), although this has been considered to be an understudied area (Green, 2009). There is a possibility that as the relationship between child and therapist differs in terms of role, goals and expectations, to that of an adult and therapist relationship, that different methods of enhancing an alliance would have varying outcomes.

Bickman et al (2004) reported that strength of alliance between youth and practitioner was weaker for those under the age of 17 compared to those over the age of 17. This may be associated with the notion that children rarely initiate their own contact with professionals (Bickman et al, 2004;

Green, 2009). It could also be argued that children and young people under the age of 17 have fewer experiences of adult interactions whilst school age and, as a result, were less participatory and more passive in the process limiting the potential for collaboration. Also, this may suggest that, to some extent, by not initiating contact, children and young people may be less engaged in the process of change and therefore less receptive to forming an alliance.

What may particularly be difficult for EPs are the multiple alliances they may have to form to support the facilitation of change with, for example, school staff, parents, LA officers, other professional and pupils. This suggests that varying factors need to be considered when attempting to form a bond with both adults and children. Research indicates that parents and children alliances should be considered as separate and not assumed to be identical (Green, 2009). As a result, Green (2009) suggests that the impact of therapeutic alliance, along with its perceived benefits, should be explored in different contexts. Therefore the next section of the literature review aims to explore further considerations to be made with regards to the EP's role in developing a therapeutic alliance.

### **Further considerations for the EP role in developing a therapeutic alliance**

The consultation approach has become a widely used method of service delivery in recent years within the United Kingdom (Leadbetter, 2006). The joint problem solving approach used by the consultation model may be useful for encouraging the development of an alliance as it places emphasis on 'patient centeredness' and a 'collaborative approach' (Green, 2009) both key in developing an alliance.

Green (2009) reported that when practitioners focus on their own requirements during consultation and assessment, such as gathering necessary information, this can reduce the likelihood of therapeutic alliance developing. This suggests that gathering information in a systematic way without taking into account the needs of the service user would be

detrimental to developing an alliance. This may suggest that developing an alliance needs to be more than solely carrying out assessments, consultations or interventions in a standardised way without due consideration of the importance of practitioner skills. This may have implications for EPs who routinely assess children's needs for statutory requirements in line with the SEN Code of Practice (2002). However, for some time, legislation has placed emphasis on the personalisation of learning (DfES, 2004b) and consultation papers have been submitted with the aim to further include 'person centred practice' within the statutory assessment process (Welsh Assembly Government, 2012).

Not only can methods of gathering information infringe on the development of an alliance but often methods of documenting involvement, such as report writing, can also act as a barrier to developing a therapeutic alliance. Vrouva & Dennington (2012) highlight how bureaucratic processes such as paper work can turn emotional encounters with service users into factual accounts disseminated to third parties, losing its personal element. Bozic (2004) highlighted that conventional reports convey "messages of authority and expertise" (p.293), the very opposite to 'collaboration' which has been suggested as method of enhancing an alliance (Creed and Kendall, 2005). Reports are not always reader friendly or child friendly, they can often use professional terminology that confuses the recipient. Many psychological principles, including narrative therapy, solution focussed therapy and person centred psychology, all highlight the need for collaboration. Written communication should not reflect a hierarchical position held by a therapist but should reflect and "strengthen the new shared meanings generated together in the consultative conversations" (Bozic, 2004, p.293). However, developing written feedback that is personal for each of its recipients may be a difficult task for EPs due to time constraints.

Farrell et al (2006) reported that time-constraints form a barrier for the role of the EP. The use of time allocation systems sometimes means that EPs have limited time for each individual case. This may impact on their ability to develop a bond when considering that time plays a vital role in the

development of an alliance. This is supported by the notion that the therapeutic alliance is stronger in later sessions of treatment (Klee, Abeles & Muller, 1990). However it is important to consider that time is not the only contributory factor in developing an alliance. Spending time with someone by itself would not develop an alliance, which suggests that the development of a therapeutic alliance is complex and multi-faceted. What happens within the time spent with the service user is equally as important. It is vital to consider other methods of developing an alliance when time may be limited. Therefore the next section of the review aims to explore some methods of enhancing an alliance when time is limited.

### **Methods of enhancing alliance**

One of the methods, which have been identified as indirectly having a positive influence on the development and enhancement of a therapeutic alliance, is therapeutic letter writing. There has been limited research within the profession to directly explore if letter writing within educational psychology can enhance the therapeutic alliance between the child/young person and EP. Research suggests that therapeutic letters make the service user feel valued, and it reinforces personal alliance (Moules, 2002; 2009a, 2009b) as well as task and goal alliance (Andrews, Clark and Baird, 1998). For this reason, literature relating to letter writing will now be reviewed in relation to their use and potential benefits along with their connection to developing a therapeutic alliance.

### **Letter Writing**

Letters have historically been used to convey written messages to one or more recipients (Nevalainen, 2007). Over time, letters have changed in their use and purpose to reflect the discursive practices of certain eras (Barton & Hall, 1999; Nevalainen, 2007). In particular, the popularity of letter writing has changed to reflect cultural and societal patterns. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when electronic methods of communicating did not exist, letters were frequently written to communicate messages and were considered a necessary skill and one of the earliest forms of literal activity (Barton and

Hall, 1999). However, in today's society letter writing for social purposes is in decline. Letters received through the post are now more frequently associated with requests for payment, or from businesses or the government. It is possible to hypothesize that in today's modern technological age that other forms of communication such as the use of a telephone (Curtis, 1990) as well as texts, e-mails and video messages are replacing the old age practice of letter writing. However, Barton and Hall (1999) suggest that letter writing is hard to define and can take many forms including a fax and electronic mail.

In previous times letter writing was a sign of wealth and status along with a high level of education. In western society, the formation and content of letters is still an important aspect of the school curriculum and forms part of the assessment of children in both primary and secondary phases of education. Government changes to the current secondary phase curriculum intends to place more emphasis on writing letter as it is believed that young people are becoming deskilled as a result of frequent texting (DfE, 2012). This suggests that letter writing is still considered an integral part of today's society and more accessible than compared to the 18<sup>th</sup> century when it was restricted to the perceived higher classes.

Barton and Hall (1999) suggest that letter writing gains its significance from "being situated in cultural beliefs, values and practices" (p.1). Barton & Hamilton (1998) conducted a study to explore the prevalence of letter writing in an English town, where a range of letter writing activity was identified. Within this study, it was found that people had distinct memories of times in their lives when writing letters had been important to them e.g., wartime, and tracing missing relatives. Love letters in particular were an important facet of wartime and played an important role in building and maintaining morale. Barton and Hall (1999) suggest that letters "mediate a huge range of human interactions" such as "narrate experiences, dispute points, describe situations, offer explanations, give instructions and so on" (p.1). This highlights the extent to which letters might fulfil many different purposes within society.

More recently, letters have been used within 'helping' professions such as, nursing, paediatrics, clinical psychology, counselling psychology and educational psychology, to support and facilitate change. Moules (2002) suggests that letters within a therapeutic context differ from social letters, "primarily in their context, content, intent and effect" (p.104). Steinberg (2000) reported that letter writing within the 'helping profession' should be deemed as 'good practice' as the written word is powerful in the therapeutic process as it allows practitioners the time to select the right wording, so they can ensure that meaning and responsibility is conveyed. However, other forms of written communication within professional practice would achieve the same outcomes.

To date, the majority of research with regards to the use of letters in professional practice has been conducted within the field of nursing and psychotherapy (Moules, 2002). Such research indicates positive effects, for example, enhancements of the therapeutic relationship (Moules, 2002), service user empowerment, as well as promoting facilitation and commitment to change (Wojick & Iverson, 1989). However, there has been limited research to explore the current use of letters within EP practice with regards to 'which theoretical frameworks are used to underpin such letters' and 'the perceived benefits and barriers for their use'. The following section of the literature review explores the current evidence base in relation to letter writing within professional practice.

### **Letter Writing in Professional Practice**

Moules (2002) highlighted that letter writing, as a tool within therapeutic practice, was first initiated by Burton (1965) and Ellis (1965). Ellis (1965) noticed a positive difference in the impact that letters had over verbal communication and since then they have been used by the Milan Family Therapy team (Selvini palazzoli et al 1978), and also within other professional contexts. They have more recently been used within the nursing profession and utilised to 'develop collaborative and transparent relationships' (Moules, 2002, p.105). Within the field of clinical and



counselling psychology, these letters are referred to as therapeutic letters. They are often written throughout the therapeutic process for different purposes such as to initiate contact, end contact or as a method to reinforce change between therapeutic sessions (Freeman, Epston & Lobovits, 1997).

### **The Benefits of Letter Writing**

There has been considerable research conducted to explore the benefits of letter writing. Toepfer, Cichy & Peters (2012) conducted an experiment to explore the benefits resulting from sending letters of gratitude. They compared the happiness, life satisfaction and depression scores of two groups of participants. One group sent meaningful letters of gratitude to a significant person, while the other group were requested not to send any letters. The researchers concluded that the more letters participants wrote the more their happiness and life satisfaction improved. In comparison, no improvements in scores on either the happiness or life satisfaction scale were detected for the control group. Other studies have reported sleep benefits for writing letters (Mosher & Danoff-Burg, 2006).

There have been many suggestions on how to develop a beneficial therapeutic letter. Moules (2002) recommended that they need to be “interesting enough to sustain interest”, the writer needs to be “brave and daring at the same time as being kind and warm”, metaphors can be used “as a creative invitation to imagination” and the use of “language that is tentative and speculative invites and creates room for many interpretations and possibilities” (p.110). However, it could be argued that the preferred content of letters is subjective.

Another benefit of letter writing highlighted by Moules (2009b), although not always fully understood, is that there is a power to the printed word, suggesting that having ideas visually presented has many benefits. Similarly, the benefits of letters include their endurance through time as well as providing “an ongoing documentation” of service users “strengths and

successes” (Moules, 2002, p.111). It has also been reported that re-reading letters allows the recipient to reflect and generate new meanings and understandings of the current situation (Moules, 2002). Letters are also “markers of change and are a testament to the personal work” that has been undertaken as well as providing a “visual affirmation of the reality of suffering” that the service user has endured (Moules, 2002, p.111). However, this assumes that the service user would always benefit from a visual affirmation of their suffering, which might not always be the case. Courtois, Ford & Cloitre (2009) suggest that avoidance of traumatic memories is normal and therapeutic interventions should not evoke such memories.

The term therapeutic letters derives from narrative therapy and is mainly associated with the work of White and Epston (1990). Moules (2002) highlighted that some professionals who do not consider themselves to deliver therapy might feel uncomfortable with the word ‘therapeutic’, in relation to letter writing, as it denotes or assumes some kind of therapeutic content or intent. Moules (2002) addressed this and stated that ‘therapeutica’ in its original meaning means ‘the art of healing and the preservation of health’. It could be considered that any professionals who send letters as a means to promote positive health and wellbeing could consider their letters to be therapeutic. Moules (2002) highlighted that “families report a valuing and appreciation of the letters and, in many instances attribute the letter with substantial credit for therapeutic change” (p.105). However, the therapeutic letters referred to by Moules are used within the nursing profession and their benefits may not readily transfer to other professions.

Perhaps some professionals feel uncomfortable with the term ‘therapeutic’ as the Oxford English Dictionary (2008) defines therapy as “the treatment of mental disorders by psychological means”. However, Mackay and Greig (2007) reported that it could also be conceptualised as working with others who support children on a daily basis. These conflicting concepts may add

to the discomfort of using the term 'therapeutic' to refer to such letters. A study by Atkinson et al (2012) found that EPs reported that they delivered therapeutic services in a range of ways including using direct interventions, consultation, delivering training and as part of assessments. This suggests that if EPs describe a range of activities that they engage in as therapeutic that they may also feel comfortable with using the term 'therapeutic letters' to describe the letters sent to pupils, depending on their aim and intent.

The psychological theory underpinning the use of letter writing may affect its content, benefit and outcome. Therapeutic Letter writing could be described as an extension of the therapeutic work completed (Moules, 2002). This may also enhance the therapeutic relationship by providing ongoing support. The varying theoretical frameworks used and subsequent content of such letters will now be discussed.

### **Letters within narrative therapy**

Narrative therapy is based on the premise that clients have the necessary skills, competencies and abilities to affect change within their lives. It also focuses on the importance of externalising problems and recognising them as separate from the individual's identity (White and Epston, 1990). Narrative therapy aims to avoid power battles and firmly asserts the client as the expert in their own life. This may indicate that any written form that exerts authority such as reports (Bozic, 2004) may contradict the guiding principles of the approach. White and Epston (1990) describe how only a fraction of people's lived experiences can be expressed or communicated at any one time. As a result, certain stories about their life become dominant and many aspects of their lived experience are discarded. Experiences that are neglected from our narrative are often ones that do not follow the typical pattern of our existing life story. These neglected experiences can be explored and used to restructure alternative stories where a person's dominant narrative is having a negative impact on their life.

Letter writing has been used within narrative therapy as a means of offering an alternative perspective and externalising problem behaviours. By the very nature of narrative therapy they also reinforce the skills and competencies of the client in the change process by offering positive reflections. Epston (1994) identified letters as having many possible uses and benefits including summarising the content of therapeutic sessions, providing a method of communicating ideas that may need to be considered in private and to recover any sessions that may not have run as smoothly. Lambert (2010) suggests that, in the same vein, a practitioner needs to closely monitor the therapeutic alliance to provide opportunities to repair any damage and improve the relationship when possible. More specifically, Bateson (1979) detailed that such letters needed to do more than summarise, they needed to challenge thinking and offer something new. Within narrative therapy there are many other written methods used to support the development of an alternative narrative including certificates, stories and therapeutic documents. White and Epston (1990) reported that letters can reinforce the narrative and discussions that have taken place within the session which supports the service user to develop alternative narratives.

Wojcik and Iverson (1989) highlighted that letters within narrative therapy can be used to empower clients, recognise strengths as well as to reinforce and emphasise key points within discussions. Wright et al (1996) further explains the purpose of letters as a method of challenging existing thoughts and ideas that may be contributing towards and perpetuating the current dominant life story. Narrative therapy aims to avoid power struggles between professionals and service users and places importance on the clients' commitment to change. Narrative therapeutic letters are used to engage the service user in the therapeutic process. It promotes "cooperation" as well as supports them to "find solutions to their presenting problems" (White and Epston, 1990, p.98). It could be concluded that the validation of feelings, recognition of strengths, emphasis on collaboration

and externalisation of the problem contributes to the enhancement of the alliance via narrative therapeutic letter writing.

Freeman et al (1997) provides examples of therapeutic letters that contains content, which enables clients to reflect. Such letters support the externalisation of the behaviour by using reflective questioning and reflexive verbs, example of these could include, 'I wonder what difference that would make to your life?' and 'does this mean you have been controlling the anger?' respectively. An element of caution has been expressed with regards to identifying strengths too early within the letter, as doing so prematurely may seem artificial (Payne, 2000). As a result, this may make the therapeutic letter and subsequently the therapeutic relationship seem insincere and contrived.

Nylund and Thomas (1994) conducted a small-scale research study to explore client's perceptions of the perceived benefits of narrative letters. It was concluded that 52% of the positive outcome was attributed to the letter alone. The letter was also rated as worth an average of 3.2 face-to-face interviews. Although this research does not specifically evaluate the direct impact of letters on therapeutic alliance, it is possible to assume that the positive outcome attributed would have a positive impact on the bond between therapist and service user. Interestingly, if letters by themselves have the power to be perceived as being worth more than face-to-face contact, then this suggests that they may be beneficial to utilise in order to develop and enhance an alliance when time is limited.

### **Solution focussed letters**

Letter writing has also been used within solution-focussed brief therapy. Solution focussed principles are based on the idea that people have the resources to develop solutions to their problems and that focus should be placed on their preferred futures rather than past or current problems (Iveson, 2002). Key concepts focus on the relationship, which includes being respectful, being accepting, demonstrating unconditional positive

regard and active listening, as well as being genuine and collaborative, whilst empowering the service user and inviting them to explore possibilities (de Shazer, 1988). Active listening refers to a technique where by the listener pays attention, demonstrates that they have been listening and provides feedback. The aim is to create a mutual understanding by clarifying key points and deferring judgment. This type of communication technique also plays a large role in many different strands of psychology. Motivational Interviewing techniques (Miller & Rollnick, 2002) incorporate active listening and are used to motivate and support the service user to reflect on their current change issue.

A letter provides an opportunity to demonstrate active listening by providing feedback, which could be considered as one of its many benefits. Moules (2002) highlighted the importance of listening to service users experiences as “unless clients perceive that they are heard, they might not be willing to take with trust the offering of another idea, solution or belief” (p.106). Considering that validating feelings is thought to be a key factor of personal alliance, it could be suggested that it is this aspect of letter writing that helps to build and strengthen alliance. However, it is important that any reflection of the information provided by the service user is accurate. Any deviation from this could mean that the service user feels that they have not been heard and therefore it may distance them further from the professional. Another benefit of such letters is their ability to encourage service users to reconstruct and re-evaluate for themselves their current situation.

Within solution-focussed approaches, determining key roles is important in the engagement of the recipient in the process of change. An important aspect of the solution-focussed approach is exploring exceptions where the problem is less prevalent and happens less frequently. In addition, exploring preferred futures by focussing on a future that is positive is another valuable aspect of the solution-focussed approach. This is generally achieved through the use of scaling questions and the miracle question. Other skills used by solution-focussed practitioners would involve noticing small steps and providing compliments and constructive feedback for altering

behaviours that perpetuate concerns. Rhodes and Ajmal (1995) recognised that, within the solution focussed approach, it is helpful if between session tasks are agreed and shared. Therapeutic letter writing is an effective tool to achieve this objective as it could be considered a document that is an extension of the therapeutic process and, like homework, it reinforces agreed tasks and goals (Prasko, Diveky, Mozny & Sigmundova, 2009).

The underpinning framework of solution-orientated approaches, which is respect and collaboration, is well suited to developing a strong therapeutic relationship. The solution orientated nature of the approach means that the service user is encouraged to consider a positive future and consider solutions, which will increase task and goal alliance. It may be that letters themselves are used as a vehicle to display those principles.

Within the solution-focussed approach, letters can be used as an additional activity to facilitate communication between sessions (Shilts and Ray, 1991). Letters can be a useful tool for summarising relevant aspects of the meeting and are an ideal tool when used to express views or initiate further questions. Letters may also be used to highlight success and motivate the service user. Therefore the principles underpinning letter writing within both narrative and solution orientated frameworks appear to mirror each other to some extent. They are both referred to as therapeutic letters due to their therapeutic nature, therapeutic intent and underpinning of psychological principles. They both aim to empower the service user, increase collaboration and engagement within the change process, as well as encourage the participant to take ownership of the change issue.

Within both narrative and solution focussed therapeutic letters, reflective questioning plays a pivotal role. Prasko, Diveky, Mozny and Sigmundova (2009) highlight the benefit of therapeutic letter writing in their ability to extend 'meaning making' beyond the therapeutic session through the process of reflection. It is possible this invitation to think and reflect may encourage a personal alliance to develop and provide a mutual understanding of tasks and goals. Moules (2002) suggests that part of the

effectiveness of asking a reflective question within a letter is that “in reading a question the reader almost involuntarily offers an answer in the mind” (p.107). A positive aspect for this would be that the recipient answers the questions to their own concerns. However, Moules (2002) indicated that letter writing requires the implementation of a careful balancing act for the use of such questions as “when too many questions are rapidly asked, reflective saturation is achieved and the mind shuts down” (p.107). This may also impact on the development of an alliance as if the service user feels overly challenged or overwhelmed they may emotionally, as well as cognitively, withdraw from the process.

Both narrative and solution orientated therapeutic letters derive specifically from these forms of therapy. It will be interesting to consider what types of letters are mainly used within the EP profession.

### **Letters within Educational Psychology Practice**

As with contemporary psychology, an EPs’ work can be underpinned by many theoretical frameworks as they may use a holistic and eclectic approach to applying psychology (Mangal, 2003). A consequence of this is that it could make it difficult for EPs to follow a typical letter format i.e. the format used by narrative letters or solution-orientated letters.

### **Solution Focussed and Consultation Letters in EP Practice**

Nash (2000) devised a solution-focussed letter to be used within the EP profession. The solution focussed letters focused on validation of feelings. In addition, they also provide a reminder about strengths and reiterate preferred futures, in keeping with the principles of the approach. Bozic (2004) reflected that most evaluation and research conducted around the utilisation of letters has been used to explore their benefits within therapy as opposed to consultation. Bozic’s (2004) consultative letters were solely based on notes taken during consultation. The consultation letters reflected information given by the service user and only contained information discussed during consultation, no new information was added. Similarly to



reflective questioning used in narrative therapeutic letters Bozic (2004) used questions within the text and used solution focussed principles to highlight positive change and identify expectations. Bozic (2004) employed the questions used by White and Epston (1990) as a way of evaluating and measuring the perceived benefit of the letter. It appears that Bozic used both narrative and solution orientated principles to create a style of letter more applicable for EP practice.

Responses from teachers to this evaluation differed to that of the participants of Nylund and Thomas (1994) where respondents felt letters were worth 3.2 face to face interviews. The findings of Bozic's study suggested that participants felt that letters should not act as a substitute for face-to-face contact and important follow ups. It could be argued that the perceived limited time that EPs have in schools (Farrell, et al 2006) influenced teacher's views of the letters resulting in contrasting results compared to previous studies. However, participants in Bozic's (2004) study did report that the consultative letters acted as a useful method for sharing information with others.

Findings of Bozic's (2004) research indicated that consultative letters provided a good record and reminder of the consultation, as well as being easy to re-read and provided a boost to confidence. Interestingly, despite Bozic specifically using the letters as a method of reflecting on discussions and purposefully not introducing new information, participants also reported that the letters provided 'alternative perspective to their own' thoughts (p.299). However, as highlighted by Prasko, Diveky, Mozny and Sigmundova (2009) therapeutic letters themselves can develop new meanings as they are an extension of the session and encourage reflection.

From an EP perspective, Bozic (2004) identified that a letter might serve as a useful reminder of the consultation, as difficulties may arise when there is a lapse of time between EP sessions and busy school environments. Information may not be so easily recalled and therefore a letter may become an invaluable tool. The tangible nature of a letter confirms the status and

existence of the problem. However, any method of documenting involvement, such as reports, can go some way to serve as a reminder and represent the physical existence of a problem. Therefore it is possible that the content and format of the letter contributes towards how valuable the letters are deemed in comparison to reports, although this cannot be ascertained from the findings of this study.

One of the main benefits of letter writing, aforementioned, is its ability to remind the recipient of ideas discussed and information shared by providing them with a concrete and permanent memento of the discussion (Goldberg, 2000). Chafe (1985) highlighted that the capacity of short-term memory is limited and therefore can only hold a specific number of idea units for a short period of time. Memories can decay or fade and can even be displaced with new memories. The benefit of any written communication is that it overcomes this barrier by presenting memories as a tangible concrete piece of information that can be reviewed as many times as one chooses. The repetition of re-reading a letter may also benefit the person in transferring the information into long-term memory. As a result it enables a person to consider many ideas and enables them to organise the information in their own way, develop their ideas and formulate possible new meanings. This suggests that although letters provide a written documentation of the session, they can also alter meaning and understanding over time by offering insight and allowing time for reflection.

Bozic (2004) highlighted some concern regarding copying others into letters. Letters are personal and by copying others in it could create an ethical issue and possibly exert an authoritative stance. This may depersonalise letters and, to some extent, become a breach of privacy. However, there could be an ethical issue with regards to not disseminating the letter to all those who have been involved in the process. For example reports can be written and sent directly to parents, excluding children from the process. This may have a detrimental impact on the development and maintenance of a therapeutic alliance.

## **Letters to Pupils**

Generally, within the field of educational psychology, there has been limited research conducted to explore the use and benefits of letters pertaining to pupils. Ashton (2007) initially experimented with letter writing to pupils and acknowledged a process of instinctively constructing letters without adhering to any preset formats. Later the researchers drew on existing formats of psychology models, for example, solution orientated approaches.

Ashton (2007) acknowledged a difference between the style and format of a letter for different ages. An “official” style with “headed paper” would be used for older pupils compared with “colourful borders” and an informal style used for younger pupils. The form of the letter conveys messages. Whether the intention is to be formal or informal, the choice of headers, borders, the use of handwritten text all ‘potentially carry a message to the child’ (Hall, Robinson & Crawford, 1999, p.136). Perhaps it is this care, attention and effort that helps to express positive messages to the recipient and conveys messages which enhance the therapeutic alliance. Luborsky (1976, 2000) highlighted the importance that the therapist’s effort plays in enhancing alliance. The content of the letter is important as Hall, Robinson and Crawford (1999) state that a letter is a shared experience and reflects previous discussions.

Ashton (2007) invited pupils who had received such a letter to complete a questionnaire. A total of eight children took part and all the children reported that they liked receiving the letter. Six of the pupils reported that they had kept the letter, and there was also positive feedback relating to the agreed actions reiterated within the letters. The researcher concluded that writing letters can be “a deliberate tool for positive change ... if coupled with approaches such as solution orientated consultation or narrative therapy” (p.4). However, this research has not been peer reviewed and therefore further research should be conducted to provide firm evidence of the benefits of writing letters to pupils.

## **Pupil Participation and the Voice of the Child**

The DfES (2004a) highlighted the need for increased pupil participation in matters concerning their education. The Special Education Needs Code of Practice for Wales (SEN CoP for Wales) reports that “children who are capable of forming views have a right to receive and make known information, to express an opinion, and to have that opinion taken into account in any matters affecting them” (Welsh Assembly Government, 2004, p.25). A consultation process is currently being undertaken with regards to the statutory assessment process to consider the most effective method of incorporating person centred practice where the child is heavily involved in all stages of the process (Welsh Assembly Government, 2012). EPs are considered to be well placed to listen to children and young people and incorporate their voice within the process of change. It is considered that children have a unique perspective regarding their current position and can provide great insight if appropriate tools are used to gather their views.

Roller (1998) highlighted the perceived benefit of involving children within the process of change as it enables them to consider and explore their current and future goals. This form of collaboration would coincide with the concept of developing and establishing a therapeutic alliance. Failing to gather the views of children may lead to the child feeling left out and angry (Kelsey, Abelson-Mitchell & Skirton, 2007). However, it is important to consider that, in relation to ethical guidelines, this information may not be shared with others without the child’s consent unless the child or others were at risk.

There are several factors such as age, ability and maturity which can all have a bearing on the professional’s perception of whether the child is able to express their view (Aston & Lambert, 2010; Coyne, 2006). The same may be true for whether EPs choose to use letter writing as a method to advocate the voice of the child. There is no clear guidance with regards to the factors that enable a child to express their view. This suggests that historically professionals, such as EPs, would need to make instinctive

judgements regarding their decisions to obtain the child's views. Factors reported to influence EPs decisions regarding the methods used to acquire the child or young person's opinions include the age and nature of SEN (Harding and Atkinson, 2009). Another issue may include the reality that thoughts and feelings are typically transient and due to EP time constraints children's views might only be sought once.

Providing children and young people with a voice provides them with a sense of ownership over the change issue with a key objective of enabling them to open dialogue with key adults in their life, both key factors in facilitating change (Gameson et al, 2003). It could be considered that letter writing as a technique could support the individual to have a sense of ownership by involving them in the process and providing them with feedback, enabling them to be an active participant in the process of change.

### **Barriers for Educational Psychologists utilising a Letter Writing Approach**

#### **Recipients**

Letter writing is a conventional and established mode of communicating. However, it could be considered to be out dated and old fashioned, especially for the younger generation who more frequently use electronic methods of communicating such as e-mails and texts. Moules (2009a) highlighted concern that we may be investing in an intervention that is "grounded in a mode of communication that could soon be considered outdated or obsolete" (p.107). On the other hand, as letters are rarely received by the younger generation it may be this very fact that makes them valuable, novel and provides them with a gift element (Moules, 2009b). This suggests that receiving a letter may make the recipient feel special, important and therefore valued all key aspect in developing a personal alliance. It has been argued that ultimately letters will be adapted to embrace new technologies such as electronic methods (Epston, 2009). However, Moules (2009a) suggests that the "enduring presence" and the

tangible, physical nature of a letter is what makes them so valuable (p.107), a strength that may outweigh the benefit of e-mails and texts.

Another consideration to be made is that some individuals may not respond positively to a letter and they may prefer verbal communication. This may be due to anxiety relating to reading difficulties. Some pupils experience anxiety and stress when required to read (Carroll & Iles, 2006). Letters should be written with the individual in mind taking into account their capabilities. Due to the personal nature of letters, it could be argued that recipients should not need support to access the letter. Writing a letter that is difficult for the child to read may serve to alienate a child, increase their anxiety and may ultimately impact on the alliance formed

### **Time and follow up**

Moules (2002) highlighted that the time it takes to write a letter is a clear disadvantage of its use. More thought and contemplation is needed regarding the content of a letter due to their therapeutic aims. However, equally, report writing takes time and one consideration for EPs would be whether or not letters would be sent in addition to, or as a substitute for, a report.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Similarly to Bozic (2004) who identified ethical issues relating to sending letters, Ashton (2007) also identified ethical issues pertaining to sending letters to children and young people. This may include needing informed consent from parents or legal guardians. Considerations for this may include gaining consent from parents or guardians to send a letter. However, Moules (2002) highlighted that another issue to consider is that letters “might be received and withheld” from the intended recipient (p.111). This is more likely in the case of children and young people due to their standing in the family and the possible need for the parent to check the content of the

letter. However, this may infringe on the child and young person's right to confidentiality, which would likely impact on the therapeutic alliance. This may make the integrity of the EP seem unauthentic and unreliable, as well as making it unlikely that the service user would be open, honest and responsive during future contact with the EP.

Misunderstandings may also lead to ethical issues, which can sometimes occur during written communication. There is no way of knowing the circumstances under which letters are read (Steinberg, 2000). This could have many implications as there is likely to be a delay in rectifying any misunderstanding.

Another ethical implication relates to the limited evidence base available in relation to sending letters to pupils. It could be argued that as practitioners, "we are ethically bound to understand the interventions that we offer families" (Moules, 2002, p.105). Further research needs to be conducted to establish a research base within EP practice. However, it would always be difficult if not impossible to separate the effects of the letter from the impact of ongoing work. There is no real way to distinguish or gauge the extent to which the letter is responsible for positive outcomes. However, it is still a right of the child and young person to express a view relating to matters affecting their life.

## **Conclusion**

Therapeutic alliance plays a powerful part in determining success in therapeutic outcomes (Krupnick et al, 1996). Thus far research has mainly focussed on adult therapeutic alliances although research is beginning to emerge in the field of child psychology. More research needs to be conducted to explore the specific factors that impact on the development and enhancement of a therapeutic alliance between child and therapist, as well as its beneficial gain specifically taking into account the perspective and view of the child.

Therapeutic alliance has been researched in many different professional fields, especially those where therapy and treatment programmes are frequent and recurrent. Therapy usually involves regular direct contact with a service user which is considered to play a substantial part in the development of an alliance. Current research suggests that therapeutic alliance strengthens in the later therapeutic sessions. Limited research has been conducted to explore the function of therapeutic alliance with regards to the role of the EP. A valuable aspect of the EP role has been identified as the good working relationships EPs are able to cultivate (Farell et al, 2006). However, EPs face many obstacles as they endeavour to form a positive bond with pupils. These barriers include; time constraints, having to form multiple therapeutic alliances, children rarely initiating their involvement with EPs, the consultation process where change is sometimes facilitated with an adult instead of a child, assessments, and report writing. Fundamentally, the issue of therapeutic alliance and the role of the EP need to be researched in an effort to determine ways of overcoming these barriers.

There are considered to be psychological approaches and techniques which are more likely to develop and enhance an alliance, for example, motivational interviewing techniques that emphasise the importance of unconditional positive regard and active listening. A tool, which has been found to enhance a therapeutic alliance, is therapeutic letter writing. The therapeutic letter is believed to play a part in building the therapeutic alliance by cementing the relationship and reinforcing agreed task and goals. Therapeutic letters are used throughout therapeutic and treatment programmes and is inclined to be underpinned by specific psychological approach such as narrative therapy or solution focussed brief therapy. There has been limited research to investigate why EPs choose to write letters to pupils, how EPs format letters and any psychological approach used to underpin them, as well as the perceived benefits of such letters.



With emphasis on the need for evidence-based practice, further research needs to be conducted to explore the benefit of letters within the EP profession. Research has been conducted to explore the benefits of specific letters within the profession such as the use of consultation letters (Bozic, 2004) and letters to pupils (Ashton, 2007). Therefore, this research aims to explore current practice within the EP profession relating to the use and perception of letters from the EP perspective as well as an exploration of any theoretical frameworks that underpin them. It also aims to explore pupils' perspectives with regards to receiving a letter from an EP. In addition and more specifically, the research aims to investigate the perceived connection between letter writing and the development of an alliance between EP and pupil.

### **Current Research**

The aim of this research is to explore the relationship between letter writing and therapeutic alliance within the context of the EP profession. Although current research within other professions has provided evidence regarding the benefits of letter writing, their use within EP practice is likely to vary due to the differing demands, expectations and role of the EP. Within other professions letter writing has been determined as a key component in developing and enhancing a therapeutic alliance. This study will explore the implications for their use within EP practice, including the possible theoretical frameworks that underpin them in order to contribute towards an evidence base for their use.

### **Research Questions**

Based on the rationale discussed above and a review of the current literature, four research questions were devised to structure the research:

- In what way might sending letters enhance the therapeutic alliance between EP and pupil?

- When and for what reason do educational psychologists write letters to pupils?
- What theoretical frameworks, if any, influence educational psychologists' letter writing styles?
- What are pupil's perceptions of receiving a letter from an educational psychologist?

## **Theoretical Approach**

This research aims to explore the current use and perception of letter writing to pupils within EP practice. As the research aims to explore current practice, this study becomes evaluative in nature. The objective of this research is to explore how letters are used with regards to their aims and theoretical orientation. The current research also hopes to explore the worth of pupil letters and possible value in developing a therapeutic alliance.

A therapeutic alliance is a human and personal experience. The research aims to explore the relationship between letter writing and the therapeutic alliance both deductively and inductively. A deductive approach will involve exploring and identifying themes specifically related to the theory of therapeutic alliance, using a 'top down' approach. However, an inductive approach will also be used to identify other themes through the use of a 'bottom up' approach. As sending and receiving letters is a very personal experience, this research will use an approach that will be reflective of this, that will allow participants to provide their personal account of their experiences from their own vantage point.

A constructivist approach will be used to explore the perception of letter writing and its relationship to therapeutic alliance. The constructivist approach assumes that reality is socially constructed and that knowledge is constructed in relation to historical, social and contextual factors (Robson, 2002). It is an 'heir' to the relativism approach, which suggests that there is no absolute truth. The task of the researcher within this study is to explore,

and attempt to understand, the multiple social constructions of meanings and knowledge relating to the connection between the utilisation and perceived benefits of letter writing to pupils within EP practice and the development and/or enhancement of a therapeutic alliance. Previous studies exploring therapeutic alliance have used a positivist experimental methodology to explore the cause and effect relationship between therapeutic alliance and treatment success. However, when people are the focus of the research it is difficult to infer causality (Robson, 2002). This suggests that it would be more useful to explore this topic within an approach that adds meaning and understanding rather than establishing causal relationships.

It could be argued that within social research using methods, which are relatively unstructured, is the most appropriate method (Robson, 2002, p.18) as it enables the exploration of personal views and experiences. Qualitative methods allow rich and meaningful data to be obtained. Due to the interactional approach of the therapeutic alliance, it will be important to gather the perspectives of both EPs and pupils. One method of gathering multiple and in depth perspectives is to use an interview method where the research participants contribute towards the development of current understanding relating to the research area (Robson, 2002).

## **Analysis**

This research aims to explore the way in which letter writing to pupils may impact on the development and/or enhancement of personal alliance and collaboration on task and goals alliance. It also aims to explore how letters are currently being used within EP practice, along with the psychological theories that underpin them. Perceptions of their use will also be explored from the viewpoint of the EP and pupil. This method has been chosen as a therapeutic alliance denotes a relationship between two (or more) people. Therefore it was felt appropriate to use an interactional approach in exploring and attempting to understand its benefits and implications. In

order to explore the first research question a deductive approach will be used. This will involve using questions that will explore themes relating to the tripartite definition of therapeutic alliance (Bordin, 1979), which comprises of personal, task and goal alliance, as well as Zack, Castonguay and Boswell (2007) conceptualisation of the therapeutic alliance as an affective bond and working collaboratively. An inductive approach will also be used which involves using a 'bottom up' approach to explore additional themes relating to the data. This, along with the theoretical approach taken and data collected, will guide the selection of the method of analysis.

A key aim of the analysis is to explore the perceptions of both EPs and pupils in relation to the use of letter writing. The most useful method of achieving this is to identify key themes relating to the research. Holloway and Todres (2003) report that within qualitative research 'thematizing meanings' occurs consistently across qualitative analysis (p.347). As Thematic Analysis is a 'theoretically flexible approach', allowing both inductive and deductive approaches to identify themes, this was deemed the most appropriate for the current research. Guidance published by Braun and Clarke (2006) will be used to support the process of analysing the transcriptions using Thematic Analysis.

#### **Literature Review References**

- Andrews, J., Clark, D.J., & Baird, F. (1998). Therapeutic Letter Writing: Creating Relational Case Notes. *The Family Journal*, 5, 1-23.
- Ashton, R. (2007). Learning from writing to students. *DECP Debate*, 122, 37-33.
- Aston, H. J., & Lambert, N. (2010). Young people's views about their involvement in decision-making. *Educational Psychology in Practice*, 26(1), 41-51.
- Atkinson, C., Squires, G., Bragg, J., Wasilewski, D. & Muscutt, J. (2012) "Effective delivery of therapeutic interventions: findings from four site visits." *Educational Psychology in Practice* (In-press). Accessed on 31<sup>st</sup> of December 2012 from the following website; [http://www.education.manchester.ac.uk/research/researchmattersseminars/Cathy\\_Atkinson\\_therapeutic\\_intervention1.pdf](http://www.education.manchester.ac.uk/research/researchmattersseminars/Cathy_Atkinson_therapeutic_intervention1.pdf)

- Barton, D. and Hall, N. (1999) *Letter Writing as a Social Practice*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Barton, D., & Hamilton, M. (Eds.). (1998). *Local Literacies: Reading and Writing in One Community*. London: Routledge.
- Bateson, G. (1979). *Mind and nature: A necessary unity*. New York: E. P. Dutton.
- Bickman, L., Vides de Andrade, A. R., Lambert, E. W, Doucette, A., Sapyta, J., Boyd, A. S., Rumberger, D. T., Moore-Kurnot, J., McDonough, L. C., & Rautkis, m. B. (2004). Youth therapeutic alliance in intensive treatment settings. *The Journal of Behavioral Health Services & Research*, 31 (2), 134-148.
- Bordin, E. S. (1979). The generalizability of the psychoanalytic concept of the working alliance. *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research & Practice*, 16(3), 252-260.
- Bozic, N. (2004). Using letters to support consultative work in schools. *Educational Psychology in Practice*. 20(4) 291-302
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). 'Using thematic analysis in psychology'. *Qualitative Research in psychology*, 3, 77-101.
- Burton, A. (1965). The use of written productions in psychotherapy. In L. Pearson (Ed.), *Written communications in psychotherapy* (pp. 3-22). Springfield, IL: Charles C Thomas.
- Campbell, A. F., & Simmonds, J. G. (2011). Therapist perspectives on the therapeutic alliance with children and adolescents. *Counselling Psychology Quarterly*, 24 (3), 195-209.
- Carroll, J.M., & Iles, J.E. (2006). An assessment of anxiety levels in dyslexic students in higher education. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 76 (3), 651–662.
- Chafe, W. L. (1985). *Linguistic differences produced by differences between speaking and writing*. In D.R.Olson, N. Torrance, & A. Hildyary (Eds.), *Literacy, language, and learning* (pp. 105-123). London: Cambridge University Press.
- Coyne, I. (2006). Consultation with children in hospital: Children, parents' and nurses' perspectives. *Journal of Clinical Nursing*, 15, 61-71.
- Courtois, A. C., Ford, J. D., & Cloitre, M. (2009). Best Practices in Psychotherapy for adults. In, J.D. Ford & M, Cloitre (Eds.), *Treating complex traumatic stress disorders: An evidence-based guide*, (pp. 82-103). New York: Guilford Press.
- Creed, T. A., & Kendall, P. C. (2005). Therapist Alliance-Building Behavior Within a Cognitive–Behavioral Treatment for Anxiety in Youth. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 73 (3), 498–505.
- Curtis, G. (1990). Behind the Lines: Don't talk until you hear the tone. *Texas Monthly*, 5-6.
- de Shazer, S. (1998). *Clues; Investigating Solutions in Brief Therapy*. W.W. Norton & Co.

- DfE. (2012). Review of the National Curriculum. Accessed on December 1<sup>st</sup> of December 2012 from the following website:  
<http://www.education.gov.uk/schools/teachingandlearning/curriculum/nationalcurriculum/>
- DfES Publications. (2002). *SEN Code of Practice*. Accessed on 06.12.12 from the following website:  
<https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/eOrderingDownload/DfES%200581%20200MIG2228.pdf>
- DfES Publications. (2004a). *Pupil Participation Guidance: Working Together - Giving Children and Young People a Say*. Accessed on 2<sup>nd</sup> February 2012 from the following website:  
<https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/publicationDetail/Page1/DfES%200134%202004>
- DfES Publications. (2004b). *Personalised Learning: Building a New Relationship with Schools*. Accessed on 26<sup>th</sup> June 2012 from the following website:  
<https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/eOrderingDownload/personalised-learning.pdf>
- Ellis, A. (1965). The use of printed, written, and recorded words in psychotherapy. In L. Pearson (Ed.), *Written communications in psychotherapy* (pp. 23-37). Springfield, IL: Charles C Thomas.
- Epston, D. (1994). Extending the conversation. *Family Therapy Networker*, 18(6), 31-37.
- Epston, D. (2009). The Legacy of Letter Writing as a Clinical Practice: Introduction to the Special Issue on Therapeutic Letters. *Journal of Family Nursing*, 15(1), 3-5.
- Farrell, P., Woods, K., Lewis, S., Rooney, S., Squires, G., & O'Conner, M. (2006). *A review of the functions and contributions of educational psychologists in England and Wales in light of 'Every Child Matters: Change for children'*. Nottingham: Her Majesty's Stationery Office.
- France, M. H., Cadieax, J., & Allen, G.E. (1995). Letter therapy: A mode for enhancing counseling intervention. *Journal of Counseling and Development*, 73, 317-318.
- Freeman, J., Epston, D., & Lobovits, D. (1997). *Playful Approaches to Serious Problems*. New York: W. W. Norton.
- Gameson, J., Rhydderch, G., Ellis, D. & Carroll, H.C.M. (2003). Constructing a flexible model of integrated professional practice: part 1, conceptual and theoretical issues, *Educational and Child Psychology*, 20, 4, 96-115.
- Glassman, W.E. (2000). *Approaches to Psychology* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Philadelphia: Open University Press.
- Goldberg, D. (2000). Emplotment: Letter writing with troubled adolescents and their families. *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 5, 63-76.
- Green, P. (2009). The Therapeutic Alliance. *Child: Care, Health and Development*, 35, 3, 298-301
- Hall, N., Robinson, A., & Crawford, L. (1999). Young children's exploration of letter writing. In D. Barton & N. Hall (Eds.), *Letter Writing as a Social Practice*, (pp. 131-150). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

- Harding, E., & Atkinson, C. (2009). How EPs record the voice of the child. *Educational Psychology in Practice*, 25(2), 125-137.
- Hilliard, R. B., Henry, W. P., & Strupp, H. H. (2000). An interpersonal model of psychotherapy: Linking patient and therapist developmental history, therapeutic process, and types of outcome. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 68, 125-133.
- Holloway, I., & Todres, L. (2003). The status of method: flexibility, consistency and coherence. *Qualitative Research*, 3 (3), pp. 345-357.
- Iveson, C. (2002). Solution Focussed Brief Therapy. *Advances in Psychiatric Treatment*, 8, 149-156. Accessed on 11<sup>th</sup> November 2012 from the following website: <http://apt.rcpsych.org/content/8/2/149.full>
- Kelsey, J., Abelson-Mitchell, N., & Skirton, H. (2007). Perceptions of young people about decision making in the acute healthcare environment. *Paediatric Nursing*, 19(6), 14–18.
- Klee, M. R., Abeles, N., & Muller, R. T. (1990). Therapeutic alliance: Early indicators, course and outcomes. *Psychotherapy*, 27, 166-174.
- Kokotovic, A. M., & Tracey, T. J. (1990). Working alliance in the early phase of counseling. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 37, 16-21.
- Krupnick, J. L., Sotsky, S. M., Simmens, A., Moyer, J., Elkin, I., Watkins, J., & Pilkonis, P. A. (1996). The role of the alliance in psychotherapy and pharmacotherapy outcome: Findings in the National Institute of Mental Health treatment of depression collaborative research program. *Journal of Clinical and Consulting Psychology*, 64, 532-539.
- Lambert, M. J. (2010). *Prevention of treatment failure: The use of measuring, monitoring, & feedback in clinical practice*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Leadbetter, J. (2006). Investigating and conceptualizing the notion of consultation to facilitate multiagency working. *Educational Psychology in Practice*, 22(1), 19-31.
- Lubrosky, L. (1976). Helping alliances in psychotherapy. In J.L. Cleghorn (Ed.), *Successful psychotherapy* (pp. 92-116). New York: Brunner/Mazel.
- Lubrosky, L. (2000). A pattern-setting therapeutic alliance study revisited. *Psychotherapy Research*, 10, 17-29.
- Luborsky, L., Barber, J. P., Siqueland, L., Johnson, S., Najavits, L. M., Frank, A., & Daley, D. (1996). The Revised Helping Alliance Questionnaire (HAQ-11): Psychometric Properties. *Journal of psychotherapy, practice and research*, 5 (3), 260-271.
- Mackay, T., & Greig, . (2007). Editorial. *Educational and Child Psychology*, 24, 4-6.
- Mangal, S. K. (2003). *Advanced Educational Psychology* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). New Delhi: PHI Learning Private.
- Miller, W. R. & Rollnick, S. (2002). *Motivational Interviewing: Preparing People for Change*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Moules, N. J. (2002). Nursing on paper: Therapeutic letters in nursing practice. *Nursing Inquiry*, 9, 104–113.

- Moules, N. J. (2009a). The past and future of therapeutic letters: Family suffering and healing words. *Journal of Family Nursing*, 15, 102–111.
- Moules, N. J. (2009b). Therapeutic letters in nursing: Examining the character and influence of the written word in clinical work with families experiencing illness. *Journal of Family Nursing*, 15, 31–49.
- Mosher, C. E., & Danoff-Burg, S. (2006). Health Effects of Expressive Letter Writing. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, 25(10), 1122–1139.
- Moyers, T.B., Miller, W.R., & Hendrickson, S.M.L. (2005). How Does Motivational Interviewing Work? Therapist Interpersonal Skill Predicts Client Involvement Within Motivational Interviewing Sessions. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 73(4), 590–598.
- Nash, J. (2000). Main features of a solution focused letter. Paper presented at West Midlands Continuing Professional Development (WMCPD) Conference, 24 March.
- Nevalainen, Terttu & Sanna-Kaisa Tanskanen, (Eds.). (2007). *Letter Writing*. Amsterdam & Philadelphia: Benjamins.
- Nylund, D., & Thomas, J. (1994). The economics of narrative. *Family Therapy Networker*, 18(6), 38–39.
- Oxford Dictionaries. (2008). *Concise Oxford English Dictionary* (11<sup>th</sup> ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Payne, M. (2000). *Narrative Therapy: An Introduction for Counsellors*. London: Sage Publications.
- Prasko, J., Diveky, T., Mozny, P., & Sigmundova, Z. (2009). Therapeutic Letters – Changing the emotional schemas using writing letters to significant caregivers. *Activitas Nervosa Superior Rediviva*, 51, 304. Accessed on 11<sup>th</sup> November 2012 from the following website: <http://www.rediviva.sav.sk/51i34/163.pdf>
- Rhodes, J., & Ajmal, Y. (1995). *Solution-focused thinking in schools*. London: BT Press.
- Robson, C. (2002). *Real World Research* (2nd ed.). Oxford: Blackwell publishing Ltd.
- Roller, J. (1998). Facilitating pupil involvement in assessment, planning and review processes. *Educational Psychology in Practice*, 13(4), 266–273.
- Regional Research Institute for Human Service (RRIHS). (2011). The Importance of Therapeutic Alliance for Transition-Aged Youth. *Focal Point: Youth, Young Adults, & Mental Health. Healthy Relationships*, 25(1), 8–10. Accessed on 23<sup>rd</sup> of February 2012 from the following website: <http://pathwaysrtc.pdx.edu/pdf/fpS1103.pdf>
- Selvini Palazzoli, M., Boscolo, L., Cecchin, G., & Prata, G. (1978). *Paradox and counterparadox*. New York: Jason Aronson.
- Shilts, L.G. & Ray, W. A. (1991). Therapeutic Letters: Pacing with the System. *Journal of Strategic and Systemic Therapies*, 10, 92–99.



- Shirk, S. R., & Karver, M. (2003). Prediction of treatment outcome from relationship variables in child and adolescent therapy: A meta-analytic review. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 71* (3), 452-464.
- Shirk, S. R., Karver, M. S., & Brown, R. (2011). The alliance in child and adolescent psychotherapy. *Psychotherapy, 48*(1), 17-24.
- Shirk, S. R., & Saiz, C. S. (1992). Clinical, empirical, and developmental perspectives on the therapeutic relationship in child psychotherapy. *Development and Psychopathology, 4*, 713–728.
- Smith, A.E.M., Msetfi, R.M., & Golding, L. (2010). Client self rated adult attachment patterns and the therapeutic alliance: A systematic review. *Clinical Psychology Review, 30* (3), 326-337.
- Steinberg, D. (2000). *Letters from the clinic: Letter writing in clinical practice for mental health professionals*. London: Routledge.
- Toepfer, S. M., Cichy, K & Peters, P. (2012). Letters of gratitude: further evidence for author benefits. *Journal of Happiness Studies, 13*, 187–201.
- Vrouva, I., & Dennington, L. (2012). A Paper about Paperwork. *International Journal of Applied Psychoanalytic Studies, 9*, 73-77.
- Welsh Assembly Government. (2004). *Special Educational Needs Code of Practice for Wales*. Cardiff: Welsh Assembly Government.
- Welsh Assembly Government. (2012). *Forward in partnership for children and young people with additional needs: A young people-friendly consultation*. Cardiff: Crown Publication.
- White, M., & Epston, D. (1990). *Narrative means to therapeutic ends*. London: Norton.
- Wojcik, J., & Iverson, E. (1989). Therapeutic letters: The power of the written word. *Journal of Strategic and Systemic Therapies, 8*(2-3), 77-81.
- Wright, L. M., Watson, W. L., & Bell, J. M. (1996). *Beliefs: The heart of healing in families and illness*. New York: Basic Books.
- Zack, S. E., Castonguay, L. G., & Boswell, J. F. (2007). Youth working alliance: A core clinical construct in need of empirical maturity. *Harvard Review of Psychiatry, 15* (6), 278-288.

PART II  
EMPIRICAL STUDY

## Research Report

### Letter writing to pupils; an approach used to develop a therapeutic alliance?

Laura Craven

*(Doctorate in Educational Psychology, Cardiff University)*

#### Abstract

The current research explores the use of letter writing to pupils as a tool within educational psychology practice to develop and enhance the therapeutic alliance. The research aims to explore the theoretical approaches underpinning the letters written by EPs, and pupil perceptions. Semi-structured interviews were used with both parties. The interviews were analysed using Thematic Analysis. Strong themes of personal, task and goal alliance emerged from both EP and pupil interviews, suggesting that letter writing is an effective tool to contribute towards the development and enhancement of a therapeutic alliance. Correlated themes such as the 'process of change' and the 'power of the written' word were also found between both groups. EP letters are not underpinned by a specific theoretical framework but reflect an eclectic and holistic use of psychology. EPs reported that they are more likely to write to older, more able pupils with Social, Emotional and Behavioural difficulties (SEBD). Pupils generally reported positive outcomes from receiving a letter. Implications for practice, with regards to the use of letters, are discussed.

**Keywords:** letter writing; therapeutic alliance; educational psychology; ethical implications; personal alliance; task and goal alliance

#### Introduction

The term therapeutic alliance derives from the field of psychotherapy. It is thought to comprise of three components: personal, task and goal alliance (Bordin, 1979). Personal alliance refers to the development of a therapeutic relationship based on genuine feelings of validation, empathy, non-judgement and respect. Task and goal alliance are considered to reflect strength in agreement of tasks and goals between practitioner and service user. Zack et al (2007) more recent developed a conceptualisation of therapeutic alliance in relation to adolescents, which consists of two components, the affective bond and collaboration. It is believed that a therapeutic alliance is a strong predictor of success in treatment (Krupnick

et al, 1994). However, methods of developing and enhancing a therapeutic alliance are considered to be an understudied area (Green, 2009). In contrast to adult therapeutic alliances with practitioners, child alliances are also considered to be an understudied area. However, Bickman et al (2004) reported that individual factors such as externalizing problems and the age of the young person are better predictors of a strong therapeutic alliance with children.

One method reported to develop and enhance therapeutic alliance, identified within other professions such as nursing and counselling psychology, is therapeutic letter writing (Moules, 2002). This approach has mainly been associated with Narrative Therapy (Epston, 1994) and Solution Focussed Brief Therapy (SFBT) (DeShazer, 1998). It involves practitioners writing letters to service users based on the specific theoretical orientation of the therapy. Research conducted on the use of therapeutic letter writing has also illustrated benefits in other areas such as, providing a measured marker for change, visual affirmation of success and a prompt for reflection (Moules, 2002).

The evidence base, which suggests that therapeutic letter writing enhances the therapeutic alliance, has derived from research based on their use during therapeutic treatment when contact is frequent and ongoing. Moules (2002) recognised that the term 'therapeutic letters' may make some practitioners, who do not use letter writing in the context of therapeutic treatment, uncomfortable as it denotes a therapeutic basis and intent. EP roles and functions vary from that of other professions. Therefore methods of enhancing an alliance in other professions may not transfer as readily to their use within the EP profession. Farrell et al (2006) highlighted that service users value EPs' skills in developing good relationships but service users perceived the time constraints associated with the role as a barrier. If the benefits of letter writing are associated with their use when contact is frequent, similar benefits might not be found within the EP profession due to the barrier of time.

With regards to the EP profession, Bozic (2004) evaluated the benefit of consultation letters sent to school staff, whilst Ashton (2007) evaluated letter writing to pupils based on narrative and solution orientated approaches. Both found positive benefits. However, there is limited research aimed to investigate the impact and outcomes optimised by the use of letters with regards to the enhancement of a therapeutic alliance. Similarly, there still appears to be a limited exploration of EPs expectations regarding the benefits of letter writing and their underpinning theoretical orientation.

### **Letter Writing**

Therapeutic letter writing was a term first coined as a narrative therapeutic technique (White and Epston, 1990). Comparable letters have been used within SFBT (Rhodes and Ajmal, 1995). Letters have been used to initiate contact, bridge contact and also to end contact (Freeman et al, 1997).

Narrative therapeutic letters may use reflective questioning and reflexive nouns to externalise behaviours with the hope that it will encourage the recipient to reflect (Freeman et al, 1997). They can be useful in; reinforcing and developing alternative narrative; summarising discussions (White and Epston, 1990); recovering sessions that may not have run smoothly; communicate ideas that need to be considered in private (Epston, 1994); challenging thinking; and offering a new perspective (Bateson, 1979).

Research conducted by Nylund and Thomas (1994) explored the perceived benefits of narrative letters. Participants rated the letters as being worth an average of 3.2 face to face interviews. Fifty two percent of the positive outcomes were attributed to the letter alone. However, Bozic (2004) found that, although positive feedback was received when evaluating consultation letters, participants did not constitute the letter as an appropriate alternative to face-to-face contact. This could be because

the circumstances in which letters were sent within Nyland and Thomas's study varied to that of Bozic's study. However, memory is limited by capacity and duration (Chafe, 1985) and Bozic (2004) recognised that a benefit of letter writing is its ability to enable service users to recall important information.

Whilst using a solution-focussed approach, letters can be used as an additional activity to facilitate communication between sessions (Shilts and Ray, 1991). This coincides with Rhodes and Ajmal's (1995) suggestion that it is helpful if between sessions tasks are agreed and shared. Nash (2000) devised a solution-focussed letter for families, which focussed on validation of feelings and attitudes, reminders about strengths, and reiterations of preferred futures. However, Payne (2000) highlighted that despite the aim of the letters to notice and focus on strengths, doing this too early may seem artificial. This is an important aspect to consider if letters are used to enhance a personal alliance because an element of personal alliance is that genuine feelings are shared and experienced.

### **Implications for EP practice**

Therapeutic alliance reportedly becomes stronger towards the end of the therapeutic process (Klee, Albeson & Muller, 1990), suggesting time is a key factor in the development of an alliance. EPs may not have the luxury of time afforded by therapy in developing an alliance. Therefore, the consideration of methods to overcome this obstacle should be explored. Letter writing has been identified as a method for providing an avenue for communication when face-to-face contact is not feasible or convenient (France et al., 1995; Rasmussen & Tomm, 1992). Letter writing is also believed to have potential benefits for the letter writer with time to reflect and process thoughts along with developing positive feelings (Toepfer, Cichy & Peters, 2012).

Krupnick et al (1996) reported that therapeutic alliance has more of a chance of predicting successful outcomes than treatment alone. However, it could be argued that elements of specific treatments or approaches may

serve to enhance a therapeutic alliance. For example, approaches such as Motivational Interviewing (MI) place emphasis on the engagement of the service user and use a person centred approach. Techniques such as MI also focus on practitioner skills, which are aimed at ensuring the service user feels respected and valued (Moyers, Miller & Hendrickson, 2005). Similar skills are demonstrated through the use of letter writing. Hall, Robinson and Crawford (1999) state that a letter is important as it forms part of a shared experience, which enables a practitioner to foster a positive relationship with the service user.

Creed and Kendall (2005) suggest that the factors that positively contribute to a therapeutic alliance, between adult and child, are collaboration and finding positive ground. They also indicated that an aspect, which negatively contributes to the alliance, is forcing the child to talk. A key feature of letter writing is its way of inviting the recipient to reflect without demanding discussions. The use of questions in letters, as a method of inviting reflection, has been reported as a useful technique as the reader “almost involuntary offers an answer in their mind” (Moules, 2002, p.107). However, Moules (2002) warns that too many questions can cause the mind to reach saturation point.

Current policies and legislation place emphasis on the use of person centred approaches to elicit and represent the voice of the child (DfES, 2004a; WAG, 2004; WAG, 2012). Engaging an individual within the process of change, by including them in the feedback process, may be an important aspect in developing a therapeutic alliance, which could be achieved by the utilisation of letters. Key to this process is the active listening demonstrated by the practitioner who reflects key thoughts or discussions held within the session via the letter. Moules (2002) reported, “unless clients perceive that they are heard, they might not be willing to take with trust the offering of another idea, solution or belief” (p.106). This highlights the benefit that letters may have in demonstrating active listening, but also suggests that this needs to occur during any face to

face contact. This suggests that letters could possibly be an extension rather than an instigator of the therapeutic relationship. Roller (1998) highlighted the perceived benefits of involving children within any process of change, which enables them to become involved in their current and future goals. This suggests that involving them not only in the initial information stage is important but also via the feedback process as it provides them with a sense of ownership and can potentially enable dialogue.

Interestingly, current research suggests that the methods used by EPs to elicit the voice of the child are dependent on the age and nature of the child's Special Educational Need (Harding & Atkinson, 2009). This raises the question of whether letter writing to pupils as a means of representing their voice would be advocated based on their age and nature of SEN. Research indicates that children are happy when consulted on matters affecting their life (Coyne, 2006) and feel angry and overlooked when not consulted (Kelsey, Abelson-Mitchell & Skirton, 2007). This indicates how important it is to gather their views. However, there could be considered more explicit ways of obtaining and representing the voice of the child.

An aspect of the EPs' work involves providing feedback in the form of a report or consultation document. Green (2009) documented that report writing does not involve the pupil within the process of change and suggested that the language and the possible jargon used in reports can distance some and make the content inaccessible. This suggests that such a method of documenting involvement may reduce or inhibit the development of a therapeutic relationship. There are many audiences for reports and therefore writing a report to accommodate everyone would not be possible, which is why providing pupils with their own feedback might be useful. Previously, cognitive assessments played a large part in the conceptualisation of the EP role. Research suggests that assessments can also reduce the likelihood of a therapeutic alliance developing (Green, 2009). However, providing positive feedback in the form of a letter may compensate for this.



Another practical implication for EPs to consider regarding developing a therapeutic alliance with pupils is that it is rare for a child to initiate their own involvement with an EP (Bickman, 2004). This raises the issue that children are not automatically involved in the process of change. Gameson et al (2003) highlighted the importance of this when empowering an individual to 'understand and manage their own change issue' as it 'promotes self-efficacy and independence' (p.100). Letter writing may be used as an approach to develop self-efficacy by involving them in the process of change via feedback. Gameson et al (2003) suggested, "people are more likely to change when they engage actively, willingly and openly in the process of change; and when they are empowered and enabled to make conscious choices to achieve their desired outcomes or consequences" (p.97). This suggests that providing feedback to pupils in the form of a letter may engage them in the process, facilitate change and increase the therapeutic alliance.

## **Conclusion & current research**

Current research within various professional domains has evidenced the benefits of letter writing. However, their use within EP practice is likely to vary due to the differing demands and expectations on the EP role and their use with pupils. Within other professions letter writing has been identified as a key component in developing and enhancing a therapeutic alliance. The aim of this current research is to explore the relationship between letter writing and therapeutic alliance within the context of the EP profession, whilst investigating the benefits and implications of their use. It will also explore the theoretical frameworks that underpin them and consider the impact this has on outcomes.

## **Research Questions**

Based on the rationale discussed above and a review of the current literature four research questions were devised to structure the research;

- In what way might sending letters enhance the therapeutic alliance between EP and pupil?
- When and for what reason do educational psychologists write letters to pupils?
- What theoretical frameworks, if any, influence educational psychologists' letter writing styles?
- What are pupil's perceptions of receiving a letter from an educational psychologist?

## **Methodology**

Individual semi-structured interviews were used to gather qualitative data relating to the key research questions. Coolican (2003) suggested that people “construct different but equally valid perspectives of a situation” and qualitative data can be obtained through the process of triangulation (p.470). Therapeutic relationships are deemed to be interactional. Therefore, for the purpose of this study, the view of EPs and pupils were sought in order to build a complex picture of the subject matter (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2009). Specific questions were included in the interview schedules in order to gain information relating to personal, task and goal alliance.

### **Details of participants recruited**

EPs that had sent a letter to a pupil within the academic year 2011- 2012 were invited to take part in the study. In total 9 participants were recruited. Eight qualified EPs and 1 third year trainee EP (TEP) participated in the study, of which seven were female and two male. All of the qualified EPs worked within LAs based in Wales and England.

In total 8 pupils, who had received a letter from an EP within the academic year 2011-2012, took part in the study. Five of the pupils were secondary school aged ranging from 12-18 years of age, 3 pupils were primary aged ranging from 8-11 years of age. Six pupils were male, 2 were female. The

main areas of additional needs of the pupils were Social, Emotional and Behavioural difficulties (SEBD) and specific literacy difficulties (SpLD). The majority of participants fall into the SEBD category (6), the remaining pupils (2) fall into the SpLD category.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical considerations were made in line with the British Psychological Society's (2010) ethical guidelines. All participants were informed of the true aims of the study. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time and were fully debriefed at the end of the interview.

No intrusive questions were asked and participants were informed that they were not obliged to answer the questions. All information was held anonymously and confidentially.

### **Pilot**

A pilot interview was held with one EP and one pupil. This was extremely useful in ensuring that the questions were understandable and designed to elicit valid and relevant information relating to the research questions. As the pilot study did not significantly alter the interview schedule the researcher was able to include, with consent, the pilot interviews in the main pool of data.

### **Reliability and Validity**

The interview schedule was designed based on guidance illustrated by Robson (2002). As the questionnaire was newly devised it was not possible to test its reliability. However, the face validity of the questionnaire was measured via the pilot interviews.

## **Procedure**

EPs were invited to take part in the study via the gatekeeper letter sent to 14 Principal Educational Psychologists (PEPs) in authorities local to the researcher. EPs willing to participate contacted the researcher by e-mail and a convenient time and date for interview was arranged. EPs were provided with consent and debrief forms. EPs were asked to contact parents/guardians of pupils who had received a letter to request permission to pass their contact details to the researcher. EPs provided contact details of pupils willing to participate in the study, which enabled the researcher to formally invite the pupils to take part. Verbal consent and arrangement for interview were initially acquired over the telephone. When interviews were arranged to take place on the school premises, a gatekeeper letter was sent to the school Head Teacher. An opt out consent form was sent to parents which included details of the arrangements as well as a debrief form. A thank you letter was sent to pupils with parent's permission. The interviews were transcribed verbatim. The duration of EP interviews were between 30 and 50 minutes. The pupil interviews were between 17 and 50 minutes.

## **Materials**

Apparatus used is as follows; PEP gatekeeper letter (Appendix 1); Head Teachers gatekeeper letter (Appendix 2); Interview schedule for EPs (appendix 3) and pupils (appendix 4); EP consent form (appendix 5) and de-brief form (appendix 6); Opt out consent form for parents/guardians (appendix 7); Debrief form for parents/pupils (appendix 8); and a thank you letter for pupils (appendix 9). An audio digital recorder was used to record the interviews in order to transcribe them.

## **Epistemology & Research Paradigm**

Sending and receiving letters, along with the perception of an alliance, is a personal experience. This research will use an approach that will be reflective of this. This will allow participants to provide their personal

account of their experiences from their own vantage point. A constructivist approach will be used to explore the perception of letter writing and its relationship to the therapeutic alliance. The constructivist approach assumes that reality is socially constructed (Robson, 2002). A strength of this approach is that it allows the researcher to explore, and attempt to understand, the multiple social constructions of meanings and knowledge relating to the therapeutic alliance, letter writing within EP practice and the connection between the two. A possible weakness for this is that it will not allow causal relationships to be established and it can conflict with the notion that research will explore themes of 'therapeutic alliance' based on a pre-defined concept.

### **Data Analysis**

Thematic analysis was chosen to identify themes using a deductive, top-down approach, to identify themes of therapeutic alliance. An inductive, bottom-up approach was also used to identify other themes connected to the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This method was chosen as it enabled a comprehensive view of the data whilst allowing for flexibility. The six-step phase outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) was used to guide the analysis;

1. Becoming familiar with the data
2. Generating initial codes
3. Searching for themes
4. Reviewing themes
5. Defining and naming themes
6. Producing the report

## Results/Findings

Nine educational psychologists and 8 pupils were interviewed from 4 LA's across Wales and England. All pupils had received a letter from an EP within the academic year. Five of the pupils were secondary age and 3 were primary age. Six of the pupils could be categorised as having SEBD difficulties and 2 as having SpLD difficulties. The interviews were transcribed and direct quotes have been used to support identified themes. Themes were identified in relation to the 4 key research questions. They were chosen based on their frequency within the data, as well as their relevance to the existing literature.

### **Research Question 1: In what way might sending letters enhance the therapeutic alliance between EP and pupil?**

Table 1 illustrates the themes identified for research question 1.

Themes	Description of Theme	Supporting Quotations
<b>Therapeutic Alliance</b> This theme highlights the existing alliance formed as a result of initial face-to-face contact, along with the anticipated alliance formed (EP perspective) and the actual alliance formed (pupil perspective).		
Existing connections & Attachments	EPs often wrote to pupils when they had already formulated a connection. The letters written were designed to provide a positive connection.	You would hope it would improve your relationship or their memory of your relationship with them - EP1  I suppose it enables ... them to feel closer than they would do if it was just a conversation because that remains with them - EP5  Feelings of continuity ... trying to fill that gap of 'random person who met me once', where are they? EP9

<p>Collaboration &amp; Personal, Task and Goal alliance</p>	<p>EPs endeavour to establish a personal alliance with pupils, increasing task and goal alliance via the letter.</p> <p>The letters defined tasks and goals whilst developing and enhancing the bond between pupil and EP.</p>	<p>I still hope that when I've written letters I've got to know these pupils really well anyways so I hope ... that it makes the pupil feel, you know, that they're important and they're valued if you like. EP3</p> <p>So I retain some kind of connection with him and hopefully helped him to move forward even though I haven't been able to see him for a while – EP8</p> <p>It's very much trying to have, have a really joined up approach to any actions that were initially agreed – EP4</p> <p>I would hope that such a documentation of something that they've agreed to ... is more likely to occur because they see it as being led by them – EP5</p> <p>... it didn't change the way I thought about *** {name of EP} it added as I thought she had gone through the effort to send this to me – S4</p> <p>I felt much better about going to see *** {Name of EP} and more confident about seeing her again and to work harder – S3</p> <p>Thinking of happy thoughts to keep myself under control, that is a thing she wants me to do when I come to school – S5</p>
---	--	--

All of the EPs highlighted the theme of the 'therapeutic alliance'. More specifically, themes of 'existing connections & attachments' and 'collaboration & personal, task and goal alliance' was found within the data.

**Research Question 2: What theoretical frameworks, if any, influence educational psychologists' letter writing styles?**

Table 2 illustrates the themes identified for research question 2.

Themes	Description of Theme	Supporting Quotations
<p><b>The psychological Underpinning</b> This theme highlights the underpinning psychology of letter writing</p>		
<p>Instinctive eclectic approach</p>	<p>EPs reported that letter writing is an instinctive process not guided by any clear letter writing guidelines. The letter reflected the psychology used within the session.</p>	<p>I don't think it's anything like a structured structure. I stick very much to the kind of fluid piece of work depending on the child - EP4</p>
<p>Psychological formats</p>	<p>Some EPs had drawn on solution orientated or narrative approaches.</p> <p>EPs tended not to use the term 'therapeutic letters' as they felt they were not therapeutic in nature.</p>	<p>We had um ... some training on narrative therapy and narrative kind of approaches and so as a service ... we talked about writing narrative letters - EP2</p> <p>My practice is underpinned by solution focussed work regardless so there will always be an element of that within the letter – EP5</p>

All of the EPs reported that the letters reflected the discussions held with pupils and the psychology used during face to face contact. Only two of the EPs indicated that their letters were guided by psychological formats such as narrative letters (1EP) and solution orientated letters (1 EP).



### Research Question 3: When and for what reason do educational psychologists write letters to pupils?

Table 3 illustrates the themes identified for research question 3.

Themes	Description of Theme	Supporting Quotations
<b>The Process of Change</b>		
This theme highlights EPs aim to use letter writing to facilitate change.		
Engagement, Motivation and Ownership	EPs write letters to engage pupils in the change process, motivate them and provide a sense of ownership.	I suppose it's a specific strategy for me if I'm thinking how do I increase the likelihood of this person remaining on board and for the motivation and ownership of it all – EP8  It is my view that it is good practice and the right thing to do to try and involve children and young people in the process– EP2
Enabling Dialogue	EPs hoped that the letters would enable dialogue	I might sometimes say in the letter 'you might like to share this with your parents or with ... with your teacher ... depending on the circumstances'. EP6
Voice of the child & Active Listening	Through active listening EPs hoped that the letter would reflect the voice of the child.	They feel listened to. Hearing their views being reflected back to them. It's important in listening. EP2
<b>Pupil Factors</b>		
This theme highlights the choice EPs make in writing letters to pupils		
SEBD Difficulties  Older & More able pupils	EPs acknowledged that they are more inclined to write to; pupils where the <i>initial concern is SEBD</i> (usually linked to boosting confidence and self-esteem); <i>older pupils</i> (as they appear more engaged in the change process); and, <i>literate pupils</i> (as it was important for them that the children read the letter themselves).	Age definitely plays a part without a doubt so I tend to do it with older pupils – EP3  I tend to use them more with emotional issues – EP5  I don't know if I'd write to a non-reader because I might feel that, okay, somebody might read it to them but that might ... it kind of defeats the object – EP8

Themes	Description of Theme	Supporting Quotations
<b>Power of the written word</b> This theme highlights EPs choice of writing to pupils to provide concrete and visual feedback.		
The letters are concrete and tangible as well as being visual.	The letters provide a visual means of understanding and recalling the initial discussion. The letters transcend the meeting. They allow the pupil to reflect and develop new meaning.	To visualise what they were intending so therefore by having it in written format as well it helps them to understand– EP4  I was able to use lots of pictures to try and get the point across– EP7  I wanted to have something written down that he could take time to read... something in black and white – EP1

The 'process of change' theme was evident in each of the EP interviews. All of the EPs felt that letters provided a 'concrete and tangible' documentation of their discussions with pupils. The majority of EPs recognised that they were more inclined to write to older pupils who were literate. The majority of EPs also reported that they were more likely to write to pupils where SEBD was the initial cause for concern.

## Research Question 4: What are pupil's perceptions of receiving a letter from an educational psychologist?

Table 4 illustrates the themes identified for research question 4.

Themes	Description of Theme	Supporting Quotations
<b>Power of the written word</b>		
This theme acknowledged the power of the written word		
Memory Aid & Visual	The letters enabled pupils to recall details of the face-to-face contact. Most perceived this to be a positive aspect. One pupil reported that they did not want to be reminded of the difficulties they had experienced.	I wouldn't really be confident without the letter because I wouldn't remember much in my head – S6  It's like a bit of a reminder of everything else in the past. So like the things we talked about and the things that have been written in the letter is not something I want to be reminded of – S8
Reflection	Pupils reported that they could return to the letters in times of need.	I could use this as a kind of solidness to go and think about strategies to help myself – S1
<b>Process of Change</b>		
This theme highlights perceived feeling of engagement, active listening and ownership. Pupils also recognised that letters could be used to enable dialogue with key people in their lives.		
Ownership & Engagement	The letter engaged pupils in the process of change and promoted ownership.  When asked, pupils were concerned about the prospect of not receiving a letter.	It makes me feel like I got more control over the situation – S2  It gives me ... more confidence over taking control over my learning – S1
Enabling Dialogue & Active Listening	The letters could be an effective method of initiating conversations with important people in their lives. They felt that they had been heard.	If I didn't have this letter then I couldn't explain to people like you, or other people, what me and *** [name of EP] did in the session –S6  she was really nice and she actually listened S4
<b>Benefits</b>		
This theme highlights the pupil's perceptions regarding the benefit of receiving a letter from an EP.		
Solution Scale	Only 1 pupil was indifferent about receiving a letter, the rest rated the letters positively.	On average the letter was rated an 8 out of 10 in promoting change on its own merits.
Positive feelings	The letters boosted the pupil's confidence.	It made me feel quite proud of myself – S1  It feels nice that she took the time to do that – S3

The majority of the pupils reported positive benefits relating to receiving a letter. However, one pupil reported that the letters served as a reminder of a difficult period experienced. Therefore, the pupil felt less likely to refer back to the letter.

### **Additional Themes**

Table 5 illustrates the additional themes identified from the interviews.

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Description of Theme</b>	<b>Supporting Quotations</b>
<b>Barriers &amp; Constraints</b> This theme highlights the constraints with regards to the role and writing letters to pupils.		
Time Limitations	The letters were often written as a substitute for contact. They were often written to bridge or end contact.	The times that I've done it have been when I know that I probably won't see the child again – EP1
Ethical Constraints	EPs acknowledged ethical constraints when writing to pupils	For confidential reasons I do ask them where they would like me to send the letter ... because some children feel they wouldn't get to open it at home– EP2  This was personal contact with the child. I would never have done that without ... getting the parents' permission to do it. – EP7
Evaluation	EPs acknowledge the complexity of measuring the effectiveness of letter writing.	To evaluate it would seem artificial and could potentially, in my mind, effect the process - EP9  You know its hit and miss sometimes its good and sometimes they don't care whether they have had it or not. - EP6

The majority of participants (7) reported time limitations which led to them choosing to write to pupils. All EPs recognised the ethical considerations needed when writing to pupils. All of the EPs expressed difficulty in accurately and objectively measuring the impact of the letters.

## **Summary of Themes**

The following table (6) summarises the main themes identified from the EP and pupil interviews.

<b>The Therapeutic Alliance &amp; Existing Attachments</b>	EPs reported that they hoped the letters would develop an alliance. However they mainly wrote to pupils who they had forged an alliance with. Pupils supported the notion that the letters had enhanced an established alliance.
<b>Pupil Factors</b>	EPs identified that they mainly wrote to pupils with SEBD concerns and those in secondary school. This could possibly be because they consider these children to be more involved in the process of change due to their age and nature of SEN.
<b>Underpinning psychological theory</b>	Only 2 of the EPs wrote letters according to a specific theoretical approach which were narrative and solution focussed brief therapy. The majority of EPs felt that there were insufficient guidelines available on how to write letters. They also felt that the psychology underpinning the letters reflected that used during face-to-face contact.
<b>Power of the written word</b>	Both Pupils and EPs acknowledged that there are benefits to the written word. The fact that the letters are concrete and tangible meant that the EPs expectations were met by the pupils' perceptions.
<b>The process of change</b>	Both EPs and Pupil recognise that letters are beneficial in facilitating change by providing ownership for pupils over the change issue, providing a memory aid, enabling dialogue, demonstrating active listening and allowing time for reflection.
<b>Barriers and Constraints</b>	EPs highlighted barriers and constraints with regards to the role of the EP which could be overcome by the use of letter writing. However, letter writing has identified its own barriers and constraints.

## Discussion

### Key Findings and Unique Contribution

Letters were mainly written to pupils as a means of bridging the gap between sessions, or providing a positive ending to contact. This is similar to how letters are used within other professions (Freeman et al, 1997). EPs also reported that they use letters as a means of overcoming time constraints, when face-to-face contact is not always possible (France et al., 1995; Rasmussen & Tomm, 1992).

EPs mainly wrote letters to pupils of secondary school age and pupils with SEBD difficulties. EPs identified these pupils as having more ownership over the change issues due to their age. This coincides with the findings of Harding and Atkinson (2009) which suggests that EPs are more likely to use particular methods of eliciting the voice of the pupils depending on their age and nature of SEN. In the same vein EPs make decisions about which children were more likely to benefit from receiving a letter. EPs also recognised that they usually wrote to pupils who they had already established a strong connection with. It could be argued that EPs are more inclined to write to this group of pupils because research suggests that stronger therapeutic alliances are more likely to form with older pupils who have externalizing difficulties (Bickman et al, 2004). However, EPs also stated that they write to pupils as a means of boosting confidence and increasing motivation, an objective which was met by pupil's reports. Pupils reported that the letters evoked positive feelings such as pride and confidence (Moules, 2002), which could be a likely aim for when working with pupils with SEBD. EPs may also be less inclined to write to pupils with learning needs as they believe it important for the pupil to read the letter themselves.

Themes of personal, task and goal alliance were identified in both EP and pupil interviews. Pupils reported that receiving a letter 'added' to their current positive perception of the EP and reinforced agreed tasks and

goals by aiding memory and facilitating reflection. Pupils used the information within the letter to formulate an impression of how the EPs felt about their current situation. Pupils reported that the letters helped them to feel more involved in the process of change and therefore more likely to engage in tasks, as reflected in the existing literature (Moules, 2002). However, it would be impossible to truly distinguish the extent to which a letter is able to develop or enhance an alliance in comparison to face-to-face contact. Therapist skills are important in the development of an alliance and these begin to be established during first contact.

Two of the EPs were guided by solution orientated or narrative approaches when writing letters as illustrated within the current literature (White & Epston, 1990; de Shazer, 1998). However, none of the EPs felt that they followed a specific format when writing letters. Instead they instinctively included information that was person centred and reflective of the psychological approaches that were applied during face-to-face contact. It could be suggested that letters written by EPs are eclectic. This suggests that the psychology included within the letters derives from a range of theories and are reflective of their use of psychology in every day practice.

Despite the diverse range of letter formats used, all EP letters could be described as person centred using skills that reinforce the development of a personal relationship whilst including personal and specific information for the pupil. EPs opted not to call letters 'therapeutic' as they did not feel they were used for 'therapeutic outcomes'. This reflects Moules (2002) idea that individuals feel uncomfortable with the word 'therapeutic' unless it is associated with therapy. Further exploration of the techniques used within these letters would be beneficial in establishing how the letters draw on a range of psychological techniques. However, the researcher suggests that the social construction of the concept of 'therapy' should be questioned and any positive benefits associated with letters could be considered therapeutic in nature.

The impact that letter writing has on engaging the pupils in the process of change was reflected in both the EP and pupil interviews. Similarly to that documented in the literature, pupils felt happy about receiving a letter and being included in the process (Coyne, 2006). They also reported that they would have been concerned if they had not received any feedback in the form of a letter. This reflects the ideas suggested by Kelsey et al (2007) who reported that pupils experience negative emotions when they are not included within the process and do not feel their voice has been heard. Themes of active listening, ownership and enabling dialogue were evident in both EP and pupil interviews. This illustrated the extent to which these factors help develop an alliance and in turn facilitate change.

EPs identified ethical issues involved in writing letters to pupils such as gaining consent from parents/guardians. This reinforces the suggestion made by Ashton (2007) that ethical considerations need to be taken into account before using the letter writing method. This highlights the dilemma that EPs face with regards to what information they should include within the letter. Necessary information should remain confidential and possibly excluded from the letter to ensure that the therapeutic alliance between the EP and pupil remains intact. EPs also recognised an issue with the lack of evaluation they undertake to assess the impact of letters. Letters are difficult to measure as change is multi-faceted. However, measures need to be taken to evaluate and monitor the effectiveness of letters.

The majority of pupils scored the receipt of a letter positively, similarly to that of Ashton's (2007) research. EPs and pupils highlighted the 'power of the written word'. Pupils felt that without the letter they would not be able to recall agreed tasks and goals. The letters were also concrete, tangible and permanent which enabled the pupils to revisit the discussion and develop a new understanding. However, one of the pupils felt that the letter had limited impact, and that it served as a reminder of the difficult period the pupil had experienced. This is another factor which is important to consider and pupils' preferences for receiving a letter should be obtained first.



## **Strengths & Limitations**

A therapeutic alliance is formed as a result of an interaction between two or more people. The triangulated method used by the current research to gain EP and pupil perspectives could be considered a strength. Using a constructivist framework to guide the research enabled an in-depth exploration of the socially constructed understanding and experience of sending and receiving a letter. However, the research was unable to establish a causal relationship between therapeutic alliance and letter writing. In addition, the researcher recognises that the term 'therapeutic alliance' is in itself socially constructed and the researcher's questions may have influenced the information obtained. EPs' work is multi-faceted and it would also be difficult to attribute positive outcomes to a single aspect of their work.

## **Further Research**

Based on the current research findings, the researcher believes that, although it would be difficult, it would be beneficial to attempt to differentiate the therapeutic alliance formed as a result of the letter. Measuring the alliance prior to and post the letter could achieve this.

The small number of participants involved in this research made it difficult to compare the impact of letters between groups of pupils. It may be beneficial for future research to explore the effects of the letters between groups of pupils depending on age and nature of SEN. A comparison between specific approaches such as narrative, solution orientated and eclectic techniques could also be investigated to consider the most effective and appropriate methods used to format letters.

## **Practical implications for educational psychology**

Government policies place emphasis on including the pupil's voice in any matters that affect them (DfES, 2004a) as well as using a person centred approaches (WAG, 2012). Letter writing can be considered an effective

technique used by EPs to demonstrate that not only are pupils listened to but they are heard. Moules (2002) highlighted the importance of 'feeling heard' in engaging in change. The eclectic style of EP letters also make them person centred and in turn increases the personal element that contributes towards their benefit. Due to the politically relevant context of this research, there may be the potential for letters to be used more specifically within EP practice to engage service users more and actually capture the voice of the child. This could be achieved by providing pupils with the opportunity to respond to the letters or to include their views within a written format.

In Farrell et al's (2006) study, service users reported that EPs were skilled in developing connections, but constrained by time. The majority of EPs who participated in the study also reported time constraints, which led to the use of letters. Pupils reported that the letters provided an extension of the relationship formed with the EP and allowed them to revisit the discussion at a later date when necessary due to their concrete and tangible nature.

It is important to consider that change occurs over time and the use of letters provides a preservable method for individuals to revisit and reflect on any discussions, especially considering the limited capacity of memory (Chafe, 1985). However, it will be necessary for EPs to be aware that the meaning may be lost in translation from dialogue to written form. It will be essential to clarify any ambiguity or misunderstanding with the pupil at a later date.

## **Summary & Conclusion**

Letters can be used as a method of supplementing EPs existing skills in forming positive connections with service users, especially pupils. In this instance it was impossible to disentangle the causal relationship with regards to the therapeutic alliance and letter writing, although the themes identified suggest that a relationship exists between the two. It was not possible to say what exactly impacted on the development of an alliance

as face-to-face contact may have already formed part of the relationship. The researcher saw no solution to this due to the complexity of the topic area and the use of a constructivist approach, although experimental conditions could have been used. However, in the first instance the researcher felt it was important to focus on the personal experiences and the meaning and understandings that participants had with regards to letter writing within this context. The researcher believes that the findings of this research provide an initial evidence base for research to be continued in the field. EPs expectations of letter writing in relation to the therapeutic alliance were met, and therefore the researcher proposes that letters written by EPs can be considered 'therapeutic'. However, individual factors need to be taken into account when choosing to write to pupils, as the extent to which it benefited pupils varied.

EPs were inclined to write to older pupils with SEBD difficulties. However, EPs should take care and consideration to provide an equitable service to all children regardless of age and nature of SEN. However, the researcher does not suggest that letter writing will be appropriate for all pupils. More research needs to be conducted to explore whether certain pupils benefit from receiving a letter depending on factors such as age and area of difficulty.

EP letters did not typically follow formats based on a theoretical framework. Clear practical guidelines need to be put in place to support EPs to effectively continue to write letters. This may increase the frequency of their use within the profession and would increase the validity of any evaluation that takes place. EP letters eclectically incorporated practitioner skills that focus on and provide a person centred approach which engages the pupil in the process of change, and contributes towards positive benefits. More direction and support for EPs in structuring letters for pupils may also encourage further systematic evaluation of their impact to provide an evidence base for their use.

The practical implications of writing letters within the EP profession relates to the ethical issues that may arise. Ethically, EPs should gain consent from parents to write letters directly to pupils and place emphasis on the impact that the personal element of the letter has on outcomes.

The process of letter writing has received positive feedback from EPs and pupils. Undoubtedly, letter writing has a place in the EP profession. The utilisation of the letters has to be addressed so as to give the EP a point of reference. Continued research in the area of therapeutic alliance and letter writing can only serve to benefit outcomes for EPs and pupils alike.

## References

- Ashton, R. (2007). Learning from writing to students. *DECP Debate*, 122, 37-33.
- Bateson, G. (1979). *Mind and nature: A necessary unity*. New York: E. P. Dutton.
- Bickman, L., Vides de Andrade, A. R., Lambert, E. W, Doucette, A., Sapyta, J., Boyd, A. S., Rumberger, D. T., Moore-Kurnot, J., McDonough, L. C., & Rautkis, m. B. (2004). Youth therapeutic alliance in intensive treatment settings. *The Journal of Behavioral Health Services & Research*, 31 (2), 134-148.
- Bordin, E. S. (1979). The generalizability of the psychoanalytic concept of the working alliance. *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research & Practice*, 16(3), 252-260.
- Bozic, N. (2004). Using letters to support consultative work in schools. *Educational Psychology in Practice*. 20(4) 291-302
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). 'Using thematic analysis in psychology'. *Qualitative Research in psychology*, 3, 77-101.
- British Psychological Society. (2010). *Code of Human Research Ethics*. Leicester: BPS.
- Chafe, W. L. (1985). *Linguistic differences produced by differences between speaking and writing*. In D.R.Olson, N. Torrance, & A. Hildyary (Eds.), *Literacy, language, and learning* (pp. 105-123). London: Cambridge University Press.
- Cohen, Manion & Morrision. (2009) *Research Methods in Education (6<sup>th</sup> edition)*. New York: Taylor and Francis.
- Coolican, H. (2003). *Research Methods and Statistics in Psychology (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.)*. Great Britain: Hodder & Stoughton.
- Coyne, I. (2006). Consultation with children in hospital: Children, parents' and nurses' perspectives. *Journal of Clinical Nursing*, 15, 61-71.
- Creed, T. A., & Kendall, P. C. (2005). Therapist Alliance-Building Behavior Within a Cognitive-Behavioral Treatment for Anxiety in Youth. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 73 (3), 498-505.
- de Shazer, S. (1998). *Clues; Investigating Solutions in Brief Therapy*. W.W. Norton & Co.
- DfES Publications. (2004). *Pupil Participation Guidance: Working Together - Giving Children and Young People a Say*. Accessed on 2<sup>nd</sup> February 2012 from the following website: <https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/publicationDetail/Page1/DfES%200134%202004>
- Epston, D. (1994). Extending the conversation. *Family Therapy Networker*, 18(6), 31-37.
- Farrell, P., Woods, K., Lewis, S., Rooney, S., Squires, G., & O'Conner, M. (2006). *A review of the functions and contributions of educational psychologists in England and Wales in light of 'Every Child Matters: Change for children'*. Nottingham: Her Majesty's Stationery Office.

- France, M. H., Cadieax, J., & Allen, G.E. (1995). Letter therapy: A mode for enhancing counseling intervention. *Journal of Counseling and Development*, 73, 317–318.
- Freeman, J., Epston, D., & Lobovits, D. (1997). *Playful Approaches to Serious Problems*. New York: W. W. Norton.
- Gameson, J., Rhydderch, G., Ellis, D. & Carroll, H.C.M. (2003). Constructing a flexible model of integrated professional practice: part 1, conceptual and theoretical issues, *Educational and Child Psychology*, 20, 4, 96-115.
- Green, P. (2009). The therapeutic alliance. *Child: Care, Health and Development*, 35, 3, 298–301.
- Hall, N., Robinson, A., & Crawford, L. (1999). Young children's exploration of letter writing. In D. Barton & N. Hall (Eds.), *Letter Writing as a Social Practice*, (pp.131-150). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Harding, E., & Atkinson, C. (2009). How EPs record the voice of the child. *Educational Psychology in Practice*, 25(2), 125-137.
- Kelsey, J., Abelson-Mitchell, N., & Skirton, H. (2007). Perceptions of young people about decision making in the acute healthcare environment. *Paediatric Nursing*, 19(6), 14–18.
- Klee, M. R., Abeles, N., & Muller, R. T. (1990). Therapeutic alliance: Early indicators, course and outcomes. *Psychotherapy*, 27, 166-174.
- Krupnick, J. L., Sotsky, S. M., Simmens, A., Moyer, J., Elkin, I., Watkins, J., & Pilkonis, P. A. (1996). The role of the alliance in psychotherapy and pharmacotherapy outcome: Findings in the National Institute of Mental Health treatment of depression collaborative research program. *Journal of Clinical and Consulting Psychology*, 64, 532-539.
- Moyers, T., Miller, W., & Hendricksen., S. (2005). How does motivational interviewing work? Therapist interpersonal skill predicts client involvement within motivational interviewing sessions. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 73, 590–598.
- Moules, N. J. (2002). Nursing on paper: Therapeutic letters in nursing practice. *Nursing Inquiry*, 9, 104–113.
- Nash, J. (2000). Main features of a solution focused letter. Paper presented at West Midlands Continuing Professional Development (WMCPD) Conference, 24 March.
- Nylund, D., & Thomas, J. (1994). The economics of narrative. *Family Therapy Networker*, 18(6), 38-39.
- Payne, M. (2000). *Narrative Therapy: An Introduction for Counsellors*. London: Sage Publications.
- Rasmussen, P. T.; Tomm, K. (1992). Guided letter writing: A long brief therapy method whereby clients carry out their own treatment. *Journal of Strategic and Systemic Therapies*, 11, 1–18.
- Rhodes, J., & Ajmal, Y. (1995). *Solution-focused thinking in schools*. London: BT Press.
- Robson, C. (2002). *Real World Research* (2nd ed.). Oxford: Blackwell publishing Ltd.
- Roller, J. (1998). Facilitating pupil involvement in assessment, planning and review processes. *Educational Psychology in Practice*, 13(4), 266-273.

- Shilts, L.G. & Ray, W. A. (1991). Therapeutic Letters: Pacing with the System. *Journal of Strategic and Systemic Therapies*, 10, 92-99.
- Toepfer, S. M., Cichy, K & Peters, P. (2012). Letters of gratitude: further evidence for author benefits. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 13, 187–201.
- Welsh Assembly Government. (2004). *Special Educational Needs Code of Practice for Wales*. Cardiff: Welsh Assembly Government.
- Welsh Assembly Government. (2012). *Forward in partnership for children and young people with additional needs: A young people-friendly consultation*. Cardiff: Crown Publication.
- White, M., & Epston, D. (1990). *Narrative means to therapeutic ends*. London: Norton.
- Zack, S. E., Castonguay, L. G., & Boswell, J. F. (2007). Youth working alliance: A core clinical construct in need of empirical maturity. *Harvard Review of Psychiatry*, 15 (6), 278-288.

## **Appendices**

1. Principal EP (PEP) gatekeeper letter (Appendix 1);
2. A Head Teachers gatekeeper letter (Appendix 2);
3. An interview schedule for EPs (Appendix 3)
4. Pupil interview schedule (Appendix 4);
5. EP consent form (Appendix 5)
6. EP De-brief form (Appendix 6)
7. An opt out consent form for parents/guardians (Appendix 7);
8. A debrief form for parents/pupils (Appendix 8);
9. A thank you letter for pupils (Appendix 9).



## Principal EP Gatekeeper Letter – Appendix 1



Date: 24.04.2012

Dear Principal/Lead Educational Psychologist,

I am a DEdPsy (Educational Psychology) trainee in the School of Psychology, Cardiff University. For my final year research, I am carrying out a study on the use of therapeutic letters by educational psychologists. I am writing to enquire whether you or your colleagues would be interested in/willing to participate in this research.

The use of therapeutic letters within educational psychology practice is increasing. However, there has been limited research conducted within the educational psychology profession to determine the effects of their use. There has also been limited research undertaken to explore perceptions of their use from relevant parties. The aim of this research is to explore the perceptions of educational psychologists who currently use therapeutic letters as part of their practice. In addition, this research also intends to explore the perceptions of children and young people who have received such letters from an educational psychologist.

Yours or your colleagues' participation in this research project would involve a semi-structured interview aimed at eliciting views on therapeutic letter writing. The semi-structured interview will take approximately 30 minutes. It would be requested that EPs agreeing to take part would either have sent a therapeutic letter within the past month or who will be sending a therapeutic letter within the next 6-8 weeks.

All attempts will be made to arrange a time and place that is convenient for the participant to hold the interview. It may also be asked of you or your colleagues, if you agree to participate, to bring along examples of therapeutic letters that you/they have written.

As previously mentioned an aspect of this research involves exploring the perceptions of children and young people who have received such letters within the time frame stated above. As a result, it would be requested that families of children/ young people, who meet this criteria, be invited to take part in this research. Understandably, the confidentiality of the children and families that educational psychologists work with is of paramount importance. Therefore, letters of invitation can be provided in stamped envelopes for educational

psychologists to send to relevant families if they wish. Alternatively, educational psychologists can choose to provide names and addresses for potential participants directly to the researcher if permission has been obtained from the families to do so.

Many thanks in advance for your consideration of this project. If yourself or any of your colleagues would like to participate in this research or would like any further information then please contact myself, Laura Craven, on the e-mail address below.

Many thanks and kindest Regards,

Laura Craven

Trainee educational psychologist

**Researcher:**

Laura Craven

Trainee educational  
psychologist

School of Psychology

Cardiff University

Tower Building

Park Place

Cardiff

Tel: 02920 876497

E-mail: [cravenlj1@cf.ac.uk](mailto:cravenlj1@cf.ac.uk)

**Research Supervisor:**

Dr Jean Parry

Research Supervisor

School of Psychology

Cardiff University

Tower Building

Park Place

Cardiff

Tel: 02920 879003

E-mail: [ParryJ1@cardiff.ac.uk](mailto:ParryJ1@cardiff.ac.uk)

## A Head Teachers gatekeeper letter (Appendix 2);



Address

Date

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

I am a DEdPsy (Educational Psychology) trainee in the School of Psychology, Cardiff University. As part of my doctorate degree I am carrying out a study on the use of therapeutic letters within educational psychology practice. I am writing to enquire whether you would be willing to provide some assistance by allowing me to interview one of your pupils who have received a therapeutic letter from an educational psychologist on your school premise. Consent has been obtained from the child's parents/guardians to interview their child.

The use of therapeutic letters within educational psychology practice is increasing with limited research available to determine the effects of their use within the profession or to gain perceptions of their use from relevant parties. The aim of this doctoral research is to explore the perceptions of educational psychologists who currently use therapeutic letters as part of their practice. In addition, this research also intends to explore the perceptions of children and young people who receive them.

The interview will last approximately 20 minutes. If you are willing for the interview to take place on the school premises it would be appreciated if a quiet room with limited distractions could be allocated to hold the interview. All attempts will be made to arrange a convenient time for the pupil and your school to hold the interview.

Many thanks in advance for your consideration of this project. Please let me know if you require further information.

Yours Sincerely,

Laura Craven

Trainee educational psychologist

**Researcher:**

Laura Craven

Trainee educational  
psychologist

School of Psychology

Cardiff University

Tower Building

Park Place

Cardiff

Tel: 02920 876497

E-mail: [cravenlj1@cf.ac.uk](mailto:cravenlj1@cf.ac.uk)

**Research Supervisor:**

Dr Jean Parry

Research Supervisor

School of Psychology

Cardiff University

Tower Building

Park Place

Cardiff

Tel: 02920 879003

E-mail:

[ParryJ1@cardiff.ac.uk](mailto:ParryJ1@cardiff.ac.uk)

## **An interview schedule for EPs (Appendix 3)**

“Letters and their use within educational psychology practice”



### Interview schedule with educational psychologists

Context: How long have you been an EP? How long have you been writing letters? What do you call them? Why do you use this term?

1. What made you first begin writing therapeutic letters to children/young people?
2. When you decide to write to a child what factors help you to decide why to do that?
3. What specific techniques or information do you try to include in the letters?
4. What is your hope for the letter?
5. In what way do you feel that your expectations for the letters are met?
6. In what way if any, does writing a therapeutic letter change the relationship you have with the child/young person?
7. What value do you feel therapeutic letters have in comparison to other methods of documenting your involvement i.e., reports?
8. In your experience in what way do you feel that the therapeutic letters alter the outcome of your involvement?
9. How do you feel that the therapeutic letters alters or adds to the engagement in the tasks/suggestions you or the child have devised to facilitate change?
10. Do you think that there are any other ways of achieving the same goals?

## **Pupil interview schedule (Appendix 4);**



1. For what reason do you think the educational psychologist wrote a letter to you?
  
2. When you received the letter in the post from the educational psychologist, how did you feel?
  
3. What did you like most about the letter and why?
  
4. Based on the letter you received, what do you think the educational psychologist thinks about? and how things are going for you in school?
  
5. Did receiving the letter in the post help you make any changes in your life? Please can you explain your answer?
  
6. How much on a scale of 1-10 with (1 being the least and 10 being the most) do you think the letter you received in the post helped you to make the changes? (show child a scale).
  
7. How many times have you read the letter? Ask them to explain the frequency.
  
8. Did you show anyone else the letter? If so why and what effect did this have?
  
9. Since you have received the letter have things been getting better for you in school?

## EP consent form (Appendix 5)

“Letters and their use within educational psychology practice”



### Consent Form

*(To be completed and returned by participant)*

My participation in this research project will involve a semi-structured interview aimed at eliciting my views on letter writing to pupils. The semi-structured interview will take approximately 30 minutes.

I understand that my participation in this research project is entirely voluntary. I can withdraw from the study at any time, without giving a reason, up until the point at which the data is analysed. My identity will remain anonymous and any information I provide will be held confidentially. I understand that I am free to ask any questions at any time. I am welcome to discuss any concerns with Laura Craven (trainee educational psychologists) or Jean Parry (research supervisor).

I give my consent to taking part in the study:-

### **“Letter writing to pupils and their use within educational psychology practice”**

This research will be conducted by Laura Craven (trainee educational psychologists, school of psychology, Cardiff University) with the supervision of Jean Parry (academic supervisor).

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## EP De-brief form (Appendix 6)

“Letters and their use within educational psychology practice”



### Debrief

(To be retained by participant)

Thank you for taking part in this research project, the aims of which were to find out:

- Can writing letters to pupils enhance therapeutic alliance?
- Do pupils receiving these letters feel that they make a positive difference?
- What are EPs perceptions of such letters?

In the case of this research, therapeutic alliance refers to the relationship between pupil and educational psychologist. A strong therapeutic relationship is thought to be a good predictor of positive outcomes and is thought to occur when a pupil feels valued, listened to, when empathy is shown towards them and their feelings are validated. Educational psychologist and other professionals are always looking for ways of enhancing this therapeutic relationship. As outlined above, this research aims to explore if letter writing to pupils can be used to enhance this alliance.

The information that you provide via the interview will be held anonymously, meaning that the information you provide cannot be traced back to you specifically in order to maintain your privacy and anonymity. Once the interview has been analysed the transcript will be destroyed (anticipated to be March, 2013).

If you have any further questions about this study, please contact the researcher or the researcher's supervisor (on next page).

Thank you for your time and interest,

Laura Craven (Trainee Educational Psychologist)



**Researcher:**

Laura Craven

School of Psychology

Cardiff University

Tower Building

Park Place

Cardiff

Tel: 02920 876497

E-mail:

[cravenlj1@cf.ac.uk](mailto:cravenlj1@cf.ac.uk)

**Research Supervisor:**

Dr Jean Parry

School of Psychology

Cardiff University

Tower Building

Park Place

Cardiff

Tel: 02920 879003

E-mail:

[ParryJ1@cardiff.ac.uk](mailto:ParryJ1@cardiff.ac.uk)

**If you have any complaints regarding the research study, please contact:**

Dr Simon Griffey

Cardiff University

Tower Building

Park Place

Cardiff

CF10 3AT

E-mail: [GriffeySJ@cardiff.ac.uk](mailto:GriffeySJ@cardiff.ac.uk)

Telephone: (0)29 208 70366

## **An opt out consent form for parents/guardians (Appendix 7);**

“Letters and their use within educational psychology practice”



### **Opt out consent form**

Dear Parents/Guardians of \_\_\_\_\_,

On \_\_\_\_\_, you verbally consented for your child to take part in research, which aims to explore pupils perceptions of receiving a letter from an educational psychologist. Your child’s participation in this research project will involve him/her participating in an interview where he/she will be asked questions about what he/she thought and felt about receiving a letter from the educational psychologist.

This is an opt out consent form. If you have since changed your mind about your child’s participation in this research then please contact myself, Laura Craven, on the contact number or e-mail address detailed below before 5:00pm of the day before the arranged interview date. If you do not contact me to opt out I will assume you are happy to continue, and will interview your child, as agreed previously, on the date and time detailed below.

The scheduled interview date for your child is: \_\_\_\_\_ at \_\_\_\_\_am/pm.

The interview will take place in school during the school day and will last approximately 15-20 minutes. You are welcome to be present during the interview if you wish. Please can you make your child aware that this interview will be taking place and ensure that they are happy to take part. I will also verify with the child that they are happy to take part before the interview begins.

By allowing your child to take part in this research you agree the following; I understand that the interview will be recorded for ease of transcription. The recorded interview will be kept confidential and will only be heard by the researcher and potentially the researcher’s supervisor at the university. Once the interview has been transcribed, the transcriptions will be coded to maintain anonymity. My child will not be identifiable at any point throughout the research. Any questions my child does not wish to answer he/she may omit without any questioning. This information will be given to my child on the day of interview.

I understand that my child's participation in this research project is entirely voluntary. I can withdraw my child's data from the study at any time, without giving a reason, up until the point at which the data is analysed and coded. I understand that I am free to ask any questions at any time. I am welcome to discuss any concerns with Laura Craven (trainee educational psychologists) or Jean Parry (research supervisor).

Yours Sincerely,

Laura Craven

Trainee Educational Psychologist

School of Psychology  
Cardiff University  
Tower Building  
Park Place  
Cardiff

Phone: 02920 876497

E-mail: [cravenlj1@cardiff.ac.uk](mailto:cravenlj1@cardiff.ac.uk)

## **A debrief form for parents/pupils (Appendix 8);**

“Letter writing to children and young people and their use within educational psychology practice”



### **Debrief**

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

Thank you for consenting for Tom to take part in this research project, the aims of which were to find out: -

- Can letter writing to pupils enhance the therapeutic alliance?
- Do pupils receiving these letters feel that they make a positive difference?

In the case of this research, therapeutic alliance refers to the relationship between pupil and educational psychologist. A strong relationship is thought to be a good predictor of positive outcomes and is thought to occur when a pupil feels valued, listened to, when empathy is shown towards them and their feelings are validated. Educational psychologist and other professionals are always looking for ways of enhancing this relationship. As outlined above, this research aims to explore if letters can be used to enhance this alliance.

The information that Tom provided via the interviews will be held anonymously, meaning that the information provided cannot be traced back to him specifically in order to maintain his privacy. Once the interview with Tom has been transcribed and analysed, the recording will be destroyed (anticipated to be March, 2013).

If you have any further questions about this study, please contact the researcher or the researcher's supervisor (on next page).

Thank you for your time and interest,

Laura Craven (Trainee Educational Psychologist)

**Researcher:**

Laura Craven  
School of Psychology  
Cardiff University  
Tower Building  
Park Place  
Cardiff  
Tel: 02920 876497  
[Cravenlj1@cf.ac.uk](mailto:Cravenlj1@cf.ac.uk)

**Research Supervisor:**

Dr Jean Parry  
School of Psychology  
Cardiff University  
Tower Building  
Park Place  
Cardiff  
(0)29 208 79003  
[ParryJ1@cardiff.ac.uk](mailto:ParryJ1@cardiff.ac.uk)

**If you have any complaints regarding the research study, please contact:**

Dr Simon Griffey

Cardiff University  
Tower Building  
Park Place  
Cardiff  
CF10 3AT

E-mail: [GriffeySJ@cardiff.ac.uk](mailto:GriffeySJ@cardiff.ac.uk)  
Telephone: (0)29 208 70366

## A 'thank you' letter for pupils (Appendix 9).

“Letter writing to children and young people and their use within educational psychology practice”



### Debrief

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

I recently came to meet with you at your home/school to discuss your views of receiving a letter from an educational psychologist. I really enjoyed talking to you and found what you had to say very interesting. Thank you for taking the time to share your views with me. The information you gave me will be used to consider whether these letters are useful and if they should continue to be used with other pupils, so thank you very much.

Your parents/guardians and school have my contact details if you would like to ask me any further questions about this research.

I'm not planning to meet with you again so I will wish you all the best for the future in all that you do.

Thank you for your time,

Laura Craven (Trainee Educational Psychologist)