

Looking towards the future: the potential of precision teaching in the work of the educational psychologist in Ireland

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Abstract

Purpose – *This paper aims to examine the evolution of Precision Teaching (PT) within the Irish educational system, focusing on its integration into national educational guidelines and applied research and, in particular, highlighting the role of the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS), Ireland's state-funded school psychological service.*

Design/methodology/approach – *This paper tracks the evolution of PT within the Irish educational context. The potential future trajectory of PT in Irish schools is explored, with specific emphasis on how PT may be incorporated into the work of Educational Psychology (EPs) within school settings, in alignment with the consultative model of EP service delivery and the continuum-based assessment and intervention process adopted by NEPS.*

Findings – *Stemming from changing policies, curricular guidelines and applied research, educational provision in Ireland has undergone significant changes in recent years. Most notably, Irish schools have introduced a range of innovative, evidence-based interventions and frameworks across all levels of the school system to support all students, including those with special educational needs. Supported by a host of national research, PT now features as one such approach, which NEPS recommends to support pupils' skill acquisition and fluency development.*

Originality/value – *By examining the past successes, current practices and future prospects of PT, this paper adds to the literature in terms of highlighting the potential of PT to inform the work of EPs in Irish schools, offering a springboard for critical reflection for comparable practices in international contexts.*

Keywords *Precision teaching, Educational psychology, Ireland, Special educational needs, Consultation, Continuum of support*

Paper type *Viewpoint*

Introduction

Educational provision in Ireland has witnessed numerous developments in recent years, as fuelled by changes in policies, curricula, research and practice. Supported by the field of Educational Psychology (EP), Precision Teaching (PT) now presents as an addition to the multiple evidence-based approaches to teaching and learning used within Irish schools, particularly to support literacy and numeracy development. The current paper tracks the evolution of PT within the Irish educational context, drawing from national educational guidance documents, as well as Irish research evidence evaluating the efficacy of PT across educational settings and learning domains. Thereafter, this paper explores the potential future trajectory of PT in Irish schools. Emphasis is placed on how PT may be incorporated into the work of EPs within school settings, in alignment with the consultative model of EP service delivery and the continuum-based assessment and intervention process adopted by the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS), Ireland's state-funded school psychology service. It is anticipated that conclusions reached within this

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paper may offer avenues for critical reflection both nationally and internationally, with a particular focus on the potential of PT to inform the work of school-based EPs.

Background, current resources and research

The use of PT as an approach to support teaching and learning has gained traction in Irish schools over the past two decades. Although the roots of PT in Ireland stem back to the former Applied Behaviour Analysis schools (see [Leslie and Tierney, 2013](#)), one potential catalyst for the recent application of PT in Irish schools may be the work of NEPS. Research undertaken by NEPS in 2007 explored the effectiveness of various reading interventions in primary school settings. As part of this project, a PT intervention focusing on improving sight vocabulary was trialled with a small number of children, with participants making gains of almost two standard score points in word reading following the three-month intervention ([Murphy et al., 2008](#)). Stemming from this, NEPS endorsed PT as an effective approach for struggling readers and, thereafter, released “Good Practice” guidelines for teachers and a related PT-based resource pack aimed at teaching sight vocabulary and improving reading fluency ([National Educational Psychological Service, 2012, 2019](#)). In 2020, this resource was supplemented by video guidance from NEPS on the use of PT ([Department of Education, 2020](#)). Thereafter, in 2021, a survey of 31 Irish Special Education Teachers (SETs) demonstrated that PT was among their most widely used intervention approaches ([Cunningham and Kennedy, 2021](#)). With due regard to the small sample size, this finding points to the growth in the usage of PT within Irish schools, particularly for supporting students with special educational needs (SEN).

In parallel, a literature review highlights that PT-based Irish educational research has gained momentum in recent years. In terms of literacy development, [Griffin and Murtagh \(2015\)](#) studied the effectiveness of a six-week PT intervention with mainstream primary school pupils receiving additional special education teaching for reading, with results demonstrating significant improvements in standard scores of reading fluency, comprehension and accuracy. Using single-case experimental designs, [Brosnan et al. \(2018\)](#) demonstrated the positive potential of PT as an intervention for early literacy skills for young, at-risk readers in mainstream primary classes. Further positive findings were also deduced by [Lambe et al. \(2015\)](#) and [Rossiter \(2023\)](#), with a comparison of pre-and post-intervention scores demonstrating significant increases across various reading domains among typically developing students in primary school settings. Beyond literacy, PT's effectiveness in promoting other curricular skills has also been explored in Irish research. Examples include the application of PT to promote Irish language vocabulary ([Mannion and Griffin, 2018](#)) and mathematical fluency ([McTiernan et al., 2018, 2021](#)) among mainstream primary students. The studies outlined above offer a flavour of the wealth of national research on PT in Irish educational contexts, which may be another potential catalyst for the uptake of PT in Irish schools.

Proposing a future for precision teaching within Ireland

On the one hand, a reflection on the position of PT in Ireland depicts a growth in its usage in educational settings, both in terms of research and practice. Specifically, it appears that the work of EPs and researchers within Irish schools has supported teachers in implementing this evidence-based intervention with children. Nonetheless, considering the significant expansion in both the EP's remit and work context in the Republic of Ireland ([Hassett, 2023](#); [Psychological Society of Ireland, 2022](#)), the question remains – is PT relevant for EPs' future work within Irish schools?

Focusing explicitly on the Irish school-based EP context, the NEPS workforce has recently adopted a consultative service model, focusing on empowering teachers to intervene effectively with pupils with SEN ([Department of Education, 2024](#)). Guided by the *Continuum*

of Support framework (Department of Education and Science, 2007), NEPS encourage schools to use a continuum-based assessment and intervention process, as delineated across three tiers/levels. In practice, schools are required to take responsibility for initial assessment, educational planning and intervention for pupils with learning, emotional and behavioural difficulties, with the EP mainly offering a consultative role. Only in the event of failure to make reasonable progress, despite the school's best efforts in consultation with NEPS, will the EP become involved with individual pupils for intensive assessment and intervention (Department of Education, 2024).

Arguably, PT offers potential across all three tiers of the continuum, with due regard for the role of the EP. In fact, this tiered approach to intervention draws many parallels with the response to intervention (RtI) approach, where previous research has shown the efficacy of PT across all RtI levels (Johnson and Street, 2013). Focusing on the Irish Continuum of Support, teachers are required to incorporate preventative and proactive approaches to assessment and intervention at the first tier, typically at whole-school and classroom levels (DES, 2007). By incorporating fluency-focused practice of component skills with all pupils, research has shown the effectiveness of PT in building pupils' behavioural fluency at the sub-skill level (Chiesa and Robertson, 2000; Mannion and Griffin, 2018). Within tier one, EPs' consultative roles with schools could arguably be at a training and development level, empowering teachers to understand the key tenets of PT and supporting them to respond to the varying needs within classrooms.

The second level, "School Support", involves response to groups and individuals, typically involving the class teacher and SET. This requires more systematic gathering of information and the development and monitoring of a School Support Plan (DES, 2007). PT is most suited at this level, where previous research has shown its positive impact at Tier 2 (e.g. Brosnan *et al.*, 2018; Griffin and Murtagh, 2015). In addition to training, the EPs' consultative role could involve supporting teachers in selecting empirically-based "pinpoints" for pupils as part of individualised assessment and planning. Moreover, EPs could consult with teachers as they critically reflect on the "learning pictures" from pupils' charts, supporting them to engage in data-informed decision-making (Kubina and Yurich, 2012).

The final level, "School Support Plus", pertains to pupils whose needs are severe and/or persistent and who require intensive support. This level generally involves personnel outside the school team in the problem-solving, assessment and intervention process, including the EP (DES, 2007). Although assessment and intervention at this level may be more complex in nature, PT arguably could be incorporated as part of a multi-component plan, as guided by the EP. As stems from research, EPs may consider the use of PT at this individual level as a learning and social-emotional tool (e.g. to support pupils' self-concept and motivation) and a means for including the voice of the child through pupil-centred data decision-making (Griffin and Murtagh, 2015; Mannion and Griffin, 2018).

Conclusion

Ultimately, this paper highlights the growth in the application of PT in Irish educational settings, both in terms of research and practice. Nonetheless, given the changing role of the Irish EP, there is a strong need to consider PT at each level of the continuum so that all pupils can benefit from the positive potential of this teaching and learning framework. The potential to use PT to empower teachers, to support dynamic teaching and assessment and to monitor students' response to intervention cannot be underestimated, with due regard to the changing role of the EP and the continuum of support framework in Irish schools. Nonetheless, implementation of any intervention requires critical reflection in a time of national and international change in schools, with due regard also to the limitations of this approach. Only with critical reflection and the adoption of research-informed best practices, as part of a holistic approach to teaching and learning, we can ensure that all students across every level of the school system continue to reach their potential.

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