

# And the award goes to...

**S**CHOOL standards, pupil behaviour and pupil inclusion remain major issues for schools. To hear about creative research designed to tackle them, I met three educational psychologists in Essex – Jean Law, Elaine White and André Imich. While Jean has particular expertise in dealing with children’s emotional and behavioural difficulties, Elaine combines her educational psychology role with managing a large behavioural support service, and André is the principal educational psychologist in the Special Educational Needs and Psychology Service.

In addition to their background in teaching, the team’s work is rooted in a strong research environment built up over a number of years. Their work has been tailored to evidence-based practical applications, and the real-life needs of schools and the education authority. As André says: ‘Good practice and quality material are of no general value in themselves if they aren’t seen as useful by schools.’

**Essex Schools Award Scheme**  
One of the major projects where the team have been involved – in conjunction with other professionals – is the Essex Schools Award Scheme. The scheme aims to reward schools that develop a positive and harmonious community, based on good behavioural and management practices. It includes an assessment of patterns of relationships within schools, how children feel about their experiences there, and also how they relate to parents and to the

**JIM McCOURT** met educational psychologists Jean Law, Elaine White and André Imich to discuss their innovative projects with schools.

community. The idea arose from a need to find creative ways to tackle behavioural disruption, boost morale in schools, and support good practice.

Together with a researcher, Jean did the initial planning, preparation and development on the award idea. The work included the mammoth task of sending a questionnaire to all 800 Essex schools as well as to a whole range of people who would have an interest in school standards, such as the police, social services, education welfare services and health authorities. Jean explains: ‘We did three different questionnaires, some focus group discussions and interviews to establish what people in Essex thought were priorities for schools. From these data we developed what we saw as being success indicators, or targets and goals. These grouped into four objectives.’ [See box.] From these key objectives, identifiable measures of success were devised. The promotion of well-being so that pupils feel safe in school might be shown by improved attendance, confidence in reporting incidents, or the availability of mentors for support. Jean and the team also developed an extensive manual to accompany the project.

A group of volunteer schools piloted the scheme, and contributed further to its content. Jean and Elaine feel that this level of involvement by schools is one of the reasons for its success. As Jean says:

‘Schools had such a crucial part in its content, and what they said is very much built in. It is very much something that the schools themselves volunteer to do. The schools working on the award scheme at any one time meet together as a group – they are a sort of self-help support cohort, and they can teach other schools. Schools that have already received the award agree to provide people to help schools still working through it.’ Elaine added that ‘it has very much been about schools sharing good practice with each other’.

This approach is maintained in the assessment process for schools trying for the award, where the assessment team includes colleagues from other schools involved in the scheme, as well as other headteachers and education authority staff.

Elaine is now responsible for the running of the scheme, together with project coordinator, Val Scott. ‘Though the award scheme involves an awful lot of work for the schools taking part – it takes a school at least three to five terms to get through the scheme if they are running things pretty efficiently – the benefits include things like improved attendance, reduction in exclusions from the school, improved staff retention, systems that are operating throughout the school, etc. A spin-off we hadn’t anticipated is that the award scheme ties in with Ofsted’s requirements on educational inclusion, as well as other Essex initiatives on standards and health in local schools.’

Jean said that the team had wondered if schools might find the award scheme too hard. ‘But they said it would be a mistake to water it down – if it becomes less rigorous, or less demanding, it will be less appealing. However, we have come to understand that a school that is struggling, perhaps having problems with exclusions, staff stress, absenteeism, and so on, might

## ESSEX AWARD SCHEME OBJECTIVES

- Effective policies and procedures for the management of positive behaviour in school
- Promotion of safety and well-being so that children feel safe and happy in school
- The valuing of individuals – both children and adults – and children’s special needs
- Promotion of positive parental/carers involvement

take a longer time than another school that has already started on the way.'

Other educational authorities, and the Department for Education and Skills, are showing considerable interest in the scheme, and some have purchased it, even if they only want to use part of it. However, although Jean and Elaine are happy to see the scheme being extended, they aim to maintain some kind of quality control to ensure that its high standards are retained. They also realise that good practice in schools is always changing, so the scheme will continue to evolve. It is certainly proving very popular – with over 130 schools applying to join it last year.

### Promoting social inclusion

Running alongside the award scheme is a major project to promote social inclusion for children with emotional and behavioural difficulties. 'This is a resource for schools which is focused more on support for individual children and class teachers,' Jean explained. 'It involves multidisciplinary behaviour support teams, using experienced behaviour support teacher team leaders working with a group of specially trained non-teaching staff to support schools in developing effective practice.' It recognises that sometimes schools need extra help with the demands made on them.

Every team includes a home-school liaison worker, a post unique to the scheme, whose role is to facilitate relationships between home and school, to listen to both the school and the families involved, and negotiate shared agreements between them about how a child's behaviour is going to be consistently managed.

This way of working is the outcome of an extensive pilot. Jean explains: 'Some areas of the county had been identified where headteachers were expressing



Jean Law



André Imich and Elaine White

difficulties with things like exclusion rates or problems with behaviour. Then two years were spent working with schools, governors and headteachers to establish a model of good practice to tackle the problems.'

The scheme tries to work not only with individual children but the school system and management as a whole, taking into account both individual and social factors. Elaine says: 'A teacher receiving a referral for an individual child will also find out how that school operates. They ask questions about rewards and sanctions in the classroom to try and understand how behaviour is managed, so that advice and recommendations can be pitched in ways that will help not only the referred child, but others as well. A single referral may lead to others, or even a whole class, and generate a whole-class plan or a whole-school piece of work.'

The scheme is very much built on the principles of behaviour modification, which remain crucial in school environments. Jean explained that sometimes the interventions from the team can be relatively straightforward, such as developing schemes for good table manners, or organising games on the playground.

As with the award scheme, during the two-year pilot, schools volunteered to take part and were invited to contribute a subscription to its costs. Understandably, this was reflected in their positive expectations of change and improvement

arising from the project. However, André and Jean acknowledge that with some other schools that kind of motivation or belief can be lacking, and that they may need more fundamental help.

Essex educational psychologists are also involved in other projects, including a major initiative aimed at devising new teaching methods to improve young children's literacy, and a teaching package for infants diagnosed with autism and social and communication difficulties. Both projects involve working in partnership with children's families, other agencies and professionals. Although success is being achieved, Jean, Elaine, and André recognise that their work is not about one-off projects to be done and set aside. As André says: 'The ideas need to be kept going and revisited.'

Thinking about our discussions afterwards, the points that stuck most in my memory concerned how the work of Jean Law and her colleagues highlights the importance of a supportive work context, a culture of research and the time and motivation necessary to build this up. It also exemplifies a bridge between 'pure' psychology research, done in conjunction with other professions, and outcomes relevant to the pragmatic concerns of the recipients of their service.

■ For more information about the work of the educational psychology team in Essex, e-mail Jean.Law@essexcc.gov.uk or Elaine.White@essexcc.gov.uk.