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On Consultation and Beginner Educational Psychologists

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SUMMARY   *In this article, we describe some of our purposes and processes when introducing consultation as a comprehensive model of service delivery to course members in their programme of initial professional education. We also note some of the impacts from this model, both in the course modules and the placement experiences. While it is written from the perspective of course tutors, we hope that this account may trigger useful thoughts for readers—about their own initial training, about their current model of practice, about their current professional development or even their current contribution to initial training.*

Background Conceptions of the Educational Psychologist Role and 'Initial Training'

Two considerations inform our current perspective on initial training: how to think of the role of EP, and how to think of professional learning.

Any planned educational experience that aims to help participants with the role transition to educational psychologist (EP) will necessarily carry a view of that role, its characteristics and its context. In our view, context features are more influential on role performance than any context-free description of the role. Similarly, Morgan (1993) suggests that control of 85% of role-performance rests in the context, shaped by the events, circumstances and general culture in which a person works. Therefore, when considering the current position of EPs, we think it particularly important to recognise the complexity of the context in which they operate: it is characterised by multiple roles and relations, the very multiplicity of which can seem overwhelming at times. With a complex set of role partners whose expectations may conflict, we have the classic conditions for role strain. It is no surprise that we see practising EPs exhibiting the classic responses to such conditions: isolating their performance from view (practising in a cupboard), defining their role in terms of its isolating functional uniqueness rather than its connections, and/or finding a 'specialist' niche with a few selected players from the larger picture.

In order to make a positive contribution in this role, we take the view that an EP must have a perspective which allows him/her to understand the context and its

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associated pressures, and must also have a vision which enables him/her to be proactive in role-making.

Professional learning, at whatever stage, may be characterised in the same way as any other learning: a process of adding variation to an existing repertoire of knowledge understanding and action, thereby extending its range and depth. Learners do not give up earlier conceptions (Marton & Booth, 1997). Rather, they achieve greater complexity through a dual process of adding more fine-grain understandings to a more integrated whole.

In order that an experience of initial professional training makes a positive contribution to professional learning, it must clearly add to the range that course members bring, but must also help them 'go meta' on the experience they bring, and set it in a larger whole. Here our conception of initial training contrasts with a notion of conversion to a completely new professional perspective, with the associated messages that EPs in training (EPiTs) must leave behind their experience as a teacher, and that teaching is somehow less professional than being an EP. Instead, the course aims to help participants to find the frameworks and concepts with which to understand and make use of their own experience of teaching, classrooms and schools, to enhance the complexity of that understanding, and to prepare to use it in their future work with teachers. They bring with them important knowledge of the culture of teachers, and need to develop a reflexive perspective on it.

Consultation, in the way the term is used in the articles of this issue—as an integrated systemic approach to EP service delivery—is the most available and appropriate model to offer new entrants a vision which is suitably complex and robust to match the context, and which is also reflexive in practice. As such, it meets the requirements of the two considerations already outlined.

A comprehensive approach to consultation also offers newcomers a resolution to some of the difficulties that have characterised the role relations between EPs and teachers. Curiously perhaps, some of the teachers who make their way to initial training have never met an EP in the time they were a teacher. Nevertheless, they can identify the classic positions: teachers viewing EPs principally as assessors with advice to follow (Hibbert, 1971), widely varying expectations, misunderstandings and a lack of credibility (Freeman & Topping, 1976), conclusions made by the EPs seen as largely a restatement of teachers' own conclusions (Topping, 1978), and teachers unconvinced about the EP's effectiveness as an agent of change (O'Hagan & Swanson, 1983). They can also identify the forces that lead to a narrow resource-allocation approach to the role, or one tightly defined and aligned with statutory processes.

The majority of course members wish to offer something better than this and, for them, the idea of working in a consultative style with teachers on the concerns that teachers bring offers an attractive sense of purpose and coherence. However, in casting themselves as a professional helping a teacher, it becomes necessary to clarify what extra they bring to the relationship—an extra pair of hands to cope with difficult classes?, an extra pair of eyes to observe the classroom?, extra resources to compensate for shortages?, an extra set of teaching plans for individual learners?, or an extra head to bring understandings and frameworks to professional concerns?

The lattermost is appealing but the question arises 'what is in the head?' and is it any different from what an advisory teacher might bring? In the context of the past decade, during which advisory teachers have all but disappeared and inspectors are currently being re-labelled 'monitoring and standards officers', it is increasingly the case that teachers report their EP as the main trigger to professional reflection and problem-solving. But what sort of psychology do EPs bring? In this context, a redefinition based on contemporary constructivist and interactionist models of thinking, learning and applying psychology seems timely.

Current Course Practice

Throughout the course, the aim is to develop systemic psychological thinking, especially the three Cs: context, cycles, and connections.

Context

Human behaviour is profoundly influenced by context, so this has to be a recurring concept. Understanding the complexity of the classroom context and its influence on teachers, pupils and learning offers a chance to analyse past experiences in classroom management. Extending this to contextual understandings of learning and behaviour introduces frameworks for seeing a wider picture when concerns have been raised. A further extension is regularly encouraged: to examine the working context of the EP. Before consultation is introduced, we analyse the local education authority (LEA) and professional context outside the school, and seek to understand the ways in which teachers seek support. We also consider the pro-activeness of role-making by an individual EP to the school, and whether this is matched by a similar degree of pro-activeness from the educational psychology service (EPS) towards the LEA.

Cycles

The cyclical patterns of relationship between key people in a setting are regular explanatory constructs. Sources of such thinking include the family systems models, but may be applied more widely; for example, to relationship patterns in the school organisation. The contrast here is with causal or unidirectional thinking. Other frequent examples relate to cycles of learning, as applied to pupils, teachers and organisations.

Connections

EPs have to work with whole, connected pictures. Therefore, course members are encouraged to reconnect the aspects that language so often divides; for example, the cognitive, social and emotional. This can mean leaving behind those academic psychologies which are forged by constructing difference, contrast and disconnec-

tion. The systemic perspective also helps connections to be made across a number of different levels of working: individual, group, school, family and LEA.

Overall, the systemic interactionist approach to consultation as a comprehensive model of delivery (not a Friday afternoon component of the tool kit) communicates a vision of practice which is consultee-centred, learning-oriented and developmental (Wagner, 1995). It is also preventative, applying to all stages of the Special Needs Code of Practice, and reducing the races through the stages to reach the notional pot at the end of the rainbow

Our current practice is to consider consultation models at an early stage, followed by exploration of practical frameworks that support the model and the systemic modes of thinking about classrooms, learning, families and organisations.

Observations and Impacts

For probably a majority of course members, the consultation model relates well to their professional purpose—making a difference. It seems to be the case that they become more comfortable with the idea that they need to be, and can realistically see themselves as, change agents. A minority appear to want to maintain 'assess and advise' roles, or sometimes advocate roles, for the sense of power or the sense of self-image they bring.

On numerous occasions during the course and during placements, the application of systemic and interactionist psychology has highlighted the reductionist and deficit models prevalent in other approaches to practice. As Gergen (1991) remarks 'the vocabulary of human deficit has undergone enormous expansion within the present century'. Instead, EPiTs begin to use language focusing on intervention strategies that respond to need.

While on the various placements, EPiTs write process accounts of their working practice, which demand a reflective and meta position on their action and thinking. This has been mentioned as a long-standing strength of the course by external examiners, and increasingly works to support an EPiT's use of the styles of thinking which are offered.

When faced with an open choice of themes to explore further in reading and assignments for the module, approximately one-quarter of the course group choose models of consultation, nearly one-third choose systems thinking about families and joint school-family work, one-fifth choose teachers' professional development, with the remainder addressing schools as systems, classroom change and pupil behaviour. Over the past 5 years, the one-third of a million words submitted by 84 course members have portrayed a sophisticated and respectful professional perspective in which systemic thinking and consultative practice play a major part.

While observing EPiTs' work on placement, we pick up unsolicited remarks from teachers that they feel valued, listened to and empowered to respond to needs. This parallels the findings from course members' own studies: teachers in LEAs with consultation services have one-half as many negative comments about the EP role, more positive comments and are more focused on partnership and co-operation

(Lewis, 1997). They also show a greater use of 'we' when describing their working relationship with EPs.

The focus on consultation sometimes finds itself in tension with other aspects of the year's experience; for example, when course members are on placement in EP services that operate on other models of practice. On these occasions, it is unsurprising that splitting processes sometimes arise, such as the attempt to portray the course as 'theory' and the EPS as 'practice'. It is important to recognise the particular dynamics of being on placement: EPiTs are working without executive authority, and have to curb their acceptance needs while carving out an identity (Weinstein, 1981). In some cases, they may deal with institutional expectations in a non-reflexive manner, thinking they have no choice but to 'fit in'. Here, the course has to maintain its systemic and meta-perspective, and avoid the pitfall of proselytising. Were the course tutors to cast themselves in the role of parents, then they would have to cope with the 'children' bringing 'home' messages non-congruent with the home culture. Instead, a reflexive approach may help course members learn why particular services adopt the models of practice they do. Also, sometimes a reminder is in order that initial training is not there to maintain the *status quo*—it too aims to make a difference.

However, through their own comparisons and the increasing number of accounts of a range of EPSs operating a consultation service (for example, this issue; MacHardy *et al.*, 1997; Consultation Development Network, 1998), EPiTs can help to dispel some of the common myths: the overarching framework can be applied in local contexts with diverse characteristics; it can accommodate a wide range of practices, including individual assessment, meetings with the child and parent, but in a changed relational context with the teacher most concerned. Knowledge of consultation alone is insufficient to change practice—the most change occurs where thought, practice and relationship have been co-constructed in changed ways.

Recent changes in the way that course tutors relate with the experienced EPs in the field have complemented the model. The term 'placement supervisor' has given way to 'fieldwork consultants' with the aim of signalling a less supervisory and more learning-oriented relationship and dialogue. We anticipate that the experience of working with a beginner helps the experienced EP not only unearth their unconscious competence, but also provide an occasion to review and recount the dynamics of their context in a professionally reflexive manner. Reports suggest that fieldwork consultants do find the experience invigorating and re-professionalising.

In the most recent review of the core module concerned, course members were asked to rate the extent to which they now had a broader vision of the possible role of the EP, and the extent to which they now had more systemic ways of thinking to use in their work with teachers, on a scale with a maximum four points. The average score was 3.25 on both aspects.

This is encouraging, and stimulates us to examine further how to help course members develop and practice skills in partnership thinking and dialogue for change, which respect and utilise the professional expertise of both parties. As they experience how professional dialogue and review provides a means of developing knowledge, their own reflection and review may become more effective and embedded.

Through the operation of a consultation approach, it is our intention that beginners prove effective at helping appropriate models of psychology to permeate into the broader education system. As has been demonstrated in the USA (Gutkin & Curtis, 1990), it becomes possible to empower teachers to embrace a more inclusive interactionist view of the learner and their context. Perhaps this might also extend to key members of the LEA. To the extent that there is an opportunity to really make a difference to professional practice at school, LEA and wider levels, an approach which highlights role-making, consultation and context seems to make a significant contribution to EPiTs. We hope that beginner and experienced EPs alike can continue to co-construct real improvements.

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