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Introduction to the Articles on Consultation

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The seven articles that follow address facets of the same thing: consultation as a comprehensive model of service delivery for local authority education psychology services (EPSs). This introduction offers a commentary on the similar and different features of this collection, including their conceptual frameworks and theoretical perspectives, and at the same time, offers a view on the relation between these accounts and earlier ones.

Is There Something New Here?

Nothing can be 100% new but there are two major features that distinguish these articles from many others on consultation. The first is that consultation is being addressed as a comprehensive model for EP service delivery. In the words of the authors: 'Everything we do is consultation', by which they mean that all aspects of the EP work profile are incorporated into a conceptual and relational framework of consultation. This contrasts with an alternative position in which consultation is one part of the EP work profile, alongside other parts such as pupil assessment, teacher INSET, therapeutic interventions, and so on, each of which calls on different conceptual and relational assumptions. The second distinguishing feature of this collection is the underlying and often explicit psychological model: it may be described as a systemic, interactionist and constructionist psychology. Such a selection of psychology promotes a reflexive stance, in which exponents use the same psychology to understand themselves as they do to understand anything else, and they do so in a multi-level picture that includes, for example, individual group, organisational and cultural considerations.

In my view, these two features relate strongly and it is no coincidence that they arise together here: the relational framework used for the EP role meshes with the conceptual frameworks used from psychology. The fact that this is common to all seven articles may not be immediately clear from the choice of topics which appear in the titles. For this collection, the authors chose not to give repeated accounts of service practice from a common framework; instead, they chose key facets: the consultation meeting itself, the judgement of value in accountability, the processes of role-making, the processes for learning both within teams and with role partners, and the role transition from teaching. For another reason, it is no coincidence that

these topic areas were chosen: they are areas where the authors expressed interest and excitement following their own professional learning in developing their consultation practice. Throughout these accounts, I detect another feature which again reflects those already presented and the reflexivity which they imply: the EP practitioners practice in an open-handed manner, seeking to give away their practices and their selected psychologies, to enable others through collaborative work, and to promote regular and public evaluation practices. This has parallels with the practice of making role assumptions overt, as described by Turner *et al.* (1996).

The combined effect of comprehensiveness, chosen psychologies and open-handedness makes a contrast with other accounts of consultation that appealed to and reflected different psychological models, notwithstanding a broad agreement on the relational principles of consultation. Mental health consultation (Figg & Stoker, 1990) may be consultee-centred, but it is likely to focus on individual cases that the consultee brings. It is the ‘most psycho-analytic’ of the models described by Conoley and Conoley (1992). It may not address directly the concerns raised by teachers, but seeks and explores possible interpretations from a psycho-dynamic perspective. The experience of mental health consultation can feel alien to teachers and it may fail to develop practical classroom-focused strategies. One senior inspector described such a service to me as ‘Talk to me and I’ll tell you what’s wrong with your classroom’. Behavioural consultation (Kratochwill & Vansomeran, 1985) is likely to utilise behaviourist theory in a technical manner and, as a result, its simplifications may not pick up wider levels of the system (Douglas, 1982; Martens & Witt, 1988). Process consultation (Schein, 1988; Schmuck, 1995) is likely to focus on the interpersonal and management processes between staff, in teams working for curriculum change, staff development and organisational development. It does not aim to address classroom concerns directly.

With a comprehensive systemic model of consultation, the processes of management may take a more integrated and distributed form. Rather than importing an additional and potentially separate grand narrative of management, the processes of monitoring, evaluation and development are embedded throughout. In this journal’s ‘special issue on management’ 5 years ago, only one article took such a perspective, and highlighted consultation as the major role of the EP (Wright *et al.*, 1995). It is no coincidence that further developments from that service are reported by Gillies in this issue.

Do these Accounts Indicate a Trend?

In different ways, this collection of accounts honours the historical and intellectual influences that inform their development of practice and thinking. Whether this is judged to be a trend would depend on the evidence selected and the reading it was given. If we examine the evidence of written accounts in the published literature, the use of the term consultation has not been extensive. Examining the two UK journals where practising EPs are most likely to publish, between 1986 and 1999, 379 articles in *Educational Psychology in Practice* included two with the term consultation in the title (Stringer *et al.*, 1992; Macready 1997), and of the 162 articles in

Educational and Child Psychology, one used the term in its title (Wagner, 1995). Other writers such as Turner *et al.* (1996) use a term which can carry significantly different implications—consultancy (see also Labram (1992) and the term consultant). These terms can de-emphasise the collaborative and ongoing nature of EP relations, although Turner *et al.* do address the process of a service team developing a model. Farouk (1999) employed the term consulting, and within this highlights the difference between consistent service approaches and individual eclecticism. The professional literature reflects a parallel issue for a comprehensive consultative approach—systemic work with schools as organisations (for example, Gale, 1991; Stoker 1987, 1992).

Is There a Trend in EPS Practice?

There does seem to be a trend in the attention given to consultation in service development. The authors in this collection work in five EPSs and meet, with others, as a collaborative exchange network. To their knowledge, EPSs in at least 25 other local education authorities (LEAs) have run in-house development sessions on consultation, engaging members of this network. Other such networks may be starting soon, as a collaborative vehicle to support the development of practice in those and other services. National workshops mounted by these authors had to be repeated by demand, and a number of whole service teams attended. Other courses for experienced EPs have proved popular, and the majority of initial training courses address the development of consultation practice. Whether a trend in development time leads to a trend in practice doubtless varies from place to place.

From another angle, evidence on practice is now emerging from those services who have developed consultation practice, and this may indicate a real and important trend: it is highly positive evaluations from schools. To add to the earlier evidence from the USA (mentioned in Wagner, this issue), UK data is starting to emerge. The current authors (Consultation Development Network, 1998) are joined by others:

The consultation model used in this project has been positively evaluated by teachers, EPs and parents. Positive changes were noted in teachers' perceptions of EPs and in their attitude to EP interventions. (MacHardy *et al.*, 1997)

The feedback from school was very positive, clearly endorsing the use of a consultation model. (Parkes *et al.*, 1988)

The overwhelming conclusion of this evaluation is that schools have given exceptionally high support to the introduction of the consultative framework. (Pitfield & Franey, 1999)

At the time of writing (as opposed to the time of publication), we anticipate the report of the Department for Education and Employment working party on the future role of the EP. Given that the working party's questionnaires and visits to LEAs have included some of those in this collection of articles, and that the

evidence-base for the impact of consultation is now building, positive feedback from Government in the context of a more developed role for EPs may be anticipated. It may not be long before the wider connections are also evidenced, between a consultative practice and other elements of the political/educational agenda: pupil outcomes and pupil well being.

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