



Consultation: developing a comprehensive approach to service delivery

PATSY WAGNER

Education Psychology Consultation Service, Isaac Newton Centre, 108A Lancaster Road, London W11 1QS, UK

SUMMARY *This article brings together some of the thinking that seems important in illuminating key aspects of a consultation approach to the work of an educational psychology service. It begins by considering some current forces that influence the pattern of service, and the value of locating these forces historically. Definitions, assumptions and underlying psychological models for a comprehensive consultation approach to educational psychology service are considered, and an outline is offered of how it is carried out, how it works and its outcomes. Common pitfalls regarding consultation and the implications for change in a service context are described.*

A Personal Context

I write from the perspective of an educational psychologist (EP) who has been involved for the past 18 years in developing a consultation approach. For the first eight of those years, I worked in a service where individual EPs devised how best to work with schools. From my earlier experience as a teacher, I had considered how EPs could be most helpful in school, and consultation proved to be a highly effective and fulfilling approach that was appreciated and valued by the schools with whom I worked. For the past 9 years, I have worked in the Kensington & Chelsea (K&C) Education Psychology Consultation Service. In the wake of the abolition of the Inner London Education Authority, the K&C EPCS decided to adopt consultation as a model of service delivery and committed itself to that development. I have also been privileged to work with many other colleagues and with over 20 educational psychology services (EPSs) in England, Wales and other countries on developing consultation.

What is the Problem to which Consultation is a Solution?

Many EPs I meet report concerns about the continuing and grinding emphasis in their work on individual assessment and report writing. They lament a lack of creative and imaginative work with teachers, of preventative interventions in school

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and classrooms, and of effective joint school–family work. Above all, they sense that the educational psychology they are using is not making a difference in improving the development and learning of children and their schools.

The picture that is painted of current patterns is familiar: a strong emphasis on individual assessment and report writing leads to progressively more children having ‘special educational needs’; the cost of providing for these children has spiralled; the positive or significant outcomes for the children concerned are few relative to the time, effort and cost of the process. Broadly put, more ‘statementing’ has led to less problem-solving. The work of the EP has tended towards routinised, technical report-writing. The end result for the profession is a restricted and constricted EP role, greater job dissatisfaction, lower morale and difficulties in recruitment. These patterns require an analysis of the system and the position of the EP within it.

Learning From our History, to Re-Vision our Future

Professional practice is unlikely to change by simply setting its face against the past. Rather, it is necessary to unearth the unexamined assumptions that have grown up through our history and have become embedded in current patterns of practice. We may then develop a more reflexive understanding of past, present and future. Building up the concepts to deconstruct our history can be helpful in reconstructing the present, and in designing the futures that we seek.

Dessent’s (1978) account of the historical development of school psychological services notes that the development of special educational facilities and the associated mental testing movement provided the initial impetus for the development of the profession of educational psychology. Echoes of that history may be detected in our present, despite the questioning of its relevance. The later growth of the child guidance movement led to the location of the EP in a psychiatric clinic setting, and contributed to the further constriction of the role to that of tester. The prevalent psychological model was one of individual pathology, leading to the need for clinical diagnosis and cure by someone with therapeutic training. The profile of EP work which was associated with that position in the system was identified in the Summerfield Report (DES, 1968): a preponderance of individual clinical, diagnostic and therapeutic work, and a relative absence of advisory, preventative or in-service training work. The report identified such a profile as a problem, yet 10 years later, Gillham (1978) described a profile that had not changed.

And where are we now? In some services, it seems that little has changed in the fundamentals, although some surface features may differ. For example, most services have adopted time allocation systems as a means of handling the demand-led nature of the work, but many have also retained the fundamentals of a referral system, thus undermining their own development. If it still remains the case that little has changed, what has prevented change? Two related strands are important.

Legislation in relation to education, and especially to special educational needs, continues to embody a focus on individual assessment. EPs have to some extent colluded with this for a range of reasons, some articulated and some not. For example, EPs may wish to be seen to as ‘helpful’ to schools or the local

education authority (LEA), or to help schools add resources through statementing. Or they may wish to maintain EPS staffing levels in the face of apparent threat through delegation of budgets, or to make or maintain apparent positions of power within the LEA.

On a day-to-day basis, EPs are subject to attributions about their role that affect the work in counter-productive ways and which may impede change. To avoid such attributions and their effects in our own practice, we need to stop, work out what is happening, and apply appropriate psychology to our own situation. To develop this 'helicopter view' or meta-perspective, we need to develop self-reflexive processes as EPs and as services.

In moving on from the models of the past, we also need to pay heed to the view of systemic family therapists: it is hard to leave a social field with a negative connotation. That is to say, it will be easier to move on if we affirm and build on the positive practices and ideas that we have developed. As Hammond (1996) puts it: 'People have more confidence in moving into the future (the unknown) when they carry with them parts of the past (the known)'. She goes on to summarise the steps in Appreciative Inquiry as:

- Appreciate and value the best of *what is*
- Envision *what might be*
- Dialogue for new knowledge and theory—*what should be*
- Innovate—*what will be*

Consultation: a definition for the EPS

Consultation is a voluntary, collaborative, non-supervisory approach, established to aid the functioning of a system and its inter-related systems. Within this broad definition, there is a possibility for different practices and models. Conoley and Conoley (1982) describe four models of consultation (mental health consultation, behavioural consultation, advocacy consultation and process consultation), outlining what is involved in each model, its realisation in practice and ethical considerations. Consultation, as practised by the LEA EP, I believe, may have *some* elements of the four models described by Conoley and Conoley, but none is adequate for the EPs context. What is needed is a psychological model that matches more closely the complexity of the social systems in which the EP is working; systems which include school, family and professional systems, and their inter-relationships. The model also needs to support EP practice that is relevant and understandable in school and related contexts, and that is open-handed, so that the work is not mystified, but is transparent.

Consultation in an EPS context aims to bring about difference at the level of the individual child, the group/class or the organisational/whole-school level. It involves a process in which concerns are raised, and a collaborative and recursive process is initiated that combines joint exploration, assessment, intervention and review. Consultation is not, in this view, an item on a menu. Consultation aims to offer to schools a more useful, egalitarian, less instrumental, individualistic form of educa-

tional psychology. It de-emphasises positional authority and gate-keeping within the LEA. When consultation works as it is intended, a greater capacity develops in the system for developing solutions, and there is less amplifying of deviance and pathology. Thus, the psychology used is of great importance, as discussed in the following.

What are the Assumptions of Consultation?

For a service to develop a coherent approach to consultation, assumptions must be discussed and made visible so that all can be sure about the beliefs which guide action. In much EP practice, fundamental assumptions or principles are frequently left hidden and undiscussed, and may even be contrary to the espoused intentions of the service. For example, the service may espouse contextual assessment but provide no opportunities for EPs to develop the necessary practices.

Assumptions about our main role partners, teachers, need to be unearthed. A key principle in consultation is to work with others as equals. It follows from this that *teachers are viewed as skilled professionals*. But do we act as if they are, and do our practices support this principle? Many EPSs espouse the notion that they are there to support the school's work with all children but concurrently operate a referral system. Through this practice, and/or other ways of retaining control of the work, the message to the school is a de-skilling one: I am the expert and I have the control—you are secondary. Similarly, the language that EPs use when referring to consultation needs to be considered carefully from the point of view of assumptions about our role partners. The words 'consultant', 'consultee' and 'consultancy' may have a cachet and meaning which distorts the collaborative and even-handed relations with teachers. As we develop an approach that appreciates the expertise of each party, the language of 'expert' gives way to the language of 'bringing expertise from a psychological perspective'. Paradoxically, our own expertise is enhanced through this process: 'It takes expertise to be non-expert' (Draper, 1997).

Other assumptions and principles which are important to a comprehensive service model include the following:

- *Psychological processes are intrinsic in all aspects of the functioning of organisations.* Therefore, EPs have an extensive contribution to make, not just at the individual level, but at the class and whole-school levels. For this, they need ways of making sense of the school as an organisation.
- *Schools make a difference and different schools make different differences.* EPs can help schools notice the differences they make and support them in making significant differences. In this way, they relate to all aspects of the school agenda.
- *Everything we do is consultation.* Consultation is not a discrete item on a menu. All intentional interactions with others are consultations, whether that interaction is with teachers, with other EPs, with parents and children, with other professionals, etc. In the K&C EPCS, we call these meetings consultations, to uphold the notion a meeting of equals, each with a distinct contribution.
- *EPs are most effective when they work with teachers collaboratively and with a sense of*

the school as a whole organisation. To do this, they need to be clear about how to work collaboratively, and sometimes how to help teachers make connections in their own organisation.

- *Transparency helps promote collaboration and skill transfer.* When EPs clarify what is appropriate to their role in the system, and work out ways of explaining it clearly to a range of role partners, they increase the engagement and contribution of those partners.

What Psychological Models are Appropriate to Consultation?

Certain psychological models seem particularly appropriate and useful. These match the complexity of the social systems with which and in which we work, and promote a reflexive stance for the EP. They are symbolic interactionism, systems thinking from family therapy, personal construct psychology and social constructionism.

Symbolic interactionism (for example, Hargreaves, 1972) helps us to focus on how meanings are negotiated and conveyed in social interaction, especially the meaning that a person constructs for themselves of self, others and behaviour. The EP is interested to understand the meaning that a person makes of himself/herself, of what he/she is doing and of what he/she is making of others. As with other social psychologies which hold that behaviour is a function of the person *and* the situation, this perspective highlights the way that understandings are particular to situations, as are the possible keys to change. At the classroom level, symbolic interactionism may draw attention to a range of features: expectations and attributions, social climate and groupings, views of self and others, reputations and audiences, styles of teaching and learning, curricular demands, and so on. This perspective also highlights a consideration for the EP role: whether working with the child or young person will contribute to possible imputations of deviance (Hargreaves, 1978). By working collaboratively with the significant others—teacher and then jointly with parents—ideas for making a difference to the situation develop.

Systems thinking from the family therapy field (for example, Burnham, 1986) contributes ideas about repetitive patterns in social contexts, how they develop over time and how they connect to belief systems. It recognises that cause and effect are not linear, but circular, and that the way a person conceptualises a problem is a particular punctuation, or viewpoint, of a behavioural sequence. The punctuation is often self-defeating, especially when it locates the problem in the individual child. Change occurs when individuals in the system make a paradigm shift to an interactionist and systemic viewpoint, so that the view of the problem changes from *within* the person to something that happens *between* people and, in this way, more possibilities emerge. This perspective also highlights the interaction between the members of such systems as school, home *and* the members of professional systems, and the processes that can occur as a feature of that interaction. Consultation using systems thinking might highlight the developmental stage of the school, stressors on the school, changes in the organisation, and so on, simultaneously using systems understandings to illuminate the relations between EP and school.

Personal construct psychology (for example, Ravenette, 1997) contributes ideas of how to understand an individual's meaning of self and situations, and is especially helpful when an EP is thinking about how to elicit a person's constructs.

Social constructionism (for example, Burr, 1995; Macready, 1997) draws on themes that help to clarify the importance of language in the construction of meaning, and how labelling, problem amplification and pathologising are constructed and can be deconstructed through language. Social constructionism also provides an added stimulus to our aim to avoid the language of deficit, and motivates us to find interactional accounts for the phenomena we encounter.

For consultation to work in a complex context, a paradigm shift is needed from individual models of psychology to these interactionist and systems psychologies. Once that shift has been made, practices from other psychologies may be in use, but their style and the explanation of any impact they may bring will change. Our profession often has a pragmatic stance, which can be both a strength and a weakness; we are prepared to look for what works, but we can also be uncritical and unpsychological. To achieve the widest goals, our choice of psychology is crucial: this was captured in a reflection by Bo Jacobsen (source unknown): 'The Educational Psychology you create co-creates in turn the social world we all come to live in'.

What Makes the Difference in a Consultation Conversation?

Conversations that make a difference lie at the heart of consultation. In our conversations, we explore a concern, the patterns and sequences around a particular punctuation of a concern and the perceptions, beliefs and ideas that inform that concern. We do this through a process of enquiry with the person who raises the concern, using ideas from interactionist psychology and systems thinking, through asking questions that are intended to explore the features of situations. This process requires our genuine curiosity be shown. We are helped in the process by having frameworks and scripts that are supportive of our enquiry.

We are interested in finding the difference that makes a difference (Watzlawick *et al.*, 1974; Bateson, 1980), i.e. something that is not more of the same but is a difference which leads towards significant changes in beliefs and behaviours. In consultation, that difference is worked towards through the psychology used and the questions asked. One hypothesis underlying this approach is that the person who had the concern has in some way restricted their view of the things that might make a difference, perhaps because the child's learning or social behaviour is so overwhelming or stressful that the range of possible strategies or solutions has been reduced. This contrasts with other situations for teachers when they do not reduce their strategies, and continue to think in interactionist terms, holding a wide range of influences and interactions in mind. The process of exploration opens up possibilities and options for change. Systems thinking may also take the EP's enquiry to a wider level; for example, through a focus on the interacting systems of school, family and other professionals that may have become enmeshed in negative patterns of interactions and beliefs about a concern. In such examples, the difference that

makes a difference shifts the interacting systems to a different level of understanding, relating and acting. 'You change the world every day, by having conversations that make a difference' (Watkins, 1999).

During conversation, the processes assisting change are as follows.

- *Externalising the problem* (concern). We are helping the person to externalise the concern. It then becomes something different from when it was internal. Once it is externalised, the person tends to see it differently and, therefore, will tend to act differently towards it.
- *Getting meta, taking a helicopter view*. Questions are typically asked about the concern: what has been tried, the effects of strategies, what changes are sought, the views of the child and others, and other relevant factors. Through these and the lines of enquiry that follow, a more detached and therefore comprehensive view emerges not only of the concerns, but of the roles in relation to those concerns, so that the person concerned may start to access their own problem-solving skills.
- *The paradigm shift*. Through examining connections, it becomes possible to see more complex patterning between the focus and features of the situation. The person concerned shifts their view of the concern from within-the-person to the interaction of the person and the situation. This, in turn, leads to the emergence of keys to change, both direct with the person and indirect with the situation; for example, adapting some part of the learning and social context, such as group reputation or interpersonal skills in the class.
- *Engaging in self-reflexivity*. Through the process of consultation, the person engages in a process which helps them to recognise their own role in the patterns of behaviour, so that possibilities for change develop through taking different actions. This avoids falling into the dynamics of blame that, in turn, can make teachers anxious about the approaches which result. It helps each professional view themselves contextually.

Consultations that make a difference can be facilitated by various frameworks, not forms or formats, which aim to provide a supportive structure to the conversations that take place (Wagner, 1995). The frameworks support the EP to be creative and imaginative in his/her work, so there are no prescriptive steps to follow but rather a structure which helps the EP to keep on track, without being restrictive or inflexible. The frameworks used reflect the psychology chosen, and require explanations and discussion with the people with whom we work. They act as a structure that supports the passing on of our skills and approaches to understanding.

What are the Common Pitfalls in Consultation?

The surface features of consultation can be seen as relatively simple, so that one major pitfall is that the casual observer may not see or grasp the complexity of what is going on, or what needs to go on. Beware the view which equates consultation with 'having chats with teachers'. There is no doubt that consultation could easily be trivialised in this way, so we need to ensure that, whatever the stage of

development we are at, we are continuing the development of our own learning and complexity.

There are many forces that promote regression towards older models of practice, and a second pitfall is to ignore these and their effect. These forces may arise through the attributions and expectations of others or they may arise through forgetting to regularly explain how we work, to all our role partners whenever we work with them, an approach Kerslake and Roller (this issue) outline to avoid regression of practice occurring in day-to-day work, therefore eroding the consultation model.

The final pitfall relates to the phrase used earlier, 'Everything we do is consultation', and it highlights our communicating to schools what is on offer to them. In a comprehensive model, consultation is not something on menu, and the pitfall is to offer it as such. On these occasions, schools may express an interest and add 'we'll do that later when we've mopped up the individual assessment work'. They are not rejecting consultation *per se*—it is more that we are proposing unknowns. School staff want more creative, collaborative and preventative work, but it is important to be clear about the ideas, our commitments and the outcomes that staff might expect from a consultation approach. When it is offered in a clear and comprehensive way, our experience is that teachers engage very quickly in such an approach, an experience shared in other EPSs.

Frequently Asked Questions Regarding Consultation

- *Do you ever see individual children?* Yes, often in a classroom, but also outside. Seeing the child in the classroom is essential to get a sense of the child in a social and learning context, and from there to begin to make hypotheses about how he/she is presenting himself/herself as a learner. The EP asks a number of children about their work: what they are doing; how they know how to do what they are doing; how they get help when they need it; how they get to know what to do next; why they are sitting as they are and how that might vary; how the class gets on together, etc. It is surprising how much can be done in a classroom in a spirit of curiosity, and how it may lead to work at the group or class level as well as at the organisational or whole-school level.
- *Do you ever write reports?* Yes, but generally only for statutory assessments. When other professionals request reports, it is very often *not* an EP report that is really required. For example, social services often want a school report but tend to ask the EP instead of the school. We aim to be helpful by clarifying what is required and then re-directing the agency to the appropriate source.
- *Do you provide documentation of your school visits?* In the K&C EPCS, we use frameworks (Wagner, 1995) for our consultations. The aim of these is to provide a structure within which the EP and the other participants can contribute actively and creatively. We are open with these frameworks so that before a consultation starts, everyone present has an idea about how we aim to work together. With these frameworks, we record the main points in the consultation conversations, note our current conclusions and any actions that were planned. These notes are

typed and returned to the school. Schools say that they find our consultation records highly professional and very helpful.

- *What do you do about dyslexia and ADHD?* The same as for anything else, we offer to have consultations with the people concerned so that we can help in finding collaborative solutions to the cause for concern; essentially, how the child can be helped to make progress.
- *Do you see parents?* Yes, we always work with parents when the consultation is about an individual child. We believe that parents are important and key partners in the process of a child's development and educational progress, and we work closely with them and school *jointly* over school-age children and young people. In our reviews with schools, staff tell us that they are particularly impressed with joint school-family work and learn a lot about working with parents through the experience. This helps toward our primary goal, which is to help schools make a difference for *all* pupils.

How do We Know that Consultation Works?

A survey of research into the impact of consultation in the USA (Gutkin & Curtis, 1990) showed:

- student referrals dropped
- gains generalised to other children in the same class as a result of increased teacher effectiveness
- underachieving children whose teachers and parents received consultation achieved significantly better later
- teachers found problems to be less serious
- teachers' problem-solving skills were enhanced by exposing them to either live or modelled consultation interactions
- teachers reported increased professional skills
- teachers' attributions for the cause of problems changed from internal-to-the-child to interactional in nature, recognising the importance of ecological factors such as teaching methods and other students
- using psychologists in consultative roles provided enhanced learning, psychological well being and skills.

A range of similar findings are beginning to emerge in the UK. In the experience of K&C EPCS, requests for statementing drop but requests for EP involvement do not. Examples of EPSs evaluating their consultation practice include Lincolnshire, Surrey, Wandsworth, Kensington & Chelsea (this issue) and Aberdeen (MacHardy *et al.*, 1997).

What About Change and Development in a Service Context?

Change is not mystical: in EPSs, it happens in a similar way to other organisations in education (Fullan, 1991). Having now seen a number of EPSs make significant change in their patterns of practice, I see the following elements as key:

- a clear desire to do something different
- developing practice from principles
- engaging the whole team
- promoting collaborative development
- regular review with all partners.

When these conditions have been evident, the net result has been the re-positioning and re-vitalising of services.

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