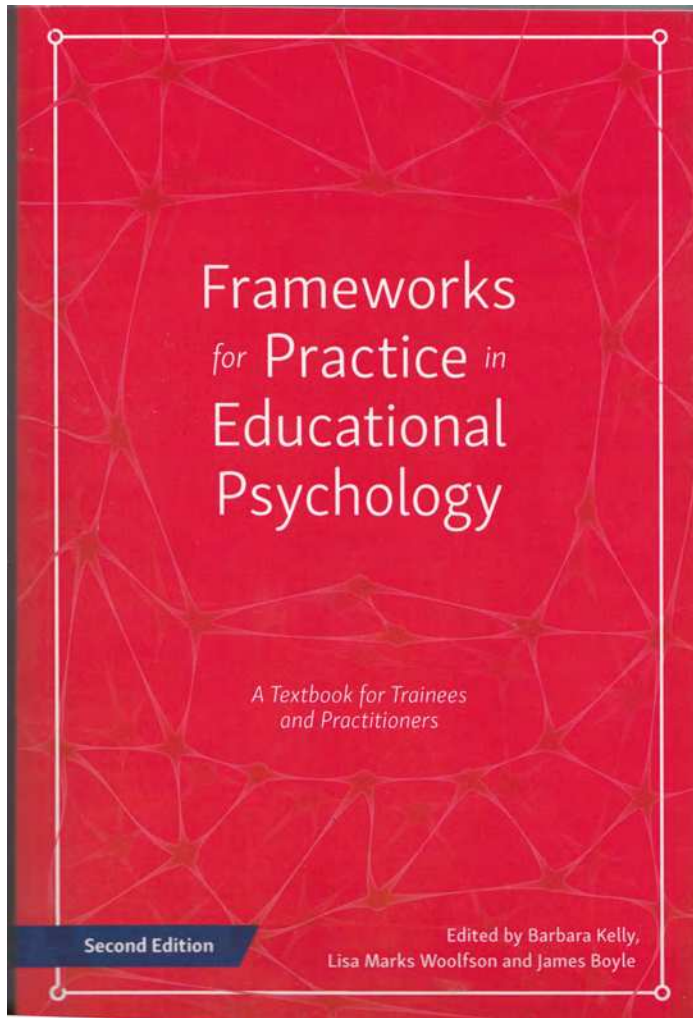


Patsy Wagner (2016)

Consultation as a Framework for Practice

In:



Frameworks *for* Practice *in* Educational Psychology

*A Textbook for Trainees
and Practitioners*

Second Edition

Edited by Barbara Kelly,
Lisa Marks Woolfson and James Boyle

Foreword by Sue Morris



Jessica Kingsley *Publishers*
London and Philadelphia

Consultation as a Framework for Practice

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Introduction

This chapter aims to describe Consultation in terms of its use as a comprehensive model of service delivery for a local-authority education psychology service, working with others to make a difference in the context of integrated children's services and multi-agency working. The interrelated theory and practice of Consultation, and its evaluation, benefits, and usefulness in the initial training and the continuing professional development of educational psychologists (EPs) will be addressed, as will some key difficulties.

The model described here has developed in the author's practice as an educational psychologist in the state system in local education authority settings over the past 35 years and is still in the process of development. I have also been privileged to work on Consultation development with a large number of varied EPs in England, Scotland and Wales over that period. The challenges in such a wide range of settings have contributed enormously to identifying the essentials of Consultation and have tested the robustness of this model. An essential feature of this model of Consultation is the interactionist, systemic and constructionist psychology that gives it meaning and relevance and that informs the practice. Such psychology reflects the complexity of the context in which we work (i.e. inter-relating systems of schools, families, local-authority systems, professional systems, agencies and so on). The aim of Consultation is to find 'the difference that makes a difference' (Bateson 1972, p.271) within a collaborative and respectful practice. As Gergen states, 'A psychology that simply contributes to the status quo has little to offer the culture' (1997, p.34).

The term 'Consultation'

Consultation may not be the best term for what we do since it could symbolise going to see the doctor, with implications of an expert who makes things better by diagnosing problems and prescribing cures, as long as someone is prepared to take on the role of patient (the word's origins lie in the Latin present participle of *pati*, meaning 'suffer'). However, the term has been used for some while (Meyers 1973) to indicate a collaborative way for EPs to work with schools. So we continue to use it, and aim to ensure that the people with whom we work understand that we mean 'working together' - that we do not consider ourselves as the experts in their lives and their situations. Rather, we take the view that everyone involved in Consultation has unique expertise that contributes to the richness of the Consultation and in turn to the search for solutions. We see ourselves as having expertise in promoting this process. We avoid the use of the terms 'consultant' (with its implication of power and expert status) and 'consultee'. Concerns about the language we use inform our facilitation of meetings, where we aim to address imbalances of power and destructive distortions of meaning created through the language of deficit.

Development of Consultation: The wider context

Nearly 40 years ago Caplan (1970) described a way of working in which two professionals worked together instead of relying on one referring a child to another. This was explained as a voluntary, non-supervisory relationship between professionals from different fields established to aid one in his or her professional functioning - the rationale for a mental health professional spending time with a teacher, instead of a child, is based on the efficiency, impact and prevention aspects of the intervention.

The desired effects of indirect work were described by Conoley and Conoley (1982):

The consultant hopes that the consultee will generalize the insights and skills learned in the discussion of a single client case to the other clients (now or ever) under the care of the consultee. The benefits of consulting about a single case while the benefits spread is the efficiency of consultation. The impact rationale is the consultant's belief that clients are best treated by those who have high duration or intensity of contact with them ... the regular caregivers in a client's life should be helped to be facilitative of treatment goals because they spend the most time with the clients. (p.1)

Consultation was therefore preventative: it follows that if generalisation and transfer of skills occur because of consultation, there is the potential for the

primary prevention of ... problems' (p.2). Conoley and Conoley also go on to describe what consultation is not: 'For example, consultants are different from supervisors, program developers, teachers and psychotherapists. While it is true that consultants are none of these exactly, it is also true that they do some of what each job title suggests' (p.2).

Consultation aimed to facilitate the skill development and expertise of others, rather than to replace them or provide a more 'expert' version of them. In this way it contrasted with 'referral', which encouraged the notion of more expert and knowledgeable systems. This notion of the pre-existing expertise in the system was emphasised in early literature. Gallessich (1972) put it this way:

the primary assumption is that the system, whether it is a small unit such as a team of 2 or 3 teachers [or one teacher in this author's view], or a larger unit, for example, a school district, contains the basic resources for effective problem-solving. (p.14)

Conoley, Apter and Conoley (1981) clarify the role:

Consultation should not be seen, therefore, as the more knowledgeable consultant giving answers to a puzzled consultee. Rather, it must be viewed as a collaborative problem solving process during which the consultant facilitates the creative, coping skills of the consultee and learns from the consultee about the unique aspects of the problem and the consultee's situation. (p.113)

All the ideas given above are, I believe, still fundamental to what Consultation is or should be.

In the United Kingdom moves towards Consultation as a framework for EP practice have been in evidence for decades, and partly relate to calls to reconstruct educational psychology (Gillham 1978). This standpoint reflected a widespread wish for change in the profession away from referral systems, psychometric assessment and reactive rather than preventative work. Many teachers at the time held the view that EPs were inaccessible and detached from the life of classrooms and schools and had little impact. It seemed that the stage was set for a sea-change in the work of EPs, and Consultation was an obvious way forward. Both EPs and teachers wanted that change -- we just needed to create a service accessible to teachers, children and young people and their families as well as to the other professionals with whom EPs worked.

Consultation developed in the next few decades in EP service practice in various parts of the country, but was rarely a smooth process. Various forces had distorting effects, and in some cases there was regression to more

traditional models. The 1981 Education Act led to a focus on individual assessment, despite its preceding report (DES 1978) emphasising that special educational needs are relative to context. The 1988 Education Reform Act raised fears of the delegation of non-statutory EP services to schools. In order to protect services and seek resources in school, the statementing rate surged, with increased psychometric assessment. Through the 1990s, and subsequently, legislation around special educational needs (SEN) and disability has continued to re-focus on individual needs. There have also been supportive forces, for example the development of more rational methods for devolving funding to schools for children with very special needs. Some services made the shift, and in some services Consultation has thrived and developed. Referring to England, the DfEE (2000) concluded:

Consultation and Solution-Focused approaches are seen as an important aspect of educational psychology services' work. A number of the services in the case studies had recently adopted the consultation approach to service delivery and saw this as key in helping to achieve a shift in the nature and balance of their work. (p.43)

Many services developing Consultation are in Wales and Scotland, and they may benefit from their distance from London and from the dominating compliance culture that government has promoted for so long and which has so often been a brake on imaginative development.

Principles for practice

A CONSTRUCTIVE PRINCIPLE

According to Jacobsen (1985), what the EP learns and believes helps to create the social and professional contexts we work in. In choosing psychology that contributes to a better social world, an emphasis on Constructionist, Interactionist and Systemic psychology follows. This contrasts with those psychologies that have contributed to the exponential increase in the language of deficit in the past couple of decades. 'Furnish the population with the hammers of mental deficit and the social world is full of nails' (Gergen 1994, p.118).

A TRANSPARENCY PRINCIPLE

How we explain what we do to those with whom we are working is crucial. Similarly we aim to be open about helping others to access and develop their own expertise. In creating non-traditional practice, we can develop our repertoire in an open-handed way through flexible 'scripts' (described here).

A SELF-REFLEXIVE PRINCIPLE

Our practice is not to be found in a manual, and responds to changing contexts, so reflection on practice is essential and needs to be routine in all that we do. In addition, we would not want to apply to others any psychology that we would not be happy to apply to ourselves.

A COMPREHENSIVE PRINCIPLE

We take the view that everything we do is Consultation - all aspects of our work as EPs are integrated into a conceptual and relational framework of Consultation (Wagner 2000). This contrasts with a model of service delivery, in which Consultation is cast as one discrete item in 'a menu' of service activities.

How do the psychologies informing Consultation translate into practice?

The psychologies of Consultation come predominantly from social psychology and are the basis of the practice. We are guided by the notion summed up as $B = f(P \times S)$ - that is, behaviour is a function of the person and the situation (Lewin 1946). This helps us to assist schools and other settings in acknowledging the power of the situation and how they can act to improve the situation for children, irrespective of what is happening in their lives outside the school. This does not mean that we underestimate the family as the primary socialising context for children, but, rather, it links to the vision we all have of schools as places that can make a difference in children's lives.

Personal Construct Psychology (Kelly 1955) informs our conversations, eliciting and exploring constructs, so as to understand and address the views that pupils develop of themselves as learners, as well as the views they have of significant others in their lives. We are interested to understand how such views might be affecting a child's progress in, for example, learning to read, and how those views can be influenced (Ravenette 1968). Symbolic Interactionism (Blumer 1969; Hargreaves 1972) emphasises that a pupil's view of him- or herself is a major cohering force and so we are interested in how such a view is built, enhanced and maintained. Consequently, we are interested in analysing how reputations are created and maintained, and in using the notion of deviance as a social construction (Hargreaves, Hestor and Mellor 1975), so that analysis and understanding leads to more constructive interventions and change.

Systems Thinking helps us notice patterns that occur over time and in wider contexts. We work at the individual, class and organisational levels and help schools to make analyses and interventions at the three levels

and to make links between them (Watkins and Wagner 2000). Although a consultation may start at the individual level, the eventual strategy suggested may be for a whole class. For example, if a child is finding it hard to cope with some family difficulties around parents separating, we might work with the teacher on activities in Personal and Social Education that will help all the students. Our assumption is that all children at some time find feelings hard to deal with and that they will all benefit from working together on this area. In all our work we keep a focus on exploring how to help children and young people become more effective learners and we also always aim to consider the social and affective dimensions of learning.

Ideas from Systems Thinking and Family Therapy (Burnham 1986; Hoffman 1981) help us consider the inter-relating systems around the child, and possible conflicting expectations and their effects and how these can be addressed. The call to multi-agency work has been around for a long time and has recently been re-emphasised. However, it is not easy when different professionals work with different languages and different conceptions of what constitutes the problem and the solution. For example, in the professions of Social Care and Health, there can be a tendency for the problem to be located in the child or family and for the solution to be similarly focused, which means that medical, pathologising and 'within-the-person' models can dominate the picture. Workers in educational settings can then feel overwhelmed and impotent. A solution in such a case might be to develop more of a shared language of multi-agency working, and the EP is well placed in the system to facilitate such a development. For example, in meetings in educational settings, the Consultation model and Solution-Focused Thinking have made a significant contribution to helping different agencies communicate more effectively (Harker 2001).

We aim to acknowledge and address the power of language in social interaction and in the Constructionist nature of language and discourse. We take seriously the idea that language creates reality, and seek to build a constructive discourse. We explore, in detail, what works and what things would be like if they were better. Through these detailed conversations the lives that people aspire to are more likely to eventuate. We aim to avoid the language of deficit and labelling and encourage others to describe, explore and reflect on the phenomena of their experience rather than to rely on labels. If, however, a parent asks us about, for example, dyslexia, we will explain as helpfully as we can about what is known about the varied 'manifestations' and what is known about what might help.

We try to keep a focus on learning (in its broadest sense) and on helping children become more active, engaged and successful learners in school by reflecting on when they do better in their learning and how we can build

on that. We will always aim to elicit what works well for a child and when things are better. Consequently, we find it helpful to use frameworks of Solution-Focused conversations (Berg 1994; de Shazer 1985), and this has now become integrated into Consultation (Wagner and Gillies 2001), developing Solution-Focused interviews at the three levels of work. In these conversations there is an important emphasis on eliciting detailed descriptions of the occasions when things go well, in order to amplify solutions.

We use scaling questions, (Rhodes and Ajmal 1995) a lot in Consultation interviews since children and young people seem to respond especially well to scaling questions. Scales can be applied to a range of situations. We might ask, for example, if 10 was 'as good as it could be' and 0 was 'it couldn't be worse':

- How happy are you in school (now/last week/this term/this year/last year, etc.)?
- How confident do you feel in the corridors (now, etc.)?
- How successful are you at getting to school (or lessons) on time?
- How is your learning going (now, etc.)?

Particular activities or subjects can be explored and compared. Children can be amazingly perceptive when it comes to thinking about how their teacher might rate them and how they could improve their teacher's rating. Scaling also enables us to help children see how they have made some progress, however small that might be and whenever it might have been. It gives us a way to help them recognise the skills and resources they have and currently use, which they can celebrate and build on. A Solution-Focused approach links to features of Appreciative Enquiry (Hammond 1996), another major resource to Consultation, particularly when helping teachers identify and analyse the best of their classroom experiences.

Another technique we use is that of Narrative Thinking (White 1995), which is creatively explicit in recognising, acknowledging and utilising the expertise that people bring - helping them to voice the rich stories of their lives rather than focusing on stories of deficit. We have learned how to focus on, elicit and amplify in that process stories of competence, and how we can help others begin to change the thin stories of difficulties, or even diagnostic labels, that have come to dominate and often determine the course of children's lives (Wagner and Watkins 2005). Externalising the problem (White 1989) is a process that Michael White first wrote about in relation to a child who was encopretic. 'Sneaky poo' now has an international reputation as the externalisation of that child's problem. Huntley (1999) has also shown the power of externalising with children with learning difficulties.

The model of Consultation is, therefore, in essence determined by the theory and practice of the psychologies that inform it, and which have been fundamental in its evolution. The challenge for EP practice is how to adapt ideas that may have originated in a clinical context, and to apply them in the systems and contexts in which we work. As multi-agency working has moved up the agenda in local authorities, Systemic Thinking continues to be important.

As EPs we also need to apply psychologies to ourselves, according to the self-reflexive principle, and recognise the difficulties of role-making in a non-traditional style. We find that it is useful as a team to review the scripts that we use in order to explain ourselves to our role partners, that is, to teachers and staff as well as to children and young people and their parents and carers, and the other agencies with whom we work (Kerslake and Roller 2000). We do this with the aim of working out how to communicate effectively with others in a process that is engaging and appropriately respectful. Scripts should not be rigid or prescribed, but reflect the importance that we place on transparency and communication.

Frameworks for Consultation

Although Consultation is the over-arching framework for how we perceive and explain our role, within our practice we also use other specific frameworks (Wagner 1995). A framework is a frame to work in: it provides boundaries and helps construct a view. Frameworks embody the Social Constructionist and Systemic ways of thinking that we apply to all that we do. When those ways of thinking differ from the dominant discourse, the regular use of a framework can help create novel perspectives.

Frameworks are not simply procedures to follow, but provide a supportive structure for creative, collaborative conversations that we have in our work as EPs. They help us to work respectfully, imaginatively and systematically. These frameworks are intended to be used in an open-handed way and are made as accessible as possible to the people with whom we work. These frameworks are not fixed: they have been changed to accommodate developments in our thinking. Thus the approach and questions of Solution-Focused or Narrative Therapy, or of Appreciative Enquiry, have now become more evident.

The intention has always been that the frameworks be succinct; that they provide a helpful structure to a conversation and that they are informative and can be used subsequently as useful working documents. They are not considered as, or used as, forms to fill in, but rather as structures to support conversations that are imaginative and useful.

Different frameworks are designed with particular role partners in mind and with particular purposes in mind. The three examples that follow provide a flavour of such frameworks:

- with teachers and school or centre staff
- with children and young people, parents and carers in joint school-family consultations
- with multi-agency groups.

The framework we used in each case provided the structure for a conversation. The process and content of the conversation related to a concern or issue that had been brought to the meeting.

'Full Consultation' with teachers and staff in schools and centres

Informal Consultation is used on those occasions when we do not meet children individually, open files or provide records for a child's school file. It comprises an informal Consultation with a teacher. It is only when a school prioritises a concern and more EP time is allocated that this becomes a Full Consultation (FC), which starts with the identification of the concern and engages in a process of working out:

- what is currently successful
- what further progress would look like
- what might contribute towards that progress.

FC could be about an individual, a group or an organisational-level issue. When it is about an individual, it is required that parents are already fully involved and have provided their consent for the EP's involvement.

The FC framework provides key questions that should be addressed by the teacher/staff before the Consultation occurs, as follows:

- What concerns you?
- What have you tried?
- What effects have you noticed?
- How would you like things to change?' (And what would that look like?)
- What do you hope to get from this Consultation?

The fact that the teacher/staff member has had time to think about these questions before the Consultation meeting means that in many cases things

that are contributing towards making a difference have been noticed before the meeting. This often leads to even more change occurring before the Consultation itself takes place. The EP uses questions that help the person to explore more dimensions of the situation and more of what is working, or might work. This helps them to find a wider repertoire of ideas and possible solutions. Questions from a Solution-Focused approach and from Appreciative Enquiry are an essential part - for example, questions that explore in detail the times when the concern is less of a concern, and what is happening at those times that helps the child engage in more active and collaborative ways.

The focus in an Individual-level Consultation is, at this stage, mainly on the child or young person in the context of the classroom and school. Our main role partners in FCs over individual children and young people are usually key workers, class teachers, form tutors or year team leaders and, possibly, learning mentors and other staff, as well as, when appropriate, other agencies. Including such role partners emphasises the fact that we work with the people who have a responsibility to have an overview of the whole child. Systemic Thinking can contribute lines of enquiry that open up the discussion about the child in other contexts, such as the major socialising agency of the family. However, since the aim is to focus on the child in the immediate context, the focus is more on the school and classroom contexts at this stage.

Consultation provides time and space for busy professionals, such as teachers etc., who have concerns about children, to have reflective conversations that make a difference. It is the process of Consultation that is the key to the difference that Consultation makes - not the actions that are arrived at when the Consultation is ending. If the actions themselves made the difference, then they could be prescribed without the need for Consultation. The process of Consultation helps professionals in schools or centres to take a step back and examine things in a way that helps thinking to shift towards a more Interactionist understanding away from a within-the-person explanation - and from there to a wider repertoire of possibilities for change. This wider repertoire of possibilities then translates into strategies and approaches that the key person can draw on.

The documentation of Consultation comprises:

- the notes of key points made at the time of the Consultation
- the summary of current conclusions that is made towards the end of the Consultation
- the strategies and actions planned.

The documentation of Consultation comprises the notes of key points made at the time of the Consultation, the summary of current (for the time being) conclusions which is made towards the end of the Consultation, and the strategies and actions planned. It is worked out collaboratively with the key staff who the EP is working with. As such, it is a joint project between the EP and staff, which clarifies the understandings that have been reached and how things could develop and improve. It might also include further questions to explore.

In some instances, letters to teachers are also used (see Bozic 2004). However, this is not a routine practice, since the documentation of Consultation as described above seems to do a very good job of keeping the work tracked and everyone appropriately involved. However, there can be key points or occasions in pieces of work when a letter to staff seems especially relevant. (For more on the use of letters see below.)

INVOLVING CHILDREN OR YOUNG PEOPLE IN CONSULTATION

The classroom is usually the context for a teacher's concern. Consequently, Consultation over a child or young person in school is often preceded by an EP carrying out an observation in class or wherever the concern arises in the school. We aim to consider how well a range of features of the situation are currently organised and managed so that they encourage the development of collaborative, active, engaged, independent and effective learners. The features of the classroom that we consider to be contributory to such a situation are:

- the environment and the layout
- the social climate and groupings
- the tasks and activities
- the resources available
- the teaching support
- the routines used by adults to engage children actively in their learning and the life of the classroom.

A snapshot observation of a child in the context of a classroom can be carried out, and children in that class can be asked about their learning and the social dimensions of classroom (and school) life.

Conversations with children and young people can also take place outside the classroom, and will often mirror the approach and orientation of Consultation generally (i.e. these can be based on Appreciative Enquiry and Solution-Focused and Narrative approaches). These conversations explore

in more depth the social and learning context of the classroom from the child or young person's perspective, and seek to explore and celebrate the successful ways that the child or young person has for engaging with others and in active, collaborative and effective learning (Watkins, Carnell and Lodge 2007). The use of letters to children or young people following individual interviews with them is now common practice in Consultation. This practice was inspired by the work of the Narrative Therapists (White and Epston 1990) and has become a powerful addition to the repertoire of work with children.

Letters help to crystallise further the acknowledgement and celebration of what has been explored and discussed with the child or young person, which could range across a variety of social, developmental and learning themes. For example:

- A young child who is grieving for her father talks about what she might do to recall the happy times they had and how she could talk with her mother about this, or how she could talk to her toys when she feels lonely or scared at night.
- An older primary boy reflects on how he is becoming more successful in making and keeping friendships.
- A young man with literacy difficulties and stress headaches in secondary school who was becoming a school refuser reflects on the times when he can spot his headaches coming on and how he might stop them by relaxing, as well as how he plans to do more of spotting the onset and relaxing himself. He can also look at how all of this will help him with his literacy, and think about which staff in school might help him develop these ideas and strategies further.

The aim is always to identify the resources in the person and around the person, and to help them make the connections that will assist them in overcoming the difficulties they have been experiencing.

Joint school-family Consultation involving parents or carers

Key ideas when working with parents or carers are the following:

- They all want to feel proud of their children (Berg and Steiner 2003).
- They can feel daunted by the prospect of engaging with schools when there are concerns over their children.

- They can feel criticised or attacked by questions that are put to them about their children at home (which seem to imply that the problem is in their parenting).

In a joint school-family Consultation the aim is to address the inevitable power imbalance through a structure that is supportive to joint working. We want to both engage parents over the work that the school or setting has done to help the child to progress, and to engage the expert knowledge that the parent has of the child. In this way a collaborative partnership becomes more than mere rhetoric. As in all our Consultations, the script that we have about the EP's role (explaining our background, training and role and how we work) is an important starter in de-mystifying and creating a greater sense of equality of expertise among everyone involved. We also explain the proposed structure of the meeting so that everyone can feel clear from the start that they have a unique and valued contribution and feel confident about how they can participate and contribute effectively.

A framework for the meeting is provided, as shown below in Figure 10.1, and is checked with everyone present to ensure it is acceptable.

<p>Purpose of the meeting</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • to update and involve the family over the Consultations that have taken place, the strategies planned, the work that has been carried out • to discuss the family's views on the school's concerns and strategies • to identify current concerns • to work out together ways of promoting progress. <p>Plan of the meeting</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The work carried out in school so far: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1.1. The original Consultation took place with on 1.2. The concerns expressed then were: 1.3. Actions, programmes, strategies and methods planned at the Consultation: 1.4. Progress that has been made in school in implementing these strategies and plans: 1.5. Effect of the programmes, strategies, methods on the original cause for concern: 1.6. Parental views and perspectives: 2. Current concerns: 3. Strategies and approaches and how we can work together to make progress as quickly as possible: 4. Any other points or issues that need to be considered: 5. Family + EP discussion/plans for discussion - if needed: 6. Conclusions and action plans:

Figure 10.1. Framework for a meeting in a joint school-family Consultation

At the end of a joint school-family Consultation of a primary-aged child, the child joins the meeting. The final part of the meeting, therefore, comprises the school staff and parents, who talk to the child about how pleased they are about the successes they have noticed and about what school and home are planning to do together to help the child further. The successes are written down by the school and handed to the parent for the parent and child to take home.

Older children or young people are usually involved in joint school-family Consultation from the start of the meeting (depending on the developmental stage of the child). The aim with younger children is to ensure that the adults have come to agreements and understandings and have ironed out any misunderstandings so as to present the child with a positive picture of collaborative working between home and school. Taylor (1986) wrote eloquently about how especially important this can be for the families who may be thought of by the school as 'harder to reach' and the children who are then triangulated between school and home and, therefore, unable to do as well in school.

When the concerns about a child's happiness or progress in school that have led to EP involvement have originated from very worried and anxious parents, rather than from school or centre staff, then Consultation may start with joint school-family work. In these situations we would start more explicitly by looking at the best hope of the parents/carers and follow a framework that left space for concerns to be aired before moving on to finding signs of possibilities and of progress and successes.

Multi-agency meetings

The agenda of *Every Child Matters* (ECM) (DfES 2003) is not new for schools, centres or EPs. Promoting children and young people's social development, learning and achievement has always been central to making schooling successful. The ECM simply provides a broadening impetus at a time when schools are overloaded with testing and inspections. However, the multi-agency thrust of ECM and the Children Act 2004 is not quite as straightforward as the architects of legislation and guidance appear to have hoped. Complications in multi-agency working occur because of differing conceptions of the problem and of the possible solution. When people working in education encounter explanations of children based on individual models of the person (still used frequently by health-service professionals), or family dysfunction explanations and family-treatment solutions often proposed by social care, the result can be disappointment, lack of collaborative working and, at worst, accusations of ignorance or arrogance. For teachers and staff in

children centres, schools and other similar settings, an important motivating factor is the knowledge that you can make a difference. For health and social care professionals, however, the school is not seen as the context of change for the problems that they as professionals usually deal with, despite moves to more holistic and/or systemic approaches in this field. Pressures on social care workers around child protection and thresholds of involvement are likely to conflict with preventative working and can lead to multiagency meetings that are predominantly focused around care proceedings. When such multi-agency meetings occur, they are often dominated by a problem orientation and a practice of cataloguing in detail the history of problems and the perceived deficits of children and families. This focus can lead colleagues from education and social care to feel alienated from each other. Such meetings leave very little time for finding strengths, resources or solutions, or for inter-agency solutions. Harker (2001) discussed this issue in some depth: 80 per cent problem talk and 20 per cent solution talk = few solutions found; 20 per cent problem talk and 80 per cent solution talk = many more possibilities for solutions found.

In multi-agency meetings we hope to encourage inter-agency working and to spend more time on finding strengths and resources, and through that process to find solutions. We have learned that a simple framework is very effective in multi-agency meetings. The framework is shown in Figure 10.2.

<p>Principles guiding our discussion and our planning</p> <p>We are all here because we care about [name of child/young person] and we are concerned to help as much as possible.</p> <p>The aim of the meeting - discussed and agreed first with all participants - is:</p> <p>The plan of the meeting is as follows:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What are your best hopes for this meeting? How will you know it has been helpful? 2. Worries/concerns: What is happening with the child that is a concern to you at the moment? What needs to change? 3. What is going well at the moment? What is better? How are you contributing to things going better now? How can you help to make things go better for the future? 4. Conclusions: 5. Actions: What? Who? When? 6. How useful was the meeting today (on a scale of 0-1 OJ?) 7. Will it be useful to have another meeting: - Yes/No. If yes, when:
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Figure 10.2: A framework for use in multi-agency meetings

Participants at the meeting are provided with copies of this framework at the start of the meeting, the plan is checked with them and (if everyone is agreeable) each person is asked to address Questions 1 to 3. Following that process, conclusions and actions are drawn up and the meeting is evaluated in terms of its usefulness in relation to the aims of the meeting and the best hopes of the participants, which were established at the outset of the meeting.

The frameworks described above are not the only frameworks that are used but they do provide a flavour of the kind of frameworks used in Consultation.

How can Consultation be evaluated?

The review and evaluation (R&E) of Consultation is a key and on-going aspect of the work and occurs regularly at individual Consultations, and also at an organisational level with the schools and centres that receive a Consultation service. R&E takes place, therefore, at each distinct Consultation meeting. The aim on these occasions is to review and evaluate the Consultation meeting in relation to the participants' best hopes for the Consultation. Consequently, we begin Consultations by asking the participants not only about his or her concerns but also about what would make the meeting a useful meeting. At the end we ask how the meeting has gone for participants in terms of their original hopes for the meeting. We also enquire about how much they feel that the structure and the process of the meeting helped them to contribute.

From the EP perspective, Consultations at the individual level are successful when participants feel able to explore a range of ideas that take them beyond explanations that are internal to the person towards a more Interactionist perspective that provides the person with more possibilities for action within his or her own sphere of influence. For example, this could relate to:

- insights that have developed about the child or young person during the Consultation that open up different ideas for interacting with the child
- aspects of organisation or management of the classroom that have become illuminated, which, if addressed, would improve the situation for the child or young person
- further enquiries with other staff that might help to illuminate key questions regarding when engagement in learning is more successful or when reputation effects might be more or less powerful

- ideas about enquiries to other agencies about aspects of health or welfare.

R&E also takes place at key points in the year with the schools and centres that we work with. Consequently, we have termly review and annual review and evaluation of the work. Termly reviews are fairly brief and help us to tune the work, using the questions:

- What has gone well?
- What has not gone so well?
- What issues are raised?
- What actions are needed?

The annual review and evaluation of Consultation is designed to check whether positive outcomes are occurring based on the research into what Consultation is intended to achieve, that is, both remedial and preventive goals as described by Gutkin and Curtis (1999). Questions and lines of enquiry in the R&E aim to address specific areas regarding outcomes for children, families, staff and the school! centre as a whole.

Schools have been consistently very clear in the review and evaluation of Consultation over a number of years about the positive outcomes for children and young people over whom they have concerns, as well as the preventive benefits of Consultation for all children, and for staff and for the school as a whole. As Figure 10.3 indicates, feedback to the questions we ask in our annual review meetings has shown that teachers and staff who are involved in a Consultation service:

- are more likely to generalise ideas and approaches to other children in the same class
- find problems to be less serious
- report enhanced professional skills as an outcome of being involved in Consultations
- are more likely to utilise Consultation skills and approaches in meetings with children and young people, with other staff, with parents and carers and with other agencies - and to report that these meetings are enhanced as a result
- are more likely to shift their attribution for the causation of a pupil-related concern from internal to the child to interactional in nature, recognising the importance of features of the situation in the

classroom (such as social climate and groupings, tasks and activities, how learning support and resources can be used more effectively, etc.).

Aim of the review For the EP and school to review, jointly, the work that has been done in and with the school, to examine its effectiveness, to work out developments, and to appreciate and celebrate the successes so that we can build on them.

Summary of the work of the year (provided by the EP, plus monitoring of all the work)

General areas to discuss

What has gone well in the content and the process of the school visits?

How effective has the work been?

What does that suggest about how we would like to progress the work further next year?

Any other issues that we wish to raise:

Summary and conclusions

Prompts used to assist in the review:

Balance in the three levels of work (individual, group/class and organisational)

1. Individual pupil level (overall patterns in the Consultations, transfer of skills, transfer between levels - individual to group, to organisational)
2. Groups of pupils (as above)
3. Organisational/whole-school level: Work with a range of role partners at different levels: individual teachers, groups/teams of teachers, whole staff, parents' evenings, governors meetings, etc.

Figure 10.3: Questions for use in annual review and evaluation of Consultation

SENcos, Inclusion Managers, Senior Managers and Head Teachers tell us that Consultation also contributes towards classroom and school improvement. This feedback matches a range of research on the effects of Consultation (Gutkin and Curtis 1999). In over 75 per cent of studies, Consultation was shown to have yielded positive results (Sheridan, Welch and Orme 1996). Small-scale studies in the United Kingdom show a similar promising picture (Lamey 2003).

The evaluations (for purposes of accountability) that schools make of me Education Psychology Consultation Service (EPCS) in Kensington and Chelsea are very positive. This has been validated by the Audit Commission's e-survey of schools, which has reported that the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea EP Consultation Service is the most highly rated in the country (Audit Commission 2006).

An EP Consultation service, when working effectively in a local-authority context, will contribute towards the thinking and action of the local authority through participation at the strategic and operational levels

of the organisation. We are reported to contribute to an 'outstanding' rating in the authority's Joint Area Review (Ofsted 2007).

How can Consultation be developed?

Consultation is relatively easy to initiate in an EP service since EPs are generally familiar with the ideas of collaborative working and are usually pleased to have the opportunity of working this way - especially if they have been tied to a treadmill of individual assessment work. They usually relish the idea of working more imaginatively at different levels in schools and centres (the individual, group and organisational levels), as well as with other aspects of inter-relating systems, with the local authority and more widely. Teachers and other staff in schools and centres, and families, are often the first to show their appreciation of Consultation. Working in a collaborative way helps people to take a step back, reflect and work out, individually and together, how they can make a difference to the lives of children and young people whom they work with and care about through direct and indirect work and systems change. Local-authority officers and other agencies with whom EPs work are also generally appreciative of an approach and a style of working that works against the grain of the pressured and pervasive climate of accountability, blame and compliance that has come to dominate many local authorities in the past couple of decades.

Inevitably, a more appreciative style can sometimes challenge strongly held beliefs about development and change in organisations and can create perturbations in the system. We aim to make these as constructive and useful as possible by being open-handed with our colleagues about how we work, where the ideas come from and what the benefits are for children and families, schools and centres, and the organisations we work with and in. This is an important and on-going task in developing Consultation in a local authority setting, so that it can be understood by other colleagues with whom we work.

The development of Consultation in a service setting requires commitment from the EP team to embrace the evolution of Consultation in the particular service context. Of course, it is easier when EPs are not located as gatekeepers on resources via individual assessment work, but this situation is generally changing.

Consultation will wither and atrophy unless there are active means taken to nurture it and to keep the team focused on the principles, psychologies and practices that are essential to its further development. Without an active and self-reflexive process that engages the whole of the team, it is likely that a gradual regression to more traditional models will occur. Consequently,

the study of the psychologies and related practices of Consultation will need to be kept central to our professional development programmes.

There will always be other topics we need to find out about, and with any new development we need to ask the question: 'How does this relate to Consultation?' The challenge is to learn how to become 'multi-lingual' and, at the same time, to make a useful contribution. We need to be able to engage with others in situations in which labels (such as ADHD) or deficit discourse, originating from a medical model, are commonly used. On such occasions we need to be able to connect constructively without becoming oppositional or either losing our way or our sense of what, and how, we can contribute effectively. Nylund (2002) has written superbly on this particular issue.

Consultation is already taught on some EP initial training courses as a unifying theme and an overarching approach, thus avoiding the fragmentation that can result from a more topic-based approach. The key to Consultation is the psychology that is used, and therefore Interactionist, Systemic, Appreciative, Solution-Focused and Narrative approaches are all essential on EP training courses. 'Tool-kits' of methods do not feature in such courses, and learning is active and collaborative, with opportunities for application and practice and regular reflection on principles and practice. The approach is one of learning to be helpful without being reactive, to be appropriately psychological, without being opaque, and to be essentially respectful of people.

What are the key difficulties with Consultation?

The Consultation process appears simple, and this can be deceptive. Such misconceptions have led to descriptions of Consultation as 'having cosy chats', when compared with a highly structured interview schedule. Consultation is intended to be engaging and transparent, and in that sense there is an aim and a plan that there will, as far as possible, be a sense of ease in the situation and the interactions. Effective Consultation is, in fact, highly skilful, and one of the skills lies in making it appear easy and helping others to feel at ease, even when the situation is challenging and possibly fraught. Since the key to Consultation is psychology, there therefore needs to be an explicit and active development of the psychologies and related knowledge and skills of Consultation over time. This should take the form of a spiral curriculum, which is regularly revisited.

As a profession, EPs tend to be great pragmatists, and many initial training courses seem, in the past, to have focused more on methodology

than psychology. Consultation invites EPs to reclaim psychology. This can be hard to do when a lot of time in a career has been spent working to satisfy the pressure for gatekeeping on resources, determining resource-worthiness or responding to requests for individual assessment. Some EPs have highly developed individual-assessment skills, and for some of those EPs the shift to Consultation can be daunting. EPs may, therefore, feel more comfortable holding on to the individual assessment role and may argue that schools want them to do that. This often occurs when a different approach, such as Consultation, is not seen or understood as being the major contribution of the EP.

Of course, EPs using Consultation do, sometimes, work individually with children or young people, but they are less likely to do this routinely and formally. In individual interviews they enquire about learning, using ideas from Solution-Focused and Narrative approaches or Appreciative Enquiry so as to explore and amplify a child's engagement and success in learning and his/her happiness in school. Schools often say that they find this more valuable than a traditional individual assessment, but in order for this shift to occur it requires that the EP has the training to carry out Consultation in this way. When a service has made a commitment to Consultation, but there is insufficient on-going development of Consultation, the relevant knowledge and skills will fail to develop, and in those cases, inevitably, frustration will occur and busy EPs will likely revert to previous ways of working.

There are also less considered versions of Consultation - for example, when it is offered as one item on a menu. Another is when so-called Consultation takes place at the beginning of the school year or term with a number of other agencies often involved, and then the EP engages in individual assessment work for the rest of the term or year.

An EP service engaged in Consultation needs to avoid the paraphernalia of referral, while remaining responsive and helpful with expertise at the ready. This does not mean taking anything and everything on, or telling people what to do, but means being prepared to help others to think things through and contribute to a process that leads to the emergence of solutions that are more tuned to the context - and it is this that is the essence of Consultation.

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