

Reflections on the role of consultation in the delivery of effective educational psychology services

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Abstract

For many years educational and school psychologists from all over the world have emphasised the importance of consultation as a key approach to delivering effective services. However, there is a considerable body of literature indicating that the approach has not been widely adopted by educational psychologists in the UK and elsewhere. This paper considers some interconnected factors that might explain why educational psychologists may be reluctant to wholeheartedly embrace this approach. First, it considers the possibility that educational psychologists, who may claim to work in a 'traditional' way, are in fact using consultation regularly in their everyday practice, although not in the way that it is often defined in the literature. Second, the influence of the history of the profession, in which educational psychologists were described as being experts in psychometric assessment, may be acting as a barrier to adopting alternative practices. Third, unintentionally perhaps, the efforts of professional associations to promote educational and school psychology may reinforce the importance of maintaining traditional practices based on individual psychometric assessments of children thought to have special educational needs and disabilities. Finally the paper discusses the skills and competencies needed to work effectively as a school-based consultant and suggests that these pose particular challenges to new entrants to the profession who wish to work in this way. The paper concludes by suggesting that debates about the relative importance of individual work versus consultation present a false dichotomy. Both roles are central to the delivery of effective psychological services. Educational psychologists need to have the necessary skills and confidence in all areas of professional practice, being able to strike the right balance between the two approaches and sensitive to the situations where each is likely to be effective in dealing with the range of problems with which they are presented.

Introduction

For many years a number of key authors from all over the world have stressed the benefits of educational psychologists adopting consultation as their principal method of working. In the USA, for example, papers emanating from the 2002 Futures Conference (Dawson et al. 2004), together with publications by Curtis et al. (2004) and Sheridan & Gutkin (2000), urge school (educational) psychologists to move away from 'medical' models of service delivery and to adopt systems-based approaches that emphasise collaborative problem solving and consultation, approaches that are also emphasized by Ehrhardt-Padgett et al. (2004) and Erchul & Martens (2010). Similar pleas are made from school/educational

psychologists working in other countries. For example Kikas (1999), Hatzichristou (2002) and Hatzichristou & Polychroni (2014), referring to the developing role of school/educational psychology in Estonia and Greece respectively, stress the need for psychologists to adopt consultative approaches to their work. There are also several accounts in the UK of educational psychologists adopting consultation as their principal method of working (see, e.g., Kennedy et al. 2008, 2009; Wagner 2008; Henderson 2013).

Despite the large volume of literature and the expressed benefits of school-based consultation, some writers (e.g., Bartolo 2010; Jimerson et al. 2010; Cording 2011; Castillo et al. 2012; Ahtola & Niemi 2013) have commented that relatively few educational psychologists appear to be working in this way. In a recent survey of school psychology practice in the USA, for example, Castillo et al. (2012) report that only 10% of members of the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) spend their time in individual consultation, and 6% in systems-level consultation activities, with the majority of their time devoted to special education related activities based on individual psychometric assessments. In a survey of the work of school/educational psychologists in five different countries carried out by the International School Psychology Association (ISPA), Jimerson et al. (2004) found that school/educational psychologists in these countries only spent 5–20% of their time in consultation-related activities. In a follow-up study, Jimerson et al. (2010) found that, although school/educational psychologists from 48 countries commented that consultation with administrators was part of their work, very few used this approach to bring about organizational or systems change, a key objective of school-based consultation, and the vast majority devoted the bulk of their time to individual counselling and/or psychological assessments using IQ tests.

In the United Kingdom, evidence of the extent to which educational psychologists have incorporated consultation into their everyday work is perhaps more encouraging than it is in other parts of the world. Several educational psychological services promote consultation as the principal approach underpinning their work (see websites for the following local authorities in the UK: Aberdeen City Council, 2012; London Borough of Richmond, 2011; Southwark Council, 2012). These developments are reflected by Leadbetter (2006) and Dunsmuir et al. (2009) who suggest that, over the past two decades, most educational psychology services in the UK have incorporated consultative principles into their ways of working. A number of other British psychologists (e.g., Turner et al. 1996; Gillies 2000; Wagner 2000; Watkins 2000; Henderson 2013) offer examples of consultation in action in UK psychological services. However, Cording (2011), while acknowledging this literature, found that many educational psychologists were unclear about whether they

had the skills and expertise to work effectively using consultation and that they felt under pressure from teachers to adopt more traditional approaches.

The literature on consultation referred to above indicates that the approach is by no means fully embedded into the everyday practice of school and educational psychologists around the world. In this paper, we discuss some of the subtle and often unspoken barriers that may have prevented educational psychologists from abandoning traditional, and predominantly individual assessment focused, ways of working. We begin with a brief review of the definition of consultation, as it may apply to the work of educational psychologists, and consider the possibility that many EPs who may claim to work in a 'traditional' way, are in fact using consultation regularly in their everyday work, although not in the way that it is often defined in the literature. This is followed by a discussion of other factors, all of which are linked in some way to educational psychologists' professional identity, which might act as a barrier to educational psychologists using consultation more extensively in their everyday work. These factors are linked to the early development of the profession at the beginning of the 20th century, to the role of professional associations and to the relatively young age profile of new entrants to the profession.

Consultation in relation to the work of educational psychologists — a problem of definition

Concerns, reflected in the above discussion, about the extent to which educational psychologists use consultation as part of their everyday practice are, in part, related to the way in which the term 'consultation' is defined. Wagner (2000) refers to consultation as being a 'collaborative and recursive process that combines joint problem exploration, assessment, intervention and review' (p. 11). This is linked to a more elaborate exposition by Gutkin & Curtis (1982) who concluded that there were nine key characteristics of school-based consultation: (a) a greater emphasis on direct work with adults rather than children/young people; (b) a trusting relationship between consultant and consultee; (c) neither consultant nor consultee has power over the other; (d) the consultee is actively involved; (e) consultees have the right to accept or reject suggestions made by the consultant; (f) the relationship is voluntary; (g) the consultation is confidential; (h) the focus is on work-related problems; (i) the consultant has the dual roles of remediation and prevention. More succinctly, Strein et al. (2003) define consultation as 'models or specific practices of individual, group or organizational consultation in the schools, including in-service training for staff' (p. 424).

Some writers adopt a particular theoretical perspective, for example interactional and systemic (Osborne 1994), psychodynamic (Caplan 1970) or process orientation (Farouk 2004). Others have developed models such as Behavioural Consultation (Kratochwill & Bergan 1993), Instructional Consultation (Rosenfield 2002), Problem-Solving Consultation (Kratochwill & Pittman 2002) and Responsive System Consultation (Hughes et al. 2001; Denton et al. 2003). In an extensive review Henderson (2013) provides a helpful overview of these and other models of consultation.

Although there are differences in emphasis, definitions of consultation have much in common. Essentially they stress that educational psychologists can enhance their impact on

helping children and young people if they increase the time they spend with the consultee (typically a teacher or related professional) and less time in direct work with children. To do this effectively, it is important for them to have a detailed knowledge of the system where children live and work (school, family and community), to develop mutually supportive trusting relationships with people who are part of the system, and to work jointly with all relevant parties adopting a problem-solving framework. Through working in this way educational psychologists should empower teachers and others to become more effective practitioners and hence they will have a more potent impact on helping vulnerable children and their families than they would do were they to work solely with individual children.

Despite the considerable degree of congruence in the definitions of the consultation approach, there does not appear to be a clear statement of work that is not consultative. The assumption appears to be that the traditional role of the school/educational psychologist, that is one that does not involve consultation, is to carry out an individual assessment of a child who has been referred as being a 'problem', to inform the parents and the teachers of the findings and to make recommendations. These findings and recommendations are typically based on the results of a range of diagnostic procedures, often psychometric tests, which are designed to find out what is 'wrong' with the child. This, it appears, is the very antithesis of the consultative approach.

In practice, of course, it is relatively rare for an educational psychologist to work in such a way. Those who adopt this 'traditional' approach would normally discuss the child's difficulties with the teachers and parents and they would seek their views on different ways in which the child might be helped; good practice requires that they would not rely solely on the results of the psychometric assessments. In this sense, there is always likely to be a 'client-centred' consultative element to the work of the most traditional educational psychologist who works in an individual referral-based system. Hence it is simplistic to say that an educational psychologist either works in a consultative way or he or she does not. In reality educational psychologists probably use consultative methods to some extent in all their work – but their commitment to, and confidence in, using this approach may vary considerably.

The above discussion indicates that definitions of consultation in relation to the work of educational psychologists are on a continuum. On the one hand, educational psychologists who spend the majority of their time working with children who have been referred to them because they have difficulties in learning and/or behaviour will still use consultation in their discussions with teachers and the children's parents. At the other end of the continuum, an educational psychologist may choose to work predominantly with teachers and other school staff and rarely with individual children. It is our impression that publications in the USA and elsewhere on school/educational psychology practice in consultation have adopted the latter side of the continuum as the 'preferred model' (see, e.g., Larney 2003; Burns 2004; Dennis 2004; Farouk 2004; Perez-Gonzalez et al. 2004; Sheridan et al. 2007; Kennedy et al. 2009). Furthermore it is possible that the research referred to above suggesting that school and educational psychologists spend relatively little time working consultatively is also using this 'preferred model'. Hence these findings may be slightly misleading, if we accept the view that educational psychologists who see their role as predominantly one of carrying out assessments

of individual children, (i.e., working in a 'traditional' way) still use consultation in their discussion with teachers and parents.

Consultation and the development of a secure professional identity

Even if we accept the view that educational psychologists who work predominately with individual children still use consultation in their discussions with parents and teachers, there are still concerns that they are not using the approach more extensively, for example consulting directly with teachers or systems-based work. In the remainder of this paper we consider three possible explanations for this phenomenon, all of which are linked in some way to the development of a secure and distinct identity for the profession: the impact of our history, the role of professional associations, and age profile of new entrants into the profession.

Educational psychologists: victims of our history?

There is undoubtedly a strong influence of 'history' upon the current work landscape and job roles of any profession. With this in mind, it has to be remembered that the profession of educational psychology is still relatively new. In the UK, psychological services only began to be established in the 1960s. At the time of the Summerfield report (DES 1968) there were as few as 350 educational psychologists in England and Wales. In order for the profession to grow, it was important to establish some key tasks that could only be performed by educational psychologists and which were in demand from parents, teachers, doctors and other related professionals. In the UK two such tasks emerged that were closely related to each other: the administration of individual intelligence (IQ) tests and the assessment (evaluation) of children requiring special educational provision. The impact of these tasks on the role and work of school/educational psychologists around the world is considered below.

Developments in our understanding of intelligence, in particular its relation to academic achievement, and, most importantly, the development of instruments to measure intelligence, closely mirror the growth in the profession of educational psychology. The origins of such instruments were quintessentially psychological and hence it seemed logical that it should be psychologists who should use them in applied settings such as schools and hospitals. As an emerging profession it was crucial to identify a task that could only be performed by someone in that profession, and IQ testing provided the perfect example. Here was a practical method of applying psychology that was seen to be of value to schools, parents and doctors and which was derived from the discipline of psychology. It was therefore a task that should rightly be carried out by trained psychologists. In the UK this position was greatly strengthened by an agreement that individually administered IQ tests should be 'closed', that is, only for use in clinical settings by appropriately trained applied psychologists. Hence IQ testing was something that no other professional could do – a truly distinctive task and one which therefore greatly contributed to the development and identity of the profession (see Farrell 2010 for a more detailed discussion of this issue).

A second key distinctive task for educational psychologists in the UK and for school psychologists in the USA was the assessment of pupils who may require special educational provision. This also has its origins in the growth in the importance of IQ testing. Organisations such as the World Health Organisation gave credibility to the importance of the IQ by labelling children with different degrees of learning difficulties based on their IQ score (WHO 1968). Thus educational psychologists could test the child and assign a label that would have direct implications for educational provision. All of this was enshrined in legislation and, without the involvement of the educational psychologist, a child might not receive the services that were thought to be needed (Woods 2012). Again this role has been hugely influential in defining the role of educational psychologists and in stimulating the growth in numbers entering the profession. Furthermore it has helped employers to develop a clear understanding about what they can expect from an educational psychologist.

Hence, the rapid development of the profession of educational psychology can, to a great extent, be explained by educational psychologists being assigned a unique role in IQ testing and special education assessments. As Reschly (2000) points out, without these tasks being assigned to educational psychologists, the profession would not have become so well established so quickly. Yet proscribing the role of the educational psychologist to these specific tasks may be counterproductive to the development and operation of consultative approaches to services to schools and families. Arguably, these tasks are rooted in the medical model, emphasising a summative rather than formative role, where problems are seen to be centred within the child, and where they can be explored through the psychologist working in a separate room, testing the child and using the results to predict educational performance. This way of working tends to ignore the contribution that the school or family can make towards prevention and intervention for individuals, groups, families and communities, and, of course, the findings and implications of the psychometric tests results tend to be accepted as valid.

Despite the wealth of recent literature that is critical of the role of IQ testing (e.g., Restori et al. 2008; Farrell 2010;), of the relevance of the medical model and of the effectiveness of special education provision (Sheridan & Gutkin 2000), evidence from studies referred to earlier (DfEE 2000; Curtis et al. 2004; Jimerson et al. 2004; Jimerson et al. 2010) indicates that school/educational psychologists still spend the bulk of their time undertaking formal special education assessments. Similarly, in relation to approaches to psycho-educational assessment, a number of studies have also shown that educational psychologists are reluctant to abandon traditional IQ testing (see, e.g., Burns 2004; Shapiro et al. 2004). Studies in the UK, (Farrell et al. 1996; Rees et al. 2003) also suggest that IQ testing remains a core part of the educational psychologist's role.

It is difficult to resolve this paradox. On the one hand, most recent literature on the developing role of educational psychologists is extremely critical of IQ testing, the medical model of working, and gatekeeping roles in special education assessments. Alternatives that are based on consultative approaches are advocated strongly. Yet educational psychologists seem reluctant to change their practice. Are we as a profession partly to blame for this? For, in order to establish our credentials as a new profession in the early days, we stressed the fact that we

were the only people who had the expertise and training to administer IQ tests and to use the findings to make recommendations for special education. Are educational psychologists, who have been brought up in this tradition, reluctant to move forward and to abandon some of their traditional practices for fear that they will be losing their professional identity and distinctive role? And, furthermore, by losing their distinctive role, might schools, local authorities and other potential employers no longer feel the need to employ them? Hence a fear of the consequences of breaking away from traditional roles can represent a major barrier to change.

The role of the professional associations

In a seminal chapter on international school/educational psychology, Oakland (2000) makes the point that a key part of establishing effective school/educational psychology services in any country lies in the development of strong national associations. In the UK, for example, the Association of Educational Psychologists (AEP) and the Division of Educational and Child Psychology (DECP) have both played a major role in establishing the profession. The same can be said of the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) and Division 16 of the American Psychological Association (APA) in the USA. All these organisations can be called upon to represent the profession by governments and other national bodies and they all write policy documents and position papers on the development of the profession. In addition they publish high-quality professional journals and run annual conferences.

There are, however, some interesting potential dilemmas that are associated with having strong professional associations for school/educational psychologists, when at the same time they are being encouraged to develop more consultative approaches. One of the key roles of any professional associations representing school/educational psychologists is to set clear boundaries that define who can and cannot enter the profession, the knowledge and skills that school/educational psychologists should possess on completing their training programmes and the range of work that they should normally undertake. As the profession became established in the UK, the AEP and the DECP were successful in stipulating these requirements. In so doing they restricted entry to the profession to applicants with clearly defined pre-entry qualifications and they reinforced the view that there are some key tasks that should only be carried out by educational psychologists. Some of these key tasks focused on the individual assessment (evaluation) of children who may have special educational needs and for whom additional resources may be needed. There is an implication that this was the only role that the associations stated should be solely restricted to school/educational psychologists.

In contrast, neither the AEP nor the DECP in the UK have stipulated that a key and distinguishing role for psychologists is in working in a consultative capacity and that no other professional should be permitted to work in this way. If a school or local authority invited non-psychologists to work as consultants in a school on, for example, the development of behaviour management programmes or mental health prevention, the professional associations representing educational psychologists would not state that this role was the sole prerogative of their members. If, however, the school or local authority suggested that another professional (e.g., a support teacher) should carry out individual assessments on children and make recommendations for special

educational provision, it is likely that the AEP and the DECP would protest vehemently and state that this was a distinctive skill that could only be done by an educational psychologist.

This suggests that the role the professional associations are most keen to protect is that associated with traditional work: individual psycho-educational evaluations (assessments). Other work, including consultative approaches, seems to be less precious. In this context, is it surprising that some educational psychologists are reluctant to move towards working more consultatively?

The age profile of new entrants into the profession

A final factor that may act as a barrier to educational psychologists adopting school-based consultation as their principal method of working relates to the knowledge and expertise needed to work effectively in this way and to the age profile of the majority of trainees completing their initial training programmes.

Essentially, to be an effective consultant, educational psychologists need to have skills and knowledge in two complementary areas. First, and perhaps foremost, they need to possess expert knowledge and skills in the field of educational psychology theory and practice. Teachers and other school staff would not consult with an educational psychologist unless they felt that these professionals possessed expert knowledge in, for example, children's development and learning, approaches to overcoming literacy difficulties, classroom management, various therapeutic approaches and many other areas. After all, these topics form the basis of the curriculum in professional training programmes for educational psychologists. Indeed, the initial request for a consultation meeting is almost always related to a child's (or a group of children's) problems in learning and behaviour. For example, a teacher may wish to consult with an educational psychologist about approaches to tackling bullying in schools or effective approaches to support children with disabilities in a mainstream classroom. The educational psychologist should possess knowledge and expertise in each of these areas on which they would draw during the consultation process.

The second key prerequisite area for effective school-based consultation relates to interpersonal skills. These include the ability to work effectively with other adults, to share expertise, to facilitate during meetings, to empower others to come to a decision, to synthesise complex and sometimes contradictory information and help the consultees formulate a plan of action. Hence, in contrast to 'traditional' work where educational psychologists spend the bulk of their time in a separate room working with an individual child often out of sight of other adults, school-based consultation is more of a public activity. The educational psychologist is working directly with one or more adults, many of whom may be older and more experienced practitioners; and some may also hold entrenched views about the 'problem' being discussed and/or about the competence (or incompetence) of the educational psychologist! Hence the arena in which school-based consultation takes place is more complex and potentially more threatening to the educational psychologist than the traditional one involving working with a child in a separate room. Is it surprising, therefore, that the newly qualified educational psychologist (probably in their mid-20s) embarking on their new career and anxious to please

teachers and other school staff, many of whom have been working in the school for several years, will spend the bulk of their time responding to teachers' requests for them to work with children on a one-to-one basis. And, once they begin working in this way, it is harder to change their practice and to increase the amount of time they spend on school-based consultation.

Conclusion — a continuum of service delivery

Given that educational psychologists' professional identity has emerged from our history with an overriding emphasis on traditional ways of working, where the primary focus is on the statutory assessment of pupils who may have special educational needs and disabilities, it is important to ask whether and how the profession can incorporate consultation into its practice, and hence extend its identity to embrace other roles. Can we give a consistent message to a school if we accept individual referrals on the one hand, while planning consultation activities with the school staff on the other? To many, the straightforward answer to this question is yes. There is nothing incompatible with the educational psychologist emphasising the two approaches at one and the same time in the same school. Indeed, we would argue that the question of whether to work 'consultatively' and more directly with school staff and parents, or whether to devote considerable amounts of time to direct work with children, may be a false dichotomy. Educational psychologists understand fully the importance of the child's school and family contexts and that these settings offer the greatest potential to bring about change for the child. At the same time, educational psychologists have expert knowledge and skills in child development, family systems, adult-child interactions, group processes, child and adult wellbeing, communication skills and general problem solving. Educational psychologists are expected to bring this expertise to bear in school-based and family-based consultation in a way that is both credible and ethical. To do this may well require individual assessment, observation, and sometimes direct intervention, by the educational psychologist; there is nothing essentially 'medical' or 'within child' about the educational psychologist bringing information, gathered first-hand and purposively, to the school-based or family-based consultation (see also Jones 2003). To rely solely on 'second-hand' information provided by a teacher may be unreliable, even unethical, since the educational psychologist's expertise clearly brings additional insights on child-related concerns to those of teachers, parents and other professionals.

This view that individual child assessment work can be incorporated within a school-based consultation model has been adopted by many educational psychology services in the UK (e.g., Kelly 2008; London Borough of Richmond 2011; Aberdeen City Council 2012; Southwark Council, 2012). These services appear to have adopted consultation approaches with all their schools and have attempted to abandon traditional individual referral-based approaches altogether. This does not, of course mean that educational psychologists in these services do not work with individual children, and, on occasion, carry out an IQ assessment (i.e., work in a 'traditional way') as part of a special educational evaluation. However, the origin of the referral is different: the child's family, teachers and the educational psychologist will have discussed and monitored the problem for some time, a number of approaches will have been tried and evaluated and, at some stage in this process, all those involved will have agreed that it would be helpful for the educational psychologist to see the child

individually and that information gained in this way would contribute to the problem-solving process. This way of working, it is argued, combines the best of the traditional approach within a consultation framework, provided the emphasis is on the contribution that all involved can make towards the prevention and alleviation of all the problem areas that have been highlighted. And, moreover, the problems associated with the child who is assessed by the educational psychologist are seen in the context of wider problems throughout the classroom or the school (e.g., lack of support staff, the need to buy new materials) and these issues should also be addressed, perhaps through further systems-orientated consultation, alongside any intervention strategy to help the individual child.

As the demand for educational psychology services continues to grow, the climate for further development and the extension of consultative approaches to the work of educational psychologists has never been more promising. Hence educational psychology services are likely to increase the emphasis on the importance of consultation as a key part of their service delivery. It is therefore important for the profession to ensure that it is adequately equipped to work in this way. This a key area for a programme of coordinated continuing professional development supported by important recent publications (e.g., Rosenfield 2012; Newman et al. 2014) that provide a range of examples of how school and educational psychologists can become more effective school-based consultants.

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