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Consulting with children and young people. Enabling Educational psychologists to work collaboratively with children and young people

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Abstract

It is argued that the educational psychologist's role is that of enabling children and young people to have greater control over and understanding of their own learning and its context. A key part of this process then is that children and young people are encouraged to make informed choices about their interactions with educational psychologists and to have access to discussion, planning and recorded information that the educational psychologist has undertaken about or with them. Consideration is given to the psychological models underpinning collaborative practice and how consultation with children may relate to current interest in the consultative model of service delivery. A table is presented for considering opportunities within professional practice for consulting with the child and some ideas are described of practical ways educational psychologists try to include children. Many ideas are those developed between the Educational Psychology Course Team and Educational Psychologists in Training (EPiTs) at Newcastle University. These ideas were initially presented in a workshop at the DECP conference "... in January 2000

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Creating Conditions for Consulting with Children

Over the past ten years there has been a major increase in educational research which focuses upon the child's perspective. Davie (1993) believes the principle of listening to children is "slowly pushing at the frontiers of good practice in education". This is true of research on a variety of areas including the effectiveness of break-time (Blatchford 1996), how to go about school improvement (Rudduck and Chaplain 1995) and what inclusion is really like (Allen 1999). Galloway, Armstrong and Tomlinson (Armstrong and Galloway 1992; Armstrong, Galloway et al. 1993; Armstrong 1995) have been at the forefront of a critique of the ability of professionals to hear the voice of the child, which has helped to contribute to this developing culture in which the child is seen to have an important voice.

Many educational psychologists and colleagues working within education, particularly in relation to special educational needs, have been actively promoting the involvement of children in assessment. Gersch (1996) concludes "of paramount importance, however, is the professional commitment to include children as actively as possible in their assessments (P39). Roller (1998) argues "...involving children presents them with an opportunity to reflect on their learning and encourages them to take a more active role in planning and reviewing progress"(P268). Norwich (1998)'s interest lies in "taking account of the child's perspective links in with a more child centred approach which involves the learner in the learning process through self assessment, self evaluation and personal goal setting."(*P147). Here the case is being strongly presented not

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simply for ascertaining children's views about their learning but that the ***purpose of involvement is to enhance the learner's capacity for managing their own learning more effectively.***

The tensions of consulting with children.

There is much to celebrate in moves towards greater active involvement of children in the practice of educational psychologists, however research has continued to suggest that consulting with children poses difficulties for our professional practice (ref???). The professional context within which the educational psychologist functions is highly complex. Aspects of this context which are key to consulting with children are: beliefs about children- what is the psychology underlying the EP gaze?; the position of the educational psychologist in the LEA- how do educational psychologists listen to multiple voices?; and the multiple discourse within which psychologists operate- *needs a question*

Educational psychologists operate with a variety of models of the child; as part of their own professional practice and as part of the wider 'world-view' of children. Historically and traditionally, the psychology of the educational psychologist has had a within-child focus, based upon the medical model (Allen, Brown et al. 1995).

The psychological language gained its authority from the mastery and control of a technical vocabulary, grounded in a quasi-scientific authority that contributes to the

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stratification of languages of representation and thereby the construction of children's identities. (Mehan 1996: 261)

The construction of the child forced by such a model leads professionals to locate the problem within the child. The child is assessed and the answer becomes the provenance of the professional. This model is clearly evidenced in much popular debate about provision or lack of it for particular children (for example Beaumont 2000) However, a socio-cultural model of the child focuses attention away from the child and on to the major complexities of the system within which the child interacts. Assessment is not of the child alone, but of the child's interaction with his or her learning context, with equal focus on the constituents of this setting. A socio-cultural approach suggests that problem-solving within this situation is likely to be quite difficult, and involve the perspectives of all involved, including that of the educational psychologist. Using such an approach, the educational psychologist becomes part of the construction of the learning interaction. Educational Psychologists then move across and within a range of different psychological models, even though they may be contradictory.

Furthermore, educational psychologists are routinely located within the area of 'special educational needs'. The assumptions underlying the construct 'special educational needs' are a particularly problematic lens through which to understand the relationship between children and schools. Woodhead (1991) has shown 'need' to be a condensed combination of compacted claims. "Special educational need' conveys notions of being empirical, that which can be

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identified, measured and treated (provided for). It is almost impossible not to respond to the concept of 'need'. It implies dependency and assumes a level of helplessness, which will lead to dire consequences if not met. The term hides the possibility that it might be a personal choice, a political decision, a professional justification or a cultural construction.

Allen quotes Lawson 1994 (Allen, 1999: 119) in inviting professionals to pathologise themselves as suffering from professional thought disorder (PTD). This is described as a compulsion to analyse and categorise the experience of others. Cognition is disordered leading to rigidly held beliefs, delusions of grandeur, negative transference and projection in which sufferers cannot distinguish their own wishes and impulses from those of the people they wish to be helping.

Allen (1999) suggests the need for professionals to carry out 'ethical work' on themselves. This includes shaking up habits, ways of acting and thinking, dispelling commonplace beliefs, and taking a new measure of rules and institutions. It involves 'refusing the other' –'refusing to gaze', and instead letting the 'cannibal desire to know the other give way to the act of hearing what the speaker says'. It involves creating spaces for dialogue and boundary crossing – but acknowledging that these spaces can also be oppressive ***It involves creating services wanted by the people who use them.***

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Is there a Legislative Mandate for Consulting with Children?

In the UK the legislative and quasi-legislative context for consulting with children about professional actions is a complex one. Much past legislation has been silent on the issue of the child's right to be consulted. Even in an area such as the choice of school, where parents have a right now to state preferences, there is no mention of the child. The 1981 Education Act, presented (and disputed) as chartering parental partnership in special needs, was silent on the voice of the child. However, the 1989 United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child stated in Article 14 that all children should have the opportunity to express views in processes affecting them. The 1989 Children Act was the major piece of UK legislation which has focused professional attention on children's perspectives, with a statutory duty, in section 1(1), on those responsible for identifying children's needs to take account of the ascertainable wishes and feelings of the child in care proceedings. This has had a major effect on social work practice, even though the remit of the duty is not wide-ranging. It has led to interest in ways to best ascertain children's views (Masson and Oakley 1999). The need to consider children's views in the assessment of their special educational needs was heralded, in a quasi-legislative sense, firstly by DES (Department of Education and Science) advice (in 1989) that the feelings and perceptions of the child should be taken into account and the concept of partnership should, wherever possible, be extended to older children and young persons. Following this, the Code of Practice (associated with the 1993 Education Act) which advises on stages relating to the identification and assessment of special educational needs, requires children's views to be sought as part of this

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assessment process. The Code states that children have a right to be heard, and should be encouraged to participate in decision making about provision to meet their special educational need. Children's support and information were said to be crucial to the effective implementation of any individual education plan (IEP). The Green Paper and the associated Action Plan for Special Educational Needs (DFEE 1997; DFEE 1998) state the requirement to consult with children in unmistakably clear terms:

The Children Act 1989 includes a duty on the courts to have regard to the ascertainable wishes and feeling of the child concerned. This principal should also apply to children with SEN. The SEN Code of Practice already refers to the need to take account of the child's views. **We will strengthen the guidance in the Code to encourage LEAs and schools to seek and take account of the child's views throughout the SEN process.** Some LEAs may wish to experiment with for a in which children with SEN, or with disabilities, have an opportunity to meet local policy makers. **We will also amend regulations to place the SEN Tribunal under a duty to have regard to the views of the child, where these views can be ascertained.** (DFEE use of bold)
(DFEE 1998)

I asked, and the child said nothing....

Children do not have the power to create the opportunities to make their voice heard. Educational Psychologists cannot just ask the child for their view of their situation, and expect them to tell us. We occupy a position of power, a complex and ambiguous role. We are often mediating and negotiating with teachers, parents and other professionals within different views of a child and competing professional demands. (Armstrong, Galloway et al. 1993; Armstrong 1995). Our question to the child, asking him for his view, is laden with our role. Armstrong et

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al (1995) found that even when a child remembered being asked, they did not say anything "They asked me but I didn't say owt because I didn't know what to say". Armstrong comments that not knowing what to say is not the same as not having anything to say.

How can educational psychologists create opportunities for the learner to express their views and more importantly take greater control of their own learning? Many educational psychology services have introduced or are actively considering introducing a consultative model of practice (Wagner 1995, MacHardy, Carmichael and Protor, 1999). In these models, consultation is described as 'a collaborative and recursive approach' 'where assessment is integral to consultation' So how does psychological assessment of the child fit into this consultative approach? Wagner (2000) lists one of the assumptions underpinning consultation as

" 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 partners, they increase the engagement and contribution of those partners.**'(P13)(authors' italics). So how can educational psychologists begin to address this transparency with learners?

Opportunities for Consulting with children and young people

An analysis of ways in which educational psychologists work with children reveal many opportunities for consulting with children. These are outlined in the following table.

How is the learner involved in the psychological process?

Psychologist	Assessment/Consultation	Learner	Ideas
Discussion about a	Could be stage 1 or 2 or	What does the learner	General information

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learner	not on the 'Code of Practice' at all.	know? Is this seen as advice to professional colleagues?	about EPs for learners? Leaflets, tapes, Videos
Consultation about a named learner	Could be at stage 1,2 or most likely 3	How does the learner agree this? Does the learner join the IEP review and join in the discussion about involvement of outside agencies?	Information about what an EP might do when they work with an individual learner/ Leaflet, tape, video
Consultation leading to next steps	EP contribution to planning. Maybe in written format	How does the learner 'know' about this input. Does the learner have a copy of anything written, as does a parent/carer?	Information sent/given to learner in learner friendly way.
Classroom observation	EP gathering more information	Does the target learner know? Does this invalidate the observation?	Tricky! Or is this overtaken by above?
Individual Meeting	EP gathering more information	Who asks the learner for their agreement? Who introduces the EP?	Specific information to learner. Letter, tape, video from EP.
Explanation of role	EP undertaking assessment/consultation	Is this consulting with the learner?	Contained in above, then explained directly, with option of leaving at any time
Carrying out a range of activities	EP undertaking assessment/consultation	Acting as a consultant? Do the tasks include the learner or are they done to the learner?	Selection of tasks that include the learner. Right to full explanation. Right to refuse. Learner involved in problem solving.
Reporting back to school/parents/carers	Outcome of assessment/consultation	How does the learner receive this information?	Information sent to learner as well as others. Information feedback to learner alongside teachers/carers
Planned further discussions about learner	School/home visits Review meetings	How is the learner asked about their involvement?	Clear information(written/drawn) of how EP will continue to be involved
Discussion about statutory assessment	Explanation of the process	How does the learner know about this? How does the learner know about EP role?	Discussion takes place with learner. Booklet, tape , video for learner
Psychological 'advice'	Appendix F	Does the learner have a copy?	Report for the learner

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The table builds upon the ideas of other educational psychologists (for example Gersch 1996, Burden 1996, PDP for Educational Psychologists in Scotland 1998/9)

The table outlines a range of activities undertaken by educational psychologists in their day to day work. The list is not definitive but attempts to give the flavour of how much of what psychologists do, can relate to particular individual learners. If this is the case, then how should psychologists make that process transparent to those learners? This debate may echo the discussion which is still ongoing about partnership with parents (ref.....), perhaps with even greater uncertainty. However ideas are suggested in the final column to further this debate.

Considering the table, a number of questions are raised about the access to information that a child may have when they become the focus of discussion between an adult, usually a teacher or parent, and a professional, an educational psychologist. It may be that there is a clear distinction to be made about professional work that is directed towards adults supporting children and professional work that is directed towards the children themselves. However boundaries frequently become blurred. The table attempts to highlight points where it would be useful and perhaps our professional duty to agree what rights to information and decision making the child may have.

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The questions are challenging to professional practice, particularly if consideration is given to the possibility of a child saying no to our involvement, as can a parent or carer, or to the possibility that our agenda is operating against the child's agenda. Such questions become more complicated when educational psychologists consider areas of their professional practice where they may see it as essential to be unknown to the target child, for example during a classroom observation or they are undertaking a particular type of assessment which leads to predetermined outcomes.

A number of working approaches have been used by the Educational Psychology Course team and EPITs at Newcastle University: Many of these ideas are already within the current practice of educational psychologists. They draw on different 'technologies' for accessing children's views. These include Personal Construct psychology which highlights the unique perspectives of each person, and emphasises that the child has a perspective we cannot know unless we find a way to ask. Each child has a unique interpretation of the world she functions within. The use of solution focused approaches in interaction with children by definition requires the child's perspective of the situation to take the upper hand and enable them to suggest solutions. Such approaches are supportive of the use of a consultation model for professional practice.

The following list gives an outline of 'work in progress'

- Interview approaches that enable children to give their understanding of the situation;

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- Letters to children giving information about the purpose of a meeting between the educational psychologist and the child;
- Letters to children giving a summary of the discussion between the educational psychologist and the child and the action they have agreed between them at their meeting;
- Therapeutic letters acknowledging the child's view of their difficulties, celebrating their strengths and recording agreed ways forward;
- Use of PCP to gain children's views about school, and the help they found most useful;
- Using SFBT to develop IEPs with and for the child themselves
- Video of children's views about school; and
- Appendix Fs written for children.

If the aim of a consultative approach is to enable those working within schools and their communities to have a clearer understanding of the concern and ways to bring about positive change then children and young people should be active and informed participants in that process. This is even more clearly the case if the psychology informing the model emphasises the importance of individual meanings and the social construction of understanding. The individual and the system are not distinct: the individual and their understanding can be seen as exemplifying the organisation (Quicke 2000). So the process of psychological assessment should not only provide the educational psychologist with a fuller understanding of the child's educational world (and other worlds), it should also provide the child with a greater understanding of their own situation and what actions may be open to them to undertake positive change. Such collaboration

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could then be seen as on a single continuum where assessment as part of consultation is always such that it gives the consultee (in this case a child or young person) greater understanding and skill to act on their own behalf. As such this way of working might be seen to revolutionise the practice of psychological assessment as it would be shifting the power balance. The purpose of assessment would not be to find out what is enabling or hindering a young person's learning (though that would remain a core part of the assessment), but to work with the child or young person such that they were more able to forward their own learning. Without this purpose, is the careful seeking of children's views and perspectives a hollow exercise? If we talk with children and ask them for their understanding but then do not offer them a way to contribute to their learning then are we misleading them? This then is about issues of power in which educational psychologists have played a role, sometimes ascribed and other times achieved, for many years.

Incorporating various ways of consulting with children needs to be seen not just as a technical change in practice, but as a political change in focus and approach. In order to empower children to take greater control of their own learning, educational psychologists need to consider how their work with and about children can be genuinely collaborative with children.

Fundamentally we need to find ways to position ourselves so we can hear children's stories, and so that these stories can challenge the narrative of our own practice with them. We need to work so that children and young people feel they can own and direct their own story.

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