

What are the effective features of consultation: a mixed methods analysis

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## Abstract

Consultation is an integral part of many Educational Psychologist's (EPs) work. Yet there is a large heterogeneity in understanding and use of this tool. Such diversity makes evaluating its efficacy difficult. This research therefore sought to identify what the effective features of consultation are by linking observed features to changes in agreed outcomes for children and young people (CYP). Mixed methods were employed to explore what EPs believe are the key features of consultation, what the barriers to effective consultation are, what happens in a consultation for a CYP, and what combination of features can be identified in consultations which lead to positive changes for CYP. To explore EP views towards the effective features of consultation, 30 EPs were interviewed. Observable features of consultation were tallied for six consultations. For those consultations, goals were identified by participants and a baseline rating was given for each goal using Target Monitoring Evaluation (TME) forms. There were 10 goals identified. Change for these goals was recorded through completing the same form 6-8 weeks later, to allow analysis of which combination of features were present for children with differing progress towards outcomes. This was assessed using Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA). The most effective features of consultation, as identified by EPs, included the expert knowledge EPs have, the collaborative nature of consultation, and creating a shared understanding of the CYP and context for all participants. Consultations which were most likely to see positive change for the CYP were ones in which the consultation was not dominated by gaining an understanding of the presenting problem. These results give clarity as to what the features of an effective consultation are. The findings have implications for EPs who use consultation, as well as consultees and those whom consultations are for.

*Keywords:* Consultation, efficacy, evidence-based practice

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## Introduction

Most Educational Psychology Services (EPS) in the U.K. have moved towards a predominantly consultation-based service (O’Farrell & Kinsella, 2018). The most commonly employed consultation framework in the U.K. is the Wagner model (Wagner, 2000, 1995a, 1995b). It is defined as “a voluntary, collaborative, non-supervisory approach, established to aid the functioning of a system and as inter-related systems” (Wagner, 2000) through “purposeful [conversations] which [use] techniques of listening, clarifying, problem-solving, challenging, questioning and reflecting” (Munro, 2000). As a result, EPs work with those closest to the CYP, but not as experts telling those directly involved with the CYP how to help them. Their role is to help empower the consultees to solve their own problems in school. The focus is not only on the CYP but their relations with others and the many different environments they are in, such as home, school, and their wider community, ideas derived from Bronfenbrenner (1981).

Consultation is considered a form of ‘indirect’ work as the theory is that the EP can enact the most change for the CYP by meeting and working with those around the CYP (Gutkin & Conoley, 1990). Whilst this approach is highly prevalent, there is a large heterogeneity in practice. This can lead to a lack of understanding of what consultation is, by both EPs and consultees, as well as making it difficult to evaluate its efficacy. Given the need of EPs to demonstrate the efficacy of their work (Fallon et al., 2010), this poses serious problems for their ability to work in an ethical and effective manner. This is against the backdrop of EPs working within ‘traded services’ (Lee & Woods, 2017), where the ability to demonstrate efficacy is highly valued to ensure schools buy EP time again. It therefore behooves EPs to gain an understanding of the consistent features of consultation, so an attempt to assess the efficacy of it can be made

## 54 **Features of consultation**

55       Several pieces of work have previously attempted to identify the core features of  
56 consultation. One such paper (Kennedy et al., 2009) found that the most common  
57 behaviours by EPs were working collaboratively, typically with those most involved  
58 (predominantly parents) using either Solution-Focused approaches or problem-solving  
59 analysis. Solution-Focused approaches are characterised by greater interest in the solutions  
60 to presenting problems rather than the problem itself. It views the client as capable of  
61 solving their own problems with a changed mindset, facilitated by the EP, through  
62 identifying times when the severity of the problem is reduced or it is not present, termed  
63 ‘exceptions’ (Rhodes & Ajmal, 2004). Problem-solving analysis is related to behavioural  
64 consultation (Bergan & Kratochwill, 1990) and is divided into four stages: problem  
65 identification, problem analysis, treatment implementation, and treatment evaluation  
66 (Sheridan et al., 2000). Those working directly with the young person, such as teachers,  
67 are involved throughout.

68       Similar results were found by Henderson (2013), who reported that the mostly  
69 commonly given features of consultation were: discussing issues with relevant parties;  
70 information gathering; and it being a reflexive process with a focus on collaboratively  
71 crafting solutions. Nolan and Moreland (2014) details several key themes relating to the  
72 features of consultation. These were: empowering those involved in the consultation;  
73 working collaboratively; the importance of each participant in the consultation recognising  
74 the valuable knowledge from others; reviewing outcomes; and EPs using their expertise to  
75 support others (without emphasising their role as the “expert”). O’Farrell and Kinsella  
76 (2018) found teachers appreciated consultation as they felt empowered to support the  
77 pupils who had been referred. According to Jones and Frederickson (1990), this  
78 empowering of consultees rather than fixing the consultees problems or simply giving  
79 advice, is part of the definition of consultation.

This research builds on a previous piece of work by the lead researcher. This first work explored what EPs believe the key features of a consultation are and what happened in an initial consultation between at least an EP and a school staff member. This was done through a novel questionnaire asking EPs to rank features of consultation according to their importance and thematically analysing transcripts of consultations. During the consultations, the two most frequent features of consultation were ‘Understanding the presenting problem’ and ‘Working together to come up with solutions.’ EPs rated these as core features of consultation in the questionnaire, as well as improving outcomes for young people.

To gain an understanding of what EPs at different LAs understood consultation to be, the Local Offer literature was examined. This information was found on the LA’s websites and detailed what services the EPS provided. Despite almost all services having moved to a consultation-based service delivery (Dinkmeyer & Carlson, 2016), over a third of LAs did not explicitly mention consultation. Of those that did, the most commonly cited feature was working with relevant parties, such as teachers. The second most common was improving outcomes for the CYP, with the importance of looking for solutions (including the use of Solution-Focused approaches) also being mentioned frequently. What this shows is that for the LAs that mention it, the EPs working there have explicitly stated the importance of collaborating with those closest to the CYP and the necessity of improving the CYP’s outcomes.

Although these studies typically only focused on a small number of participants, the consistency in results allows fundamental features of consultation to be gleaned. The studies also cover a wide range of EPS, so the results are not limited to a specific region. This increases the generalisability of the findings. However, despite these consistencies, there is still a great deal of heterogeneity in consultation models and practice. EPs can state they are engaging in consultation, but without more information or a previously established working relationship, those involved (parents, teachers, etc.) are unlikely to

know what to expect with a consultation. An arguably more serious consequence is that assessing the efficacy of consultation is very difficult. If consultations are not ergodic due to the very wide range of features, any assessment of consultation may not be valid for consultations performed by an individual EP. Therefore, assessing the efficacy of consultations is difficult. This is against the backdrop of EPs working within ‘traded services’ (Lee & Woods, 2017), where the ability to demonstrate efficacy is highly valued. It therefore behooves EPs to gain an understanding of the consistent features of consultation. This will allow some assessment of which combination of features are sufficient to lead to improved outcomes for CYP.

### **Evaluation of consultation**

There have been calls for assessing the efficacy of EP work for decades, for example Cline (1994). Several tools have been put forward to attempt to do so. One such tool is Target Monitoring Evaluation (Dunsmuir et al., 2009). Target Monitoring Evaluation (TME) involves the negotiated development of SMART goals (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and time limited) between the EP and the consultees. To examine the suitability of using TME forms with consultations, Dunsmuir et al. (2009) incorporated TME forms into the practice of eight assistant EPs in one county and 13 EPs based in two Local Authorities. During the initial consultation, after the goals had been decided upon, each participant rated how far along on a 10-point scale the child currently was towards each goal. They then stated how far they expected the child to be when they had their review consultation. 6-8 weeks later, during the review consultation, each participant rated how far the child had actually progressed, which was compared with how far they were predicted to progress. Interviews were conducted with teachers, SENCOs, and headteachers, who gave positive feedback on the easy and efficiency of the process, as well as how the tool helped focus on setting of targets.

There have been a few studies which have attempted to compare TME with other

quantitative measures of change, such as Connor (2010). In this thesis, the author compared TME with other, more established forms of progress measurement in domains like reading, such as the York Assessment of Reading Comprehension (YARC). They report that there was broad agreement between the TME and other forms of assessment; when other forms of assessment found improvement, this was reflected in the reported change through the TME forms.

### Research questions

The general aim of this research was to identify, through observations and interviews, what the key features of consultations that lead to change for CYP are. This was done by asking EPs what they believed the effective features of consultation are, what makes them effective, and then observing consultations and systematically noting which features occurred. This allowed the comparison of said features with progress towards agreed goals for various CYP and whether they reflected the views of EPs. As such, the research questions (RQs) were

1. What are the core features of an effective consultation?

i) What do EPs believe are the key features of an effective consultation?

ii) What do EPs believe are the barriers to effective consultation?

iii) What do EPs believe makes those features effective?

2. Which combination of features of consultation are seen with progress towards agreed goals?

### Methods

All methods and results can be accessed at: <https://osf.io/6px7q/>.

## Participants

Ethical approval was obtained from UCL the Institute of Education's Ethical Committee. The inclusion criteria for both arms of the research was: an EP or TEP who used consultation as part of their practice. There were no requirements as to how frequently or recently it had to be used, nor experience or location. Nor were there requirements around the definition of consultation, just that EPs believed themselves to be engaging in consultation.

For the interview and observation, participants were recruited via the researcher's EPS. Participants were also recruited to the interview by sharing calls for participants on a popular mailing list for EPs and other education professionals (EPNET) and social media (Twitter). Participants were also asked to share the call for participants with other EPs at their work. Thus, a mixture of convenience and snowball sampling (Robson & McCartan, 2015) was employed for the two arms of the research.

30 EPs of all roles and across the U.K. and Republic of Ireland were interviewed. 6 consultations were observed for 4 children. Child 1 had a joint home-school consultation, child 2 had one parent consultation and one school consultation, child 3 had one parent consultation, and child 4 had one school consultation and one parent consultation.

## Material

**Interviews.** A semi-structured interview format was used because an interview schedule was developed (Appendix 1) which served as a checklist of areas to be explored with a given question order and wording. However, the order and wording were allowed to change given the flow of the interview. Additional questions were used to further develop an interviewee's answer (Robson & McCartan, 2015). Interviews were chosen because they allow the interviewee to explain in detail their thoughts and were judged to be the suitable means to explore the first RQ. EPs have the greatest knowledge about consultation and are



thus in the best position to be able to explain what the effective features of it are.

The interviews were of the focused type as the questions centred around the key theme of consultation (Merton et al., 1990). The core of this theme related to why EPs use consultation, what EPs believe the key features of consultation are, why they are effective, what the barriers to consultation are, and what is the unique contribution of consultation. Barriers were explored because exploring this can help reveal what the effective features of consultation are as often barriers are a lack of an effective feature or the opposite of an effective feature. The unique contribution of consultation was asked to further explore what EPs believe makes consultation effective.

Probes (interview devices to elicit more information) were employed by the researcher to further develop the interviewee's responses. To achieve this, 'laddering questions' (questions phrased in a variety of ways asking for the interviewee to expand on their answer) and 'summarising techniques' (summarising what has just been said by the interviewee to prompt more information), as well as 'addition probes' to maintain the flow of the conversation (Zeisel & Eberhard, 2006).

**Observations.** The quantitative arm of the research involved systematic observations of consultations between an EP and either the parent, class teacher, or both. Thus, it was a naturalistic observation as the participants were observed in their typical environment without any interference from the researcher (Vigliocco, 2001). Observation was chosen as it helps overcome the often-recorded discrepancy between what people say they do and how they behave in the real-world. This has been reported in such wide-ranging fields as smartphone use (Andrews et al., 2015) to driving behaviours (Kaye et al., 2018).

Systematic observation was chosen because of the previous research identifying features of consultation. The researcher therefore judged that all the relevant observable features had been identified prior to data collection. These observable features were

developed into a coding scheme (see Appendix 2 for the definition of each feature) to identify categories over the course of a set period of time. The categories were defined and operationalised prior to data collection (Croll, 1986). They were derived from the relevant literature and were mutually exclusive. The categories were limited to what was explicitly said because this would help reduce the amount of interpretation needed for behaviours such as non-verbal interactions. Models of consultation, such as Solution-focused and problem-analysis, were broken down into their constituent observable parts, such as exploring strengths and identifying exceptions. Commonly cited concepts in the literature such as ‘collaborative’ were split into explicit examples of those concepts, such as Everyone’s contributions valued.

Event sampling was used as the absolute and relative frequency of events was of interest (Robson & McCartan, 2015). A sequence record was also used to provide information as to the order in which the features were seen, thus providing information about transitions (Robson & McCartan, 2015).

**TME.** TME involves the negotiated development of SMART goals (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and time limited) between the EP and the consultees. During the initial consultation, after the goals had been decided upon, each participant rated how far along on a 10-point scale the child currently was towards each goal. They then stated how far they expected the child to be when they had their review consultation. 6-8 weeks later, during the review consultation, each participant rated how far the child had actually progressed, which was compared with how far they were predicted to progress.

Connor (2010) In this thesis, the author compared TME with other, more established forms of progress measurement in domains like reading, such as the York Assessment of Reading Comprehension (YARC). They report that there was broad agreement between the TME and other forms of assessment; when other forms of assessment found improvement, this was reflected in the reported change through the TME forms.

## Procedure

Semi-structured focused interviews were used to elicit EP views with regards to the core features of consultation, the features of an effective consultation, the barriers to effective consultation, and what is the unique contribution of consultation. Participants were interviewed using a mixture of phone and video call technology. Data collection took place between 31/03/2020 and 28/05/2020. An anonymous transcript was made for every interview. The anonymous transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis (TA), a methodology explicated by Braun and Clarke (2006). This was done using the software NVivo 12. A mixed TA approach (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006) was employed. This incorporates inductive and deductive TA. Inductive TA is driven primarily by the data (Boyatzis, 1998) and deductive TA is theory-driven with codes derived from said theory (Crabtree & Miller, 1992).

Observations were conducted between 20/11/2020 and 14/01/2021. After gaining informed consent from all participants, the researcher observed the consultation unfold as normal. The researcher used the observation schedule to mark when and how frequently different features occurred. As each feature was observed during the observation, a 1 would be written in the corresponding column of the observation schedule. This would continue sequentially, with only one feature being recorded in each column until the conclusion of the consultation. The features were then summed.

Immediately after the conclusion of the consultation, the participants (EP, school class teacher, and/or parent) were asked to collectively identify 1-3 goals for the CYP to work towards. This was done using a TME form which the EP introduced the participants to. Goals were suggested by the consultees or by the EP (if the consultee was unable to think of a suitable goal). It was then agreed by all participants. Participants rated, on a scale of 1-10, where the CYP currently was towards that goal (by writing the letter 'B' for 'baseline' next to the number) and where they expected them to be in 6-8 weeks (by writing

the letter ‘E’ by the number). In 6-8 weeks’ time, participants would be contacted by the researcher via email to rate how far along the CYP had progressed towards that goal. This judgement was represented by the letter ‘A’ (for ‘actual’) along the same rating scale.

After the consultation, contact was made via email with the consultees after 6 weeks. This was because it was judged that this would give enough time for the participants to respond within the 8-week window recommended by TME (Connor, 2010). All consultees responded within 8 weeks. For all but child 4, this period fell over the Christmas holidays. The upper limit was therefore chosen to give the children as great a time as possible in school receiving support. A second national lockdown was announced prior to the start of the spring term. All the children except child 3 remained in school during this lockdown.

## **Data analysis**

Thematic analysis (TA) was used to explore RQ1 and its sub RQs. TA, as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), involves 6 stages: familiarizing yourself with your data; generating initial codes; searching for themes; reviewing themes; defining and naming themes; and producing the report. Codes were instances of features of consultation discussed by the participants as this was the first step in ‘data reduction’ (Miles & Huberman, 1994) by organising it into meaningful groups (Tuckett, 2005).

A thematic map of codes was created using TikZiT, an open-source project for creating diagrams (Kissinger, 2019). This was to visually represent all the codes and aid in the generation of themes. Boyatzis (1998) defines a theme as a pattern contained within one’s data which summarises the observations through description. This helps to interpret the explored phenomenon. Semantic themes (that which is explicitly said) were found and analysed (Boyatzis, 1998) with interpretation of their significance and implications (Patton, 1990). TA identified 32 inductive codes, as well as the 15 deductive codes previously set, relating to what features EPs believed were effective for consultation. 6 codes were

identified for what made said features effective (see Appendix 3 for the definitions of the inductive codes, Appendix 4 for the definitions of the codes relating to what makes the features effective and Appendix 5 for the breakdown of the number of interviews which each code was identified in and the total number of codes for each feature). These were combined to create 8 themes: Buy-in, Conditions, Context, Strengths-based, Shared understanding, Intervention, Future facing, and EP skills and knowledge. These could then be combined to create two overarching themes: Internal factors (features relating to the factors endemic to a consultation) and External factors (features relating to things happening around a consultation).

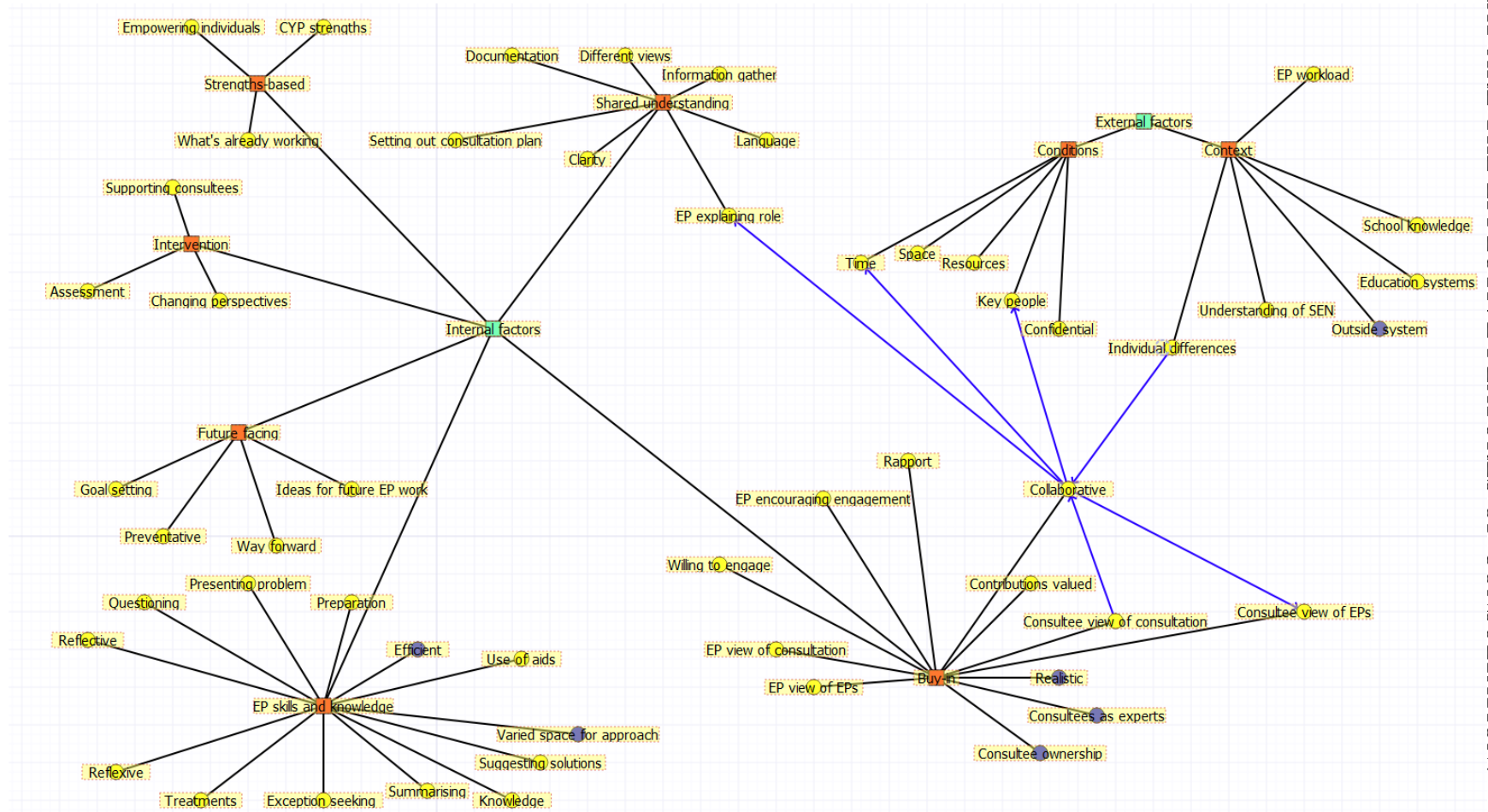
For the quantitative arm of the research, 6 observations were conducted for 4 children. After the tabulation of features of consultation using the observation schedule, the number of features across each consultation was summed. Qualitative notes were made on the demeanour and enthusiasm of the consultees. The data from the TME forms for all goals was collected and a value of ‘change’ was calculated for each consultation. This was done by subtracting the ‘baseline’ rank from the ‘actual’ as research suggests most TME forms report a positive change as a result of the consultation (Dunsmuir et al., 2009; Monsen et al., 2009). To explore the relationship between the presence of features and reported change, Qualitative Comparison Analysis (QCA) was used, with the QCA package for R (Duşa, 2018). QCA allows the comparison of cases with the “help of formal tools and with a specific conception of cases” (Rihoux & Lobe, 2009). However, due to there being more conditions than cases, conclusions from QCA cannot be drawn as each case formed a unique configuration, thus invalidating the ability of QCA to find common combinations (Marx & Dusa, 2011).

## Results

### Qualitative

Given the large number of codes and themes identified, what follows will be an examination of two of the key themes within the overarching theme Internal factors and one of the themes from External factors.

Figure 1



*Note.* Light blue square: over-arching theme, orange square: theme, yellow circle: feature of consultation code, dark blue circle: what makes the feature effective code, black line = connection from code to theme to over-arching theme, blue line = connection between code (with arrow pointing to direction of influence).

The thematic map of codes and features (see Figure 1) was derived from analysing the codes for similarities around their nature to give themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). For example, the essence of codes such as ‘collaborative’ and ‘contributions valued’ related to the consultees viewing the consultation as a good use of their time and believing that it would lead to change for the CYP. This buy-in was linked to the outcomes and suggestions from the consultation being realistic, as consultees would be more likely to do what had been suggested and believe it would have a positive impact. By treating the consultee as an expert in their area of knowledge, this would help increase their buy-in to the process of consultation and be more willing to engage.

This collaborative nature of consultation was expressed by many participants, :  
“*effective consultation shouldn’t being a meeting where one person dominates, whether that may be a psychologist or anyone else*” (Interview 11) and “*it’s like we’re all involved, we’re all at the same level, we just come at it from a different perspective*” (Interview 7).

EP skills and knowledge was identified as many of the effective features of consultation were related to the EP having expert knowledge of viable solutions or through their understanding of psychological models. These all increased the efficacy of consultation. Through EP skill with regards to their expert knowledge and ability to ask questions, for example, consultation could be an efficient means to enact change. Consultation also allowed for EP skill to be shown by being a flexible model of working, such that EPs could a wide range of their skills and knowledge to help CYP.

The most common code across all themes was in relation to the models of consultation and general psychological knowledge that the interviewees believed EPs needed to have to facilitate an effective consultation. The “*use of theory and reference to the evidence base*” (Interview 2) was identified as an important effective feature of consultation. Commonly discussed models and frameworks included being solution-focused (Interview 1), person-centred (Interview 16), trauma and attachment informed (Interview



13), and using Wagner’s model of consultation (Interview 17) and the COMOIRA model (Interview 25).

One of the main codes of the theme Condition was Key people. Almost every interviewee cited having “*all the key stakeholders*” (Interview 11) involved in the consultation as a key aspect. Consultation was widely regarded as an “*indirect service method*” (Interview 17) so involved working with a range of people, including “*the SENCO, the class teacher, and both the mum and dad of that child*” (Interview 11). Many interviewees state that it was crucial to have “*the person that has most knowledge about the child*” (Interview 10) or the “*people who are most concerned*” (Interview 21). This included the person who “*has the most influence*” (Interview 14) as they will be the person who will implement the agreed interventions.

A number of interviewees highlighted the importance of bringing the voice of the CYP into the consultation, either by actively involving them in the consultation (Interview 21) or through those that know the CYP well (Interview 15).

Many interviewees identified difficulties with conducting consultations in secondary schools:

... if you’ve got multiple people working with a young person, and actually the more people you have, the less anybody feels any responsibility for them... you’re trying to find that person who is most concerned and actually they don’t exist. (Interview 13)

... it’s very difficult to get parents, teachers, parents and teachers around the same table, at the same time. (Interview 18)

## Quantitative

Table 1 summarises the cumulative frequencies of each feature for each consultation. The most frequently observed feature was Understanding the presenting problem, followed

367 by CYP strengths, and then Info gather. 3 features were observed on zero occasions  
368 (School knowledge, EP explaining role, and Planning/implementing treatments).  
369 Understanding the presenting problem was observed the most frequently in every  
370 consultation, often twice as frequently as the next most observed feature. CYP strengths  
371 was the next most frequently observed, followed by Information gather.

Table 1

Summary of features by consultation

Consultation	Sch knw	Empwr individ	Ideas future EP work	Set out plan	EP explain role	EP using exp knowl	Plan/impl treatment	Summ	Unders presen problem	Everyones contrib valued	Discuss what alr working	CYP strengths	Suggest solutions	Info gather
1(j)	0	1	0	3	0	8	0	1	29	20	7	17	9	11
2(t)	0	0	1	4	0	9	0	10	67	25	13	17	4	18
2(p)	0	0	0	2	0	6	0	7	11	10	6	9	3	2
3(p)	0	0	4	5	0	8	0	10	46	8	8	7	0	7
4(t)	0	0	1	4	0	1	0	4	42	12	10	8	0	10
4(p)	0	0	10	6	0	10	0	11	18	5	5	5	8	5
Mean	0	0	3	4	0	7	0	7	36	3	8	10	4	9

**Table 2***TME goals with ratings for baseline, expected, and actual*

EP	Adult	Child	Goal	Baseline	Expected	Actual	Change
1	Teacher	1	Solving maths problems up to 10	3	6	4	1
1	Teacher	1	Accept play requests	3	5	4	1
1	Parent	1	Accept play requests	3	5	3	0
2	Teacher	2	Not pausing when naming emotions	3	7	3	0
2	Parent	2	Not pausing when naming emotions	5	8	6	1
2	Parent	2	Joining sounds up and reading unfamiliar words	5	8	7	2
2	Parent	2	Using phoneme knowledge for unfamiliar words	3	5	4	1
2	Parent	3	Maintaining a conversation	3	4	3	0
2	Teacher	4	Learning self-esteem	2	4	3	1
2	Parent	4	Managing frustration when instructed	3	5	4	1

## Discussion

### RQ 1.1 What do EPs believe are the key features of an effective consultation?

The 8 themes regarding the core features of consultation encapsulate a very broad range of aspects of consultation that a number of EPs (of varying levels of experience) believe are important for making consultation effective. The most frequently identified themes were Buy-in and EP skills and knowledge. There was a large disparity between the number of inductive and deductive codes. There was also a difference between the number of instances for each type of code, with the inductive codes being recorded more frequently than deductive codes. This suggests that the current literature does not accurately reflect EP's beliefs about effective consultation.

**Buy-in.** Buy-in referred to all the participants of the consultation, including the EP, believing that consultation is an effective method for enacting change for the CYP in question. Believing that this was a valuable use of their time and that it could help the CYP was believed by many interviewees to be essential for an effective consultation. Without this buy-in, consultees would not be willing to engage with the process or change anything as a result of the consultation. And if nothing changed, it is unlikely the situation would improve for the CYP, and it is even less likely the EP could have a positive impact through consultation (Noell & Gansle, 2014).

This buy-in could be established at two time points: prior to the consultation and during the consultation. Before the consultation, the consultees view of consultation had a large impact on whether they valued the process. If they understood what it was (via explanation or training) and believed that it could help, then the chances of the consultation having a positive impact improved. If they understood that they were an active member of the consultation and did not look to the EP as the expert who would fix the problem for them, then they could buy-in to the process and an effective consultation was more likely to occur. Hasselbusch and Penman (2008) found that consultants being perceived as the expert was felt to have a limiting impact on the efficacy of the consultation and many participants shared this view. Buy-in was also facilitated by the EP not viewing themselves as the expert who was there to tell the consultees what they needed to do to solve the problem. Thus, prior to the consultation, buy-in for both the consultees and EP could be established through these mechanisms.

During the consultation, buy-in by those involved could be facilitated by the EP. By being collaborative and actively involving the consultees in the consultation, the EP could encourage their buy-in to the process. By giving the consultees the opportunity to voice their opinions and concerns and listening to them, this helped the consultees feel valued and an active participant in the process (Benn et al., 2008). Consultee voice has been identified as crucial for effective consultation (Newman et al., 2017) and these results

further substantiate this idea. These all served to help create a rapport between the EP and consultees. This relationship was one of the most important features of an effective consultation, as without a trusting relationship between consultees and the EP, consultation cannot be an effective vehicle for change (Meyers et al., 2014). Rapport also formed the foundation for many of the ways consultation helped consultees, such as through changing consultee perspectives. This buy-in also greatly increases the chance of solutions being implemented, which is one of the main mechanisms through which consultation creates positive change (Meyers et al., 2014).

**EP skills and knowledge.** This theme related to all the ways that EPs use the knowledge gained over the course of their training and professional practice. It has been argued that "[possessing] expert knowledge and skills in the field of educational psychology theory and practice is one of, if not the, most important requirement for effective consultation (Farrell & Woods, 2015). This is reflected in the results, as every interviewee mentioned at least one example of expert knowledge they used in their practice. In addition, many explicitly talked about the importance of this knowledge for effective consultation.

Specific examples of this knowledge included core models of consultation, such as Patsy Wagner's model of consultation, as well as Jey Monsen's Problem-analysis framework. Meyers et al. (2014) argue that effective consultation requires steps such as "problem definition" and other core parts of the Monsen framework. Many interviewees cited the Problem-analysis framework as their primary model and a core part of an effective consultation. However, few interviewees stated they strictly held to any one model. Many stated they used different elements from different models as and when appropriate. This paints a picture of consultation, as used by EPs, as an assortment of different skills and knowledge rather than strict adherence to one method. To date, there has been no examination of the efficacy between consultations when there is strict adherence to the model versus a more eclectic mix. It is therefore unknown whether this

approach to consultation is as effective as strictly using a consultation model.

Ideas from Solution-focused therapy were frequently mentioned, including specific components such as the miracle question and looking for exceptions. Other examples included using person-centred processes such Narrative therapy. This was the only code to be cited by every EP yet seems to run counter to the often-presented argument “I am not the expert.” This may represent an epistemic conflict between EP’s desire to not be placed in a position of power for fear of undermining consultee engagement, but also recognising the need to have expert knowledge to be able to lead an effective consultation. One of the reasons it was believed to be essential for effective consultation was because many believed it formed the bedrock of how the EP leads a consultation. This knowledge also helps provide a structure for the consultation, thus making it more effective (Wagner, 2008). This is because a structure can help keep the consultation focused on a single concern which can be tackled (Newman et al., 2017).

The ability to ask difficult questions and to know what questions to ask to move a situation forward were frequently given as a key feature of effective consultation. These questions, developed through training and experience, help identify the presenting problem and limits to this, as well as areas where they need more information (Hylander, 2017). By thoroughly preparing for the consultation, for example having questions prepared in advance, the efficacy of it can be increased. This is because it is easier to know what questions to ask and to keep to the structure. However, as some interviewees argued, keeping to the structure should not come at the expense of listening to the concerns of the consultees and being flexible to their needs. Without this, consultees risk feeling devalued and thus disengaging (Slonski-Fowler & Truscott, 2004). This presents another difficulty for EPs who wish to use consultation effectively. Whilst this psychological knowledge is viewed as essential for effective consultation, it can undermine this method by being too rigid.

**RQ1.2 What do EPs believe are the barriers to effective consultation?**

The barriers to effective consultation were examined because through the exploration of factors which undermine the efficacy of consultation, it will reveal what is needed for an effective consultation to occur. Two of the biggest barriers brought up by interviewees were not having the key people involved or not having sufficient time. For a consultation to be effective, the people who are in a position to change things need to be involved. If they are not, they are unlikely to buy-in to the proposed change and make sure it happens. The efficacy of the consultation is also reduced if one is trying to elucidate a situation and someone who knows the CYP is not present. Therefore, having the key people as part of the consultation is essential for it to reach its full potential of providing clarity and changing the situation (through perspective change and identifying support strategies).

Time constraints was identified as one of the main barriers to effective consultation. Therefore, an effective consultation needs time. The minimum time limit for an effective consultation was judged to be 30 minutes, although most interviewees preferred to have 45 minutes to one hour. This meant that the consultees did not feel rushed through the process, which undermines the efficacy of consultation (Webster et al., 2003). Having time also ensures that consultees could be properly supported emotionally before exploring solutions. Time has also been found to be essential for consultee empowerment and learning (D. M. Truscott & Truscott, 2004). A lack of time has also been found to decrease the consultee's sense of ownership for the solutions (Babinski & Rogers, 1998), which is one of the main mechanisms through which the features of consultation are effective (see section 5.1.1.3).

A perennial barrier to effective consultation is a lack of resources from the school. If the school do not have the resources to implement any of the devised solutions, it is unlikely the situation will improve for the CYP. This lack of resources may also affect the consultees as they feel disempowered even before they have entered the consultation. They



are therefore less likely to buy-in to the process of actively seeking change and taking ownership of the situation, because they feel like forces beyond their control are stopping them.

### **RQ 1.3 What do EPs believe makes those features effective?**

The most frequently discussed reason that the identified features help ensure consultation is effective is that it is efficient. This took a few forms, such as being efficient for seeing more children in a short space of time (as opposed to direct work with children). Many of the benefits reflect some of the pressure's interviewees felt. Several EPs discussed the need to use consultation because schools could not buy in more time but wanted psychological input for a large number of children. They may have also perceived a need to demonstrate their value for money within a traded context (Lee & Woods, 2017) and so emphasised the cost-efficient nature of consultation. However, consultation was also efficient because of its ability to have an impact wider than the consultation itself. Through empowering consultees, changing perspectives, and emotionally supporting consultees, consultation can have positive effects for consultees, CYP, and schools as a whole if they change policy as a result of an effective consultation.

The key reason identified for making such features as Collaborative, EP encouraging engagement, and Rapport effective was the fact it engendered Consultee ownership of the situation. By making the consultation Collaborative, by Empowering consultees, those involved feel better equipped to support the CYP and more motivated to implement recommendations (Erchul & Martens, 2012).

A number of interviewees talked about the importance of being external to the school system. This being outside the school system meant that questions could be asked that otherwise could not be and an external perspective could be brought in (Cording, 2011). This is particularly valuable for when a situation feels “stuck,” and consultees feel

powerless. By being external, they may be able to see what is already working and give new recommendations for supporting the CYP.

The giving of recommendations links to another mechanism through which these features of consultation are effective: that what is recommended is Realistic. By listening to the consultees and valuing their opinions, EPs are more likely to be able to make recommendations that fit within the context of the school and can be reasonably put in. If an EP makes a series of grand recommendations for the CYP but the school do not have the means to implement them, then there is little chance the situation will improve. But by having a collaborative consultation, in which recommendations are co-created, the solutions are more likely to be feasible and therefore the chance of having an effective consultation and a positive impact is increased. This is associated with the final mechanism through which these features are effective: treating the Consultees as experts. By taking on board the views of the consultees and seeing them as having expertise to bring to the discussion, the consultation is more likely to be effective (S. Truscott et al., 2012). Consultees will be more likely to buy-in to the process if they feel valued and listened to and the recommendations are more likely to be relevant if those who know the school and CYP most are actively involved. Whilst there is theoretical evidence to suggest this an important feature, only a small number of interviewees explicitly mentioned this as a valuable mechanism for effective consultations. This reveals another instance of the disparity between what the academic literature highlights as important and what practicing EPs believe is important.

## **RQ 2 Which combination of features of consultation are seen with progress towards agreed goals?**

A majority of the goals were judged to have experienced progress, bolstering the claim made in Dunsmuir et al. (2009). Of those which saw progress, patterns can be drawn. A qualitative examination of the correspondence between features of consultation

and change revealed that consultations with fewer recorded instances of Understanding the presenting problem were more likely to see change. Such examples include the parent consultation for child 2 and the parent consultation for child 4 (see Appendix L for all observed features and change). There was also a greater number of instances of Suggesting solutions by the EP during consultations which saw change, such as the first consultation and the parent consultation for child 4.

There was a disparity between what interviewees stated was important and what was observed in the consultations. Collaboration was given by almost every interviewee as a crucial feature. However, observable instances of this feature were less frequently seen than the EP exploring the presenting problem for a majority of consultations. This may represent a gap between what EPs say is important and what they do in a consultation when they are there to support a specific CYP in that context. It does, however, corroborate the importance of EPs using parts of models e.g., the Problem-analysis framework. This is because for each consultation the most frequently seen feature was Understanding the presenting problem. This is substantiated by the fact one of the EPs who was observed stated in their interview that the main model they use in their practice is the Problem-analysis framework. On the other hand, this emphasis on exploring the depth and limits of the main problem may not reflect adherence to this model (and thus be evidence for the importance of using said model). It may just be an exploration of the main difficulties (and arguably the reason why the consultation was organised in the first place). The absence of other features of the Problem-analysis framework, such as discussing how to implement an intervention, is suggestive of the perceived need by EPs to fully understand the presenting problem rather than fully commit to a certain model. This suggests a disparity between how EPs say they work and what happens in a consultation.

The importance of the individual differences of the consultees was highlighted in these observations, as consultees who were more optimistic and less stressed were better able to engage collaboratively and not focus as much on exploring the negative aspects of

the situation. Examples of these include the parent consultation for child 2 as the ratio between Understanding presenting problem and other features was more even. The teacher consultation for child 2 was also an opportunity to highlight the importance of emotionally supporting consultees, given how upset the consultee was and therefore unable to engage with one aspect of the consultation prior to said support.

The fact three putatively core features of effective consultation (School knowledge, EP explaining role, and Planning/implementing treatments) were not recorded once undermines the argument that they are important for effective consultations. This is also true for Empowering individuals as this was only recorded once. They do not appear to be necessary and perhaps are not sufficient for change to be judged as having occurred. Even though there were instances of the EP offering solutions in most consultation, there was no discussion of the specifics of how any suggestion was to be implemented (as there were no recorded instances of Planning/implementing treatments). There was also no review of any prior treatments. This raises questions as to how effective the suggestions are. If they are left to the consultees to establish and decide how often an intervention should be run for, will it be as effective as if it were decided with the person who is believed to have expert knowledge?

There was a lack of consistency regarding the discrepancy between the ratings given by parents and teachers: one consultation saw the teacher identifying change and the parent not, another saw the parent judging there to have been progress but the teacher not. This reflects the fact TME is based upon the perceptions of change by consultees and thus there may be different conceptions and criteria for judging change between consultees (Connor, 2010). However, the sample is too small to draw any patterns or conclusions from this data.

## Conclusions

This piece of work represents an attempt to systematically identify the features of consultation which lead to change for CYP. By employing a mixed methods approach, the beliefs of practicing EPs regarding the effective features of consultation were detailed, along with recorded instances of various features of consultation. These recordings were tabulated against measures of change for co-operatively agreed goals by the EP and consultees. The relative presence or absence of said features were then analysed to see if patterns of features could be identified. Whilst statistical analyses did not yield conclusive results, the breadth of qualitative data combined with the non-formal analysis of features and ratings of change present a picture of what is necessary for an effective consultation.

To lead an effective consultation, EPs need to have specialist knowledge to thoroughly explore an area of need for a child or young person. By creating a collaborative space in which consultees feel valued, through the development of rapport and encouraging the participation of consultees, EPs can hope to change the perspectives of those involved and identify potential solutions. By exploring the views of consultees and using various questions, a shared understanding of the CYP and situation can be created. Through consultation, EPs can impact not only those involved in the consultation, by providing therapeutic support, but those outside the consultation through the ripple effects consultation can have on people and systems. By being collaborative, consultees can not only feel empowered to support CYP but to take ownership of the situation and actively work to improve the situation for all.

Consultation is fundamental to the work of EPs in the U.K. Yet there remain significant questions as to what constitutes consultation and how it can be effective in supporting CYP. This presents great challenges to TEPs and EPs alike, resulting in many claiming to practice consultation when in fact they do not. It is therefore of vital importance for us as a profession to clarify what we mean by consultation and how we can

619 engage in it effectively. My hope is that this work can go some way in shining a light on  
620 the core features of an effective consultation and thus empower EPs to lead consultations  
621 which improve the lives of those we seek to help.

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**Appendix 1: Interview schedule**

- 1) What is your role?
- 2) How do you define consultation? What does it mean to you?
- 3) What key words would you use?
- 4) How often have you engaged with consultation?
- 5) What history of consultation training do you have?
- 6) Does your current EPS value consultation/operate a consultation-based service?
- 7) Why do you use consultation?
- 8) What do you believe are the key features of a consultation? What needs to be present for it to be more than a conversation?
- 9) What features do you most frequently see (what is seen may be different what they believe is effective)?
- 10) What do you believe are the key features of an effective consultation (including examples)?
- 11) What makes them effective?
- 12) How could consultations be more effective?
- 13) What are the barriers to effective consultation?
- 14) If you could not use consultation, what work would you use instead?
- 15) What is the unique contribution of consultation?

800 **Appendix 2: Definitions of features of consultation**

Category	Definition
School knowledge	A back and forth exchange where the EP made a comment or asked a question which increased understanding of how the school works.
Empowering individuals	Any comments or questions which aimed to increase the skills of the consultees (teachers, parents, SENCOs, etc.)/upskilled consultees so they can solve their problems (Nolan & Moreland, 2014).
Ideas for future EP work	Discussion of potential work an EP could do in the future, such as consultation, assessment, observation, etc.
Setting out plan for consultation	Discussion of what would happen over the course of the consultation.
EP explaining role	EP explicitly talked about the work of an EP and their purpose.
EP using expert knowledge	EP discussed topics which they have knowledge of (from both professional experience and academic reading) within school psychology theory and practice.
Planning/implementing treatments	Discussion and agreement between the consultant and consultee(s) on any interventions that would be implemented to support the CYP (Sheridan et al., 2000).

Category	Definition
Summarising	The EP said back what has previously been stated by consultee(s) in the consultation (not necessarily building on it)
Understanding presenting problem	A back and forth exchange where the EP made a comment or asked a question which explored the main presenting concern(s) including scope, environmental factors, exceptions, etc. and why a problem may be present (Sheridan et al., 2000)
Everyone's contributions valued	Consultees gave their view on something e.g. presented hypotheses, suggested solutions, or the EP explicitly acknowledged someone for their contribution. Not just when the consultee(s) spoke/gave an answer to a factual question.
Discussing what's already working	A back and forth exchange where the EP made a comment or asked a question which explored an intervention/change which had improved the current situation for the CYP. This included evaluation of said intervention/change.
CYP strengths	Any discussion of the CYP's positive qualities: attributes, personality, actions, etc.
Suggesting solutions	The EP volunteered a solution to the presenting concern.



Category	Definition
Info gather	A back and forth exchange where the EP made a comment or asked a question which sought to gather more information about a non-key concern(s).

801 **Appendix 3: Definitions of inductive codes for features of consultation**

Code	Definition
Assessment	How consultation can be a form of assessment.
Changing perspectives	Any discussion of the EP changing the perspectives of consultees during consultation or the understanding of consultation by consultees.
Clarity	Gaining clarity regarding the issues through formulation etc.
Collaborative	Any discussion of a joint or collaborative aspect of consultation.
Confidential	Confidentiality and privacy
Consultee view of consultation	How the consultees view consultation and understand it, as well as discussion of increasing understanding through training.
Consultee views of EPs	How the consultee views the role of the EP, including as the expert.
Different views	Gaining the views of a variety of different people, including the young person, to explore narratives and triangulate evidence.
Documentation	Writing of notes or reports which detail what happened.
Education systems	How the school systems and bureaucratic processes of the British education system impact consultation.
EP encouraging engagement	The EP being engaged in the consultation through active listening to challenge narratives and facilitate discussion.
EP view of consultation	The EPs understanding of consultation.

Code	Definition
EP view of EPs	The EPs understanding of their role, including as the expert.
EP workload	How the high workload EPs experience impacts consultation.
Goal setting	Explicit discussion of outcomes and goal setting.
Individual differences	How the personalities and histories of the consultees and consultors impacts consultation.
Key people	Having the people who are most concerned present.
Language	Using language that can be understood by all as well as issues regarding English as an Additional Language.
Preparation	Time for the consultees and consultors to prepare.
Preventative	How consultation can help prevent issues arising or exacerbating.
Questioning	Use of a wide range of questions within consultation for a multitude of purposes, including to explore and challenge.
Rapport	The importance of relationships with those involved and how it can be developed.
Reflective	Reflecting on an individual consultation, receiving feedback, or having a review consultation to explore how the situation has progressed.
Reflexive	In consultation checking, by the EP, of how they and others might be affected by the discussion as well as what they are saying and why.

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Code	Definition
Resources	How a lack of resources from the school can impact on consultation, including not giving teachers enough time for them.
Space	Having both the physical and mental space to engage with consultation.
Supporting consultees	EPs providing therapeutic support for consultees during a consultation.
Time	Having enough time within the consultation to maximise its use.
Understanding of SEN	How consultees and schools see special educational needs in children and how it impacts consultation.
Use of aids	Using aids such as Planning Alternative Tomorrows with Hope etc.
Way forward	General statements about how consultation can provide a way forward.
Willing to engage	Consultees being willing to engage with the process of consultation.

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802 **Appendix 4: Definitions of inductive codes for what makes the features effective**

Code	Definition
Consultee ownership	Consultees having a sense of responsibility for what will happen next to support the CYP.
Consultees as experts	Viewing consultees as experts in the lives of the child or as teachers of the child who have valuable knowledge to share.
Efficient	Being able to impact at multiple levels, over time, and have wide ranging impacts.
Outside system	EPs being outside the school system giving them a meta perspective, a new way of seeing things, which allows them to challenge and explore.
Realistic	The recommendations made are realistic to the setting and capabilities of those involved, including regarding resources, and are time bound.
Varied space for approach	Consultation being a highly flexible vehicle to support CYP.

803 **Appendix 5: Breakdown of the number of interviews the features were**  
 804 **recorded in and how many total times across all interviews**

Code	File n	Total code n
Everyone's contributions valued	14	33
CYP strengths	7	9
Empowering individuals	19	68
Exception seeking	5	8
EP explaining role	5	5
Ideas for future EP work	4	4
Information gathering	18	48
EP using expert knowledge	30	223
Understanding presenting problem	16	35
School knowledge	3	4
Setting out plan for consultation	16	31
Suggesting solutions	11	14
Summarising	6	7
Planning/ implementing treatments	8	15
Discussing what's already working	11	21
Assessment	5	14
Changing perspectives	25	118
Clarity	17	37
Collaborative	29	212
Confidential	10	13
Consultee view of consultation	28	155
Consultee views of EPs	26	84
Different views	27	150

Code	File n	Total code n
Documentation	8	10
Education systems	27	134
EP encouraging engagement	29	119
EP view of consultation	22	77
EP view of EPs	14	28
EP workload	7	16
Goal setting	13	21
Individual differences	24	47
Key people	27	81
Language	8	13
Preparation	10	22
Preventative	5	5
Questioning	19	43
Rapport	26	91
Reflective	26	110
Reflexive	9	21
Resources	15	22
Space	15	20
Supporting consultees	12	27
Time	22	61
Understanding of SEN	3	7
Use of aids	10	22
Way forward	13	22
Willing to engage	19	41
Consultee ownership	15	27

Code	File n	Total code n
Consultees as experts	5	6
Efficient	18	43
Outside system	8	12
Realistic	7	11
Varied space for approach	10	15