

# What are the effective features of consultation? A mixed methods approach

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DO I NEED TO DEFINE THE WORD ‘FEATURE’?

## 1 Introduction

This research consisted of interviews with Educational Psychologists (EPs), the development of a novel questionnaire, and observations of joint school-parent consultations with long-term follow-up. This was in service of exploring what the core features of consultation are, according to EP self-report and observation of real-world consultations, and how EPs altered their practice to adapt to the COVID-19 global pandemic. The interviews explored EP’s definition of consultation, their views on what the key features of effective consultations are, what some of the barriers are, how they have changed their consultation practice as a result of the pandemic and the advantages and disadvantages of this. This was supplemented by a questionnaire which asked similar questions, as well as asking participants to identify the different kinds of work they were engaging in during the pandemic. The observation schedule was informed by the relevant literature and was used to see how often different features of consultation were observed during a joint school-parent consultation and in what order. This was then to be cross-referenced with reported progress towards jointly agreed goals for the child and young people (CYP) to see which features correlate with improved outcomes. This work built on a previous piece of research exploring what EPs believed were the most important features of consultation and a thematic analysis of recorded initial consultations to identify the main features in a live consultation.

### 1.1 Literature Review

A literature review was conducted to see what previous research had found to be the main features of consultation and what the main tools of analysing the efficacy of consultation were. Various databases, including Web of Science and Scopus, were searched using the key words “educational psychology” and “consultation”. Key references, such as @kennedyEducationalPsychologistsWalk2008a, were given to the researcher by their supervisor to set a baseline for the literature review. Considering all the relevant literature, there is some consistency around EPs views regarding consultation. However, there is a heterogeneity of understanding from other stakeholders as to what consultation actually means. Crucially, there is a relatively small amount of research exploring what happens during a consultation [@kennedyEducationalPsychologistsWalk2008a], as well as few studies evaluating the efficacy of consultation. There are also few studies which attempt to analyse what makes consultation effective or what the effective features of consultation are. This leaves EPs and associated stakeholders with a widely used but poorly understood and validated framework.

#### 1.1.1 What is consultation?

Consultation takes many different forms across contexts and countries. Consequently, there is not a universal definition of consultation as conducted by EPs. This raises an important problem for any EP who wishes to engage in consultation or analyse its efficacy. Within a western context, it fundamentally involves problem

solving between consultants (EPs) and consultees. The consultee is most often a teacher who knows the CYP well, but it can also be parents and/or Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCOs). In joint school-family consultations, it is generally agreed prior to the consultation that at least one member from the child's family unit and the school will attend. These individuals collaborate to devise and establish interventions to help support and find solutions for the client, the CYP [ofarrell\_research\_2018]. 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\_reconceptualizing\_1990]. They may or may not engage one to one with the CYP but it is not mandated by this approach.

Consultation has become the model of service delivery for many Educational Psychology Services [sheridan\_randomized\_2017]. Most Educational Psychology Services (EPS) in the U.K. have moved towards a predominantly consultation-based service [ofarrell\_research\_2018]. This is in contrast with what is viewed as a more traditional model which predominantly involves individual casework, typically including the administration of a cognitive assessment [kratochwill\_evidence\_based\_2002; larney\_school\_based\_2003]. The most commonly employed consultation framework in the U.K. is the Wagner model [wagner\_consultation\_1995; wagner\_school\_1995; wagner\_consultation\_2000]. It is defined as "a voluntary, collaborative, non-supervisory approach, established to aid the functioning of a system and as inter-related systems" [wagner\_consultation\_2000] through "purposeful [conversations] which [use] techniques of listening, clarifying, problem-solving, challenging, questioning and reflecting" [munro\_angles\_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 [bronfenbrenner\_ecology\_1981]. There is an understanding of the interactions between these layers and the need to consider a child holistically. This support is provided by asking questions, analysing presenting problems and helping others think differently, agreeing on potential interventions, and then reflecting on the whole process so progress can be made.

### 1.1.2 How prevalent is consultation in the U.K.?

The move towards a consultation-based model of service is reflected in government legislation. The Special Education Needs: Code of Practice characterises consultation as one of the main services of EPs [department\_for\_education\_send\_2015]. Several studies have also found it makes up a large percentage of their time working with schools. shannon\_educational\_2007 delivered questionnaires to 44 EPs, asking for the EPs to self-report how often they undertook different types of work, including consultation or case work. 32 responded, with most reporting they spent a majority of their time engaging in individual level work. 91% of the EPs who were doing individual level work stated consultation was the main activity performed. However, the authors do not provide a definition of consultation nor ask the EPs to provide a definition of consultation. Given that consultation takes many different forms and there are a wide range of views on consultation between EPs and other stakeholders, ensuring everyone has the same definition of the process is crucial. Without it, one cannot be sure different EPs are engaging in consultation in a similar way and that the schools understand what they are doing. Participants may have reported they used consultation, but in practice their methods may be very different. Because of the limits of self report, we do not know if such a disparity exists in this study. On the other hand, the EPs who responded were from a large range of locations across the U.K., thus increasing the representativeness of the data.

Another study exploring the prevalence of consultation in the UK comes from leadbetter\_patterns\_2000. The authors sent questionnaires to all Principal Educational Psychologists (PEPs) and asked about their models of service delivery. Consultation was reported as one of the most frequently used models. However, there was only a return rate of 58%, with those not returning almost certainly not randomly distributed. There is therefore uncertainty around the amount of bias in the results. If the non-returns were randomly distributed on key variables, such as whether the EPs has recently experienced a number of organisational changes, then a low return rate would not introduce bias into the results. But this is unlikely. As such, the results of certain PEPs who may have different results from the norm are missing.

Although consultation forms the bedrock of many EPs work and the model of service delivery for EPS, EPs often struggle to articulate what a consultation model of service entails. @leadbetter\_role\_2004 argues there is little research which explicates the structure and process of consultation. This situation has not improved over the following years, with the few studies examining this typically only focusing on one EPS or a small number of EPs [@cording\_study\_2011; @leadbetter\_investigating\_2006; @pipher\_consultation\_2013]. These limitations prohibit one from developing a broad picture of how consultation is performed in the U.K.

### 1.1.3 What are consultees views on consultation?

Before exploring what occurs in a consultation, understanding what those involved (EPs, teachers) believe it to be is important. This is because if consultees are to play an active role in consultations (as all models of consultation state they should), their views of consultation need to be understood. That way, any misunderstandings can be cleared up and consultation can be effective. To serve this end, the following section explore stakeholders' views of consultation as detailed in the relevant scientific literature. @ofarrell\_research\_2018 interviewed three groups containing a teacher, an EP, and the parents of the child the consultation was about. The teachers and parents reported that while they appreciated and saw the value of consultation, there was a lack of understanding regarding its process and nature. All three teachers implied they viewed the EP as the external expert, who had specialist knowledge and access to resources which they wanted. This is in direct contrast to the sentiments expressed by the EPs in this study. They explicitly stated they were not experts and tried to distance themselves from that sentiment. This concept is fundamental to many models of consultation, including Wagner's. This research was conducted in the Republic of Ireland. Here, consultation has only become the dominant model of service delivery in recent years. Thus, U.K. based teachers and SENCOs may have a better understanding. However, few pieces of research have been conducted to explore understanding of this important strand of EP work.

@dennis\_so\_2004 interviewed SENCOs at twelve schools to better understand their views on EP work. One of the core themes raised by the participants was a wish for EPS's to "publicise more the range of things it has to offer and good/innovative practice". The exact number of schools which held this belief is unknown as that information was not reported in the paper. Regarding consultation, there was a large heterogeneity in the the school's understanding of it. Some schools were fully aware of the consultation model of service delivery and preferred it to previous models. Such models focused on direct work, including assessment of CYP using cognitive assessments. However, other schools, either did not understand the consultation model or were only partially aware of it but preferred other models which placed a primacy on child-focused individual work. They reported they believed the consultation model involved "too much talk, not enough action" [@dennis\_so\_2004, 22] and thus did not value it as highly.

This lack of understanding of consultation is found in other countries as well. Many Australian EPSs have also shifted their focus from an assessment-based to a consultation-based model of service delivery. But they also experience a lack of cohesion in understanding among stakeholders regarding the meaning and process of consultation [@bell\_perceptions\_2013]. However, some EPs do not report this problem. In the U.S.A., those who work with school psychologists (as EPs are called) show a greater consistency of understanding of consultation in schools. There is also a larger evidence base for the efficacy of their form of consultation. This is because consultation as practised in the U.S.A. is almost exclusively Conjoint Behavioural Consultation (CBC). CBC is defined as "a strength-based, cross-system problem-solving and decision-making model wherein parents, teachers, and other caregivers or service providers work as partners and share responsibility for promoting positive and consistent outcomes related to a child's academic, behavioural, and social-emotional development" [@sheridan\_conjoint\_2007, p.25]. CBC has been shown to be effective for CYP over a wide range of settings and for many presenting problems [@sheridan\_randomized\_2017]. This hegemony of practice allows for a consistent definition and implementation, and is likely one of the reasons consultation in the U.S.A. is better understood and valued by stakeholders [@reddy\_clinical\_2000]. It also means its efficacy can be assessed more readily, such as by conducting a randomised control trial conducted by @sheridan\_randomized\_2012.

However, the lack of understanding by key stakeholders (SENCOs, teachers, and parents) may not truly reflect the modern day conception of consultation in the U.K. The research reporting these findings are

roughly 15 years old. It is reasonable to presume stakeholders have become more familiar with it, given how prevalent it is. A more recent paper exploring this is @cording\_study\_2011. For this work, the authors interviewed 10 school personnel (such as Head teachers and teachers) and 9 EPs in a Welsh Local Authority (LA). The aim was to elicit their understanding of the kinds of work they believed EPs engage in. There was a general alignment between the views of the school personnel and the EPs themselves. But the school personnel stated they greatly valued the EP's expertise in diagnosing and alleviating presenting problems. This shows that despite there being a shared understanding of what EPs do, there is still a divide in what stakeholders value about EP work.

#### **1.1.4 What are consultant's views on consultation?**

The vast majority of EPs have a positive view of consultation, with the Local Offer literature from many EPS stating their model of service delivery is consultation, such as Kensington & Chelsea [@royal\_borough\_of\_kensington\_&\_chelsea\_educational\_2019]. Some EPs believe they provide a unique method of working through their use of consultation [@ashton\_what\_2006]. @ashton\_what\_2006 sent questionnaires to both schools and EPs asking for them to comment on the work EPs engage in. 22 questionnaires (out of 58) were returned from mainstream primary schools and eight (out of nine) EPs completed the questionnaire. 'Statutory assessment work', 'Closed tests' and 'Expert role' were the most frequently provided parts of EP work that were classed as unique by SENCOs. Few or no other agencies were judged by SENCOs as providing a similar or the same service as EPs. 'Individual assessment and intervention' and 'Consultation' were the aspects of EP work the EPs themselves believed were unique to them, as no other service provided these. This shows a clear disparity between the views of EPs and key stakeholders within consultation (SENCOs). They also reported that SENCOs typically valued more traditional EP work, such as individual assessment and giving advice. The SENCOs did not value consultation, nor give evidence they had a complete understanding of it. However, these results should be interpreted with caution. The small sample limited to one LA undermines our ability to generalise the results to a wider context. It also only collected data from mainstream primary schools, further limiting the scope of these results. Yet one of the main results, namely the lack of understanding regarding the nature of consultation) has been replicated by research in other school settings [@dennis\_so\_2004; @ofarrell\_research\_2018].

#### **1.1.5 What are the main features of consultation?**

Once a common understanding of what the stakeholders believe consultation to be has been created, an analysis of the common features of consultation can occur. The following section will evaluate the relevant literature regarding the features of consultation. @henderson\_exploration\_2013 used focus groups with clusters of SENCOs across a small LA to gain an understanding of their beliefs about the mechanics of consultation. The researchers sat in on five different Primary SENCO Network meetings and worked to elucidate their views. They presented the participants with statements about parts of the consultation process. Their task was to sort them depending on how often they believed the statements to be a part of a consultation. The mostly commonly given features of consultation were: discussing issues with relevant parties; information gathering; and it being a reflexive process with a focus on collaboratively crafting solutions. They also conducted semi-structured interviews with EPs, children who were receiving EP involvement, and their parents. It being a collaborative and problem-solving process, with a focus on solutions, and the development of positive working relationships between those involved were the two main themes. The use of focus groups to identify SENCO beliefs regarding the nature of consultation and the interviews with the stakeholders allows comparison between the stakeholder's expectations and the reality of consultation. However, given the researchers did not directly observe consultations but relied on self-report, the conclusions that can be drawn regarding how consultations occur are weakened. This is because of the disparity between self-reports of behaviour and real-world instances of behaviour [@argyris\_theory\_1992].

@kennedyEducationalPsychologistsWalk2008a thematically analysed the voice recordings of 17 EP-teacher consultations. These individual case studies [@robson\_real\_2015] were supplemented by a pre-consultation

questionnaire completed by EPs to establish their espoused theory for consultation. A comparison could then be made between the recordings and participants' self-report to see whether their espoused theory aligned with the recorded behaviours. The authors report a high correspondence between the EPs espoused theory and theory in practice as EPs predominantly engaged in behaviours dictated by their espoused theory. The most common behaviours by EPs were working collaboratively, typically with those most involved (predominantly parents) using either Solution-Focused approaches or problem-solving analysis. Solution-Focused approaches are characterised by greater interest in the solutions to presenting problems rather than the problem itself. It views the client as capable of solving their own problems with a changed mindset, facilitated by the EP, through identifying times when the severity of the problem is reduced or it is not present, termed 'exceptions' [rhodes\_solution\_2004]. Problem-solving analysis is related to behavioural consultation [bergan\_behavioral\_1990] and is divided into four stages: problem identification, problem analysis, treatment implementation, and treatment evaluation [sheridan\_school\_2000]. Those involved with the young person, such as teachers, are involved throughout [kennedy\_effective\_2009]. By recording the consultations, the authors could gather data from a larger number of consultations than they could have if they sat in on every consultation. However, there was a low granularity of analysis. The researchers only assessed whether features of the espoused theory appeared at all during the consultation. Thus, the analysis only shows that during a consultation, EPs brought in ideas from their espoused theory at least once. There was no analysis of how frequently the ideas appeared and when during the consultations. It therefore cannot tell us how great a part these concepts from the espoused theory played in the consultation, merely that they were present.

@nolan\_process\_2014 observed seven consultations between five EPs, a teacher, and at least one parent. A week later, the researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with all EPs and teachers and some of the parents. Several key themes arose from the observations and interviews. These were: empowering those involved in the consultation; working collaboratively; the importance of each participant in the consultation recognising the valuable knowledge from others; reviewing outcomes; and EPs using their expertise to support others (without emphasising their role as the "expert"). The use of both observation and interview generates a lot of data about these 7 consultations, giving a very detailed understanding of the process. It also allows corroboration between data collection methods. However, the small sample size limits the generalisability of the findings. These results therefore need to be replicated with different configurations of participants and in other school settings.

@ofarrell\_research\_2018 found teachers appreciated consultation as they felt empowered to support the pupils who had been referred. According to @jones\_refocusing\_1990, this empowering of consultees rather than fixing the consultees problems or simply giving advice, is part of the definition of consultation. @denis\_so\_2004 found that EPs and SENCOs saw several key issues relating to the successful implementation of a consultation model: the EP having a detailed knowledge of the system (school) they were working in; addressing issues at multiple levels (rather than just on the individual level); positive relationships between the EP and SENCO; and empowering staff to successfully fix their problems, rather than doing it for them.

@dickinson\_consultation\_2000 & @munro\_angles\_2000 examined how consultation had been implemented in their EPS (Lincolnshire and Buckinghamshire respectively). Behaviours and approaches which helped support the successful implementation of consultation across both EPS's included: having purposeful conversations; EPs using their psychological knowledge during consultations; and all parties involved deciding on interventions as well as reviewing past and current interventions. Factors that were only reported in @munro\_angles\_2000 included: engaging in preventative work; improving outcomes; and engaging in multi-level collaborative work. Unfortunately, these papers are based on the author's reflections on the implementation of consultation in their LA and do not give the views of anyone else or provide much in the way of data to support their findings. Readers must therefore take them at their word.

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. Whilst this research assessed what EPs believe the core features are and what the features are of an initial consultation, the small sample size (3 observed consultations and 8 EPs completing the questionnaire) means the results are hard to generalise beyond the immediate consultations.

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\_exploration\_2017], where the ability to demonstrate efficacy is highly valued. It therefore behoves EPs to gain an understanding of the consistent features of consultation. This will allow some assessment of which features are correlated with improved outcomes for CYP.

### 1.1.6 Assessing the efficacy of consultation

There have been calls for assessing the efficacy of EP work for decades, such as cline\_quality\_1994, but this has become even more important since the almost complete shift to ‘traded services’ [national\_college\_for\_teaching\_and\_leadership\_educational\_2014]. ‘Traded services’ marks a shift in funding towards existing service organisations needing to generate income from schools (seen as customers) to either partially or fully financially support itself [woods\_preparation\_2014]. Many EPs feel a pressure from schools to both provide something tangible for customers and to demonstrate the effectiveness of their work, so schools buy their services again [lee\_exploration\_2017]. EPs are also expected to use evidence-based tools and to critically evaluate their practice [british\_psychological\_society\_quality\_2015, Standard 4.8; health\_care\_professions\_council\_standards\_2015, Standard 12.1] as part of the requirements of practising as an EP. It is therefore very important for EPs to understand what aspects of consultation are effective in eliciting change.

Measuring such change is difficult. As kennedyEducationalPsychologistsWalk2008a notes, due to the complex nature of the interactions between consultant, consultee, and client it is difficult to decide what to measure and how to do so. Several methods have been put forward but none have gained ascendancy yet. One method used by some EPS [hampshire\_eps\_how\_2010] is the Target Monitoring Evaluation [dunsmuir\_evidencebased\_2009]. Target Monitoring Evaluation (TME) is based on Goal Attainment Scaling (GAS), which was developed by kiresuk\_goal\_1968 to evaluate the outcomes of mental health interventions. TME is a streamlined form of GAS, with the added advantage of increased granularity in evaluating progress in relation to expected progress. TME involves the negotiated development of SMART goals (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and time limited) between the EP and the consultees. TME forms were completed by both EPs at two Local Authorities and assistant EPs in one County. 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. Two of those interviewed had experience with GAS and stated they preferred TME. Focus groups of EPs and assistant EPs elicited positive views towards the tool, as well as considerations of implementation.

This pilot study gives evidence for TMEs efficacy in assessing progress in response to EP intervention. However, the limited detail provided in the report means we do not have a fine grained understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the tool. monsen\_evaluation\_2009 assessed the efficacy of assistant EPs

using TME and focus groups with stakeholders. Both measures found assistant EPs to be beneficial to EP work. This work was conducted in one EPS, therefore the generalisability of the findings are limited. TME is a quantitative assessment of efficacy and the focus groups produced qualitative data, comparison of efficacy between the two measures is difficult. We therefore cannot draw strong conclusions about the validity of TME when assessing educational psychology work.

There have been a few studies which have attempted to compare TME with other quantitative measures of change, such as @connor\_target\_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. However, while TME may be useful for identifying progress in individual children, it was not clear how it could be used to assess the quality of the work from the EP. There were also some difficulties regarding the use of it, as there was disagreement between some consultants and consultees regarding target setting and the voice of the child.

A recent paper [eddeleston\_using\_2018] comparing different consultation evaluation tools excluded TME because it did not reach the inclusion criteria. Here, TME's streamlined nature counted against it as it was not sufficiently thorough enough to be evaluated. This means there is limited evidence for its efficacy as a tool. However, as @dunsmuir\_evidencebased\_2009 states, "the strengths of GAS are maintained but the TME system is more streamlined and user friendly" (p 67). We can therefore have increased confidence in the validity of TME as a measure of change, given that GAS has been shown to be a useful tool [roach\_goal\_2005] and it shares fundamental similarities.

### 1.1.7 Local Offer literature

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\_consultation\_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.

## 1.2 Context and rationale

This project was greatly shaped by the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic and the subsequent response by the British Government. Because of this, the research was conducted during unprecedented circumstances. All EPs (and workers in general) had to work remotely from home. This presented unique concerns for how EPs worked, as they were not allowed to see any adults or CYP in person. Several documents, such as @bhardwaj\_rapid\_2020, and one piece of research [aep\_survey\_2020] were disseminated during this time, detailing guidance as to how EPs can work ethically within the context of a lockdown. This included conducting consultations using either phones or video call software, such as Microsoft Teams or Zoom. There were concerns regarding the safety and privacy of Zoom technology [paul\_zoom\_2020] so Teams was encouraged by many EPS. This shifted the manner in which the research could be conducted: consultations could not be observed in person and many EPs were not engaging in consultation. The timeline of the research was changed as a result, with the observation of consultations pushed back to September 2020 when it was hoped they would resume by. There was also a broadening of the parameters of the research. Questions exploring the impact of the lockdown were posed to interviewees and a questionnaire was designed and disseminated to explore a wide range of views towards consultation and how it had been affected by the pandemic.

The purpose of this research was to gain an insight into what happens during a joint school-family consultation, as well as which features correlate with rated changes towards agreed goals. Having a more fine-grained understanding of when different features are seen and how frequently would provide valuable insight into what are the core features of a consultation. This could then be cross-referenced with the ratings of progress as measured by TME. Because of the global pandemic, a related question was explored regarding the use of technology when conducting consultations. Gaining an understanding of what the core features of consultation allow EPs to understand what is essential for a consultation to occur. This will inform the professions response to the lockdown, subsequent lockdowns, and EP work in general. EP beliefs regarding how consultation can be performed and their experiences changing their work can give guidance as to how EPs should use consultation in future, beyond the scope of the COVID-19 pandemic or any future pandemics.

### 1.3 Research questions

Given the lack of strong theory in this area of research, research questions were developed but statistical hypotheses could not be drawn. Thus, it is exploratory research [kimmelman\_distinguishing\_2014]. The research questions are:

1. What do EPs believe are the core features of a joint school-parent consultation?
2. Which features of consultation correlate with increased progress towards agreed goals?

## 2 Methodology

### 2.1 Epistemology and research paradigm

To explore these questions, a mixed methodology was employed, making use of quantitative and qualitative research methods. It was informed by a scientific realism epistemology. Scientific realism can help approach difficult problems in social science as it takes into account the complexity of the situation in which they occur [house\_realism\_1991]. It can be viewed as a pragmatic approach [robson\_real\_2015] as it is less concerned with philosophical dualisms, such as rationalism versus empiricism, and more with practical considerations of issues and potential solutions [johnson\_mixed\_2004]. Mixed methodology aligns with a pragmatic approach as it is not beholden to one method of exploring a research topic; it sees the benefits of both for exploring a research question in different ways [denscombe\_communities\_2008]. Multiple methods of inquiry were employed because it is generally believed using different means to explore research questions brings greater rigour [creswell\_research\_2003]. Data can be triangulated with one another, with evidence corroborating, refuting, or adding nuance to each other and increasing confidence in ones findings [munaf\_robust\_2018]. Mixed methodology research designs can be divided along a key dimension: paradigm emphasis [johnson\_mixed\_2004]. This refers to whether one strand of the research (quantitative or qualitative) is given greater emphasis during analysis. Because equal weight was placed on both forms of inquiry, this was an ‘equal weight’ paradigm emphasis piece. An explicit account of the ways in which the qualitative and quantitative arms of the research relate to one another will be given [denscombe\_communities\_2008].

### 2.2 Participants

Ethical approval was obtained from UCL the Institute of Education’s Ethical Committee. The inclusion criteria for all three 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. This was to try and elicit a wide a range of views on consultations from practising EPs. For the interview and observation, participants were recruited via the researcher’s EPS. Convenience sampling was therefore used. This was because participant recruitment for the observation was judged to be



difficult and the researcher would have greater success by asking participants they already had a professional relationship with. The interview also recruited participants by sharing a call for participation 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. This was the method used for recruiting participants to the questionnaire as well. Thus, a mixture of convenience and snowball sampling [robson\_real\_2015] was employed for these two arms of the research.

## 2.3 Materials

All materials, along with raw data, are released under a CC-BY license, thus allowing re-use of materials and improving reproducibility and transparency [nosek\_scientific\_2012]. They can be accessed at: <https://osf.io/nra86/> in the ‘Methods’ folder. Almost all materials used were Free/Libre and Open Source Software [stallman\_floss\_2016].

### 2.3.1 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 was allowed to change given the flow of the interview. Additional questions were used to further develop a interviewee’s answer [robson\_real\_2015]. The interviews were of the focused type as the questions centred around the key theme of consultation [merton\_focused\_1990]. 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\_inquiry\_2006]. All interviews were recorded with an Honor 10 lite phone. The anonymous transcript was thematically analysed using the software NVivo .

### 2.3.2 Observation

The quantitative arm of the research involved systematic observations of joint home-school consultations with an EP. Thus, it was a naturalistic observation as the participants were observed in their typical environment without any interference from the researcher [vigliocco\_tip\_tongue\_2001]. A systematic 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\_beyond\_2015] to driving behaviours [kaye\_comparison\_2018]. They involve the development of a coding scheme (Appendix 2) to identify categories over the course of a set period of time. The categories are defined and operationalised prior to data collection [croll\_systematic\_1986]. They were derived from the relevant literature and were mutually exclusive. The categories were limited to what was explicitly said. 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. Event sampling was used as the absolute and relative frequency of events was of interest [robson\_real\_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\_real\_2015]. Time sampling was not chosen so no events were missed because they fell outside of the time intervals. However, the length of time each feature occurred for was lost. Whilst this information would be valuable to see how long each feature lasted for, rather than just how frequently it occurred, it was decided that the risk of missing feature due to the researcher focusing on correctly marking the time of each feature outweighed the benefit of gaining that information.

To explore the relationship between the features and the change in the goals for each consultation, Qualitative Comparison Analysis (QCA) was used. It is characterised as a “small-N-many variables” approach. Configurational Comparative Methods: Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) and Related Techniques:

“QCA techniques allow the systematic comparison of cases, with the help of formal tools and with a specific conception of cases.”

“In the process of configurational comparative analysis, the researcher engages in a dialogue between cases and relevant theories. Indeed, the choice of the variables (conditions and outcome) for the analysis must be theoretically informed. In this sense, there is a deductive aspect to QCA; however, QCA techniques can also be used more inductively, gaining insights from case knowledge in order to identify the key “ingredients” to be considered (Rihoux, 2003, 2006; Rihoux & Lobe, 2009).”

“QCA techniques allow for “conjunctural causation” across observed cases. This means that different constellations of factors may lead to the same result (equifinality)”

“By using QCA, the researcher is urged not to specify a single causal model that best fits the data, as one usually does with statistical techniques, but instead to determine the number and character of the different causal models that exist among comparable cases (Ragin, 1987).”

for the statistical programming language R [[@r\\_core\\_team\\_r\\_2017](#)]

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1089061/pdf/hsresearch00022-0148.pdf>: “to assess the sufficiency of a combination of causal conditions, the researcher selects cases with a given combination of conditions and then evaluates whether or not these cases display the same, or roughly the same, outcome.”

### 2.3.3 Questionnaire

A questionnaire was designed using Qualtrics to explore consultation as conducted both during the lockdown and prior to it. The questions were informed by the answers to the interview questions, as recommended by [[@gehlbach\\_measure\\_2011](#)]. Due to the fact the way answer options are presented can bias results [[@schwarz\\_self\\_reports\\_1999](#)], the construction of the question and answers was guided by the best practice recommendations from [@gehlbach\\_measure\\_2011](#). Quantitative questions explored what the key features of consultation are (both before and during the lockdown), what kinds of work EPs engaged in (before and during the lockdown), how they have found the changes to their work (with Likert scale ratings), and how much different types of work have been affected by the lockdown. Questions suggesting different features of consultation were based on the scientific literature, for example [@dennis\\_so\\_2004](#); [@dickinson\\_consultation\\_2000](#); [@farrell\\_developing\\_2006](#); [@henderson\\_exploration\\_2013](#); [@kennedyEducationalPsychologistsWalk2008a](#); [@munro\\_angles\\_2000](#); & [@nolan\\_process\\_2014](#), and the material on the Local Offer websites. These were the same features used in the observation schedule. Open-ended questions will be used to explore the changes to EP consultations as a result of the lockdown and their views towards technologically mediated consultations. This is because there is no published literature to suggest what EPs may experience, given the unprecedented nature of the present circumstances. It is therefore best to give participants the opportunity to respond how they wish, without a narrowing of options by the questionnaire.

## 2.4 Procedure

Prior to data collection, it was decided the quantitative arm would be conducted first, starting in March 2020 and continuing until March 2021. Interviews would be conducted in the autumn of 2020. Thus, a concurrent triangulation design would be employed [[@creswell\\_research\\_2003](#)]. Both the quantitative and qualitative arms of the research would be conducted simultaneously and independently. The results were to be compared to see whether the conclusions drawn align with one another. This was done for practical rather than philosophically informed reasons. It was agreed beforehand that collecting observation data would be more difficult, as finding consultations with all the required participants who were also willing to be observed is unlikely. Consultations with both the teacher and parent present are less likely to occur than consultations with just one of them, given the specific multiplication rule of probability [[@grinstead\\_introduction\\_1997](#)]. It was therefore felt that having a longer window of opportunity to collect data was the reasonable course of action.

However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic all in person consultations were cancelled across the U.K. to comply with the government-mandated lockdown [cabinet\_office\_staying\_2020]. Whilst many EPs offered consultations to their respective schools, most found they delivered far fewer consultations during the lockdown than usual. Those who delivered consultations typically did so via the phone, eliminating any chance of observation by the researcher. In response, data collection for the interviews was brought forward to start in March 2020 and observations of consultations would occur once consultations could be observed by the researcher. The research was therefore adapted to use a sequential transformative design [creswell\_research\_2003]. This type of mixed methodology involves one method preceding the other. Either the qualitative or the quantitative arm of the research project is conducted first. The methodology does not require one be used before the other, so practical reasons may determine the order of research. The results from both strands are interpreted together, with one informing the other.

### 2.4.1 Interviews

Interviews were originally planned to be in person with EPs in the researcher’s EPS. However, because of the global pandemic, all non-essential in person meetings were banned. They were therefore switched to video or phone call interviews. Because of the sudden increase in proficiency and willingness of many EPs to use phone and video call technology, the parameters of the participant recruitment for the interviews was widened to all EPs. This decision was made because of a desire to increase the number of participants and thus the range of views on consultation.

Semi-structured focused interviews were used to elicit EP views with regards to the core features of consultation, the barriers to effective consultation, how their consultation work has changed in response to the lockdown, and the advantages and disadvantages of this new way of working. 27 EPs were interviewed using a mixture of phone and video call technology. Data collection took place between 31/03/2020 and 28/05/2020. All interviews were recorded and an anonymous transcript made. These transcripts were thematically analysed, which involves the identification of themes through “careful reading and re-reading of the data” [rice\_qualitative\_1999]. A mixed or hybrid thematic analysis approach [fereday\_demonstrating\_2006] was employed. This incorporates inductive and deductive thematic analysis. Inductive thematic analysis is driven primarily by the data [boyatzis\_transforming\_1998] and deductive thematic analysis is theory-driven with codes derived from said theory [crabtree\_template\_1992]. The a priori codes identified were developed from the scientific and Local Offer literature. Semantic themes (that which is explicitly said) were found and analysed [boyatzis\_transforming\_1998].

### 2.4.2 Observation

After gaining informed consent from all participants, the researcher observed the consultation unfold as normal. The researcher will use the observation schedule to mark when and how frequently different features occur. These will then be summed. Immediately after the conclusion of the consultation, each participant (EP, school staff member, and parent/guardian) was asked to collectively identify 2-3 goals for the CYP to work towards. This was done using a TME form. 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. This data will be summarised with the median ratings for each category (‘baseline’, ‘expected’, and ‘actual’) presented. The summed features would be tallied against the progress made for each observed consultation. This will be calculated 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\_evidencebased\_2009; monsen\_evaluation\_2009]. Whilst the independent variable of frequency counts of features is continuous, the dependent variable of the reported progress is ordinal. Therefore, a Spearman rank-order correlation will be used [field\_discovering\_2012] to measure the correlation between features of consultation and reported change in outcomes for the CYP.

### 2.4.3 Questionnaire

A questionnaire was designed to supplement the findings from the interviews. By identifying key ideas from the interview answers, these could be explored with a larger sample by using a questionnaire. Data collection took place between 26/05/2020 and 04/06/2020. Descriptive statistics of the types of features employed during consultations will be reported, along with how much of an impact the lockdown has had on different kinds of work and the changes made to work during the pandemic. The open text questions exploring participant views towards the use of technology when conducting consultations and how their work has been impacted by the lockdown were thematically analysed. Inductive thematic analysis was used to explore the semantic themes [boyatzis\_transforming\_1998]. Inductive analysis is data driven and thus codes are derived from the data, rather than pre-determined codes being used to analyse the data [guest\_applied\_2012]. The question assessing how much each type of work has been affected will be plotted to check the distribution of responses. Likert rating scales produce ordinal data and the responses are unlikely to be normally distributed, therefore models which assume normally distributed continuous data are inappropriate [liddell\_analyzing\_2017]. It will therefore be analysed using a cumulative probit ordinal regression model [burkner\_ordinal\_2019] to see if there differences between types of work as well as groups, such as role. A probit model will be used as the latent variable which the question is seeking to measure (how greatly various kinds of work have been affected by the lockdown) is assumed to be normally distributed [mccullagh\_regression\_1980].

To see whether the lockdown has affected the prevalence of different features of consultation, a two-way within subjects ANOVA will be used. This is suitable because the data is proportional [man-giafico\_summary\_2016]. The features will be clustered into subgroups: Solution-Focused, Problem analysis, Organisation and knowledge; and Valuing everyone (see Appendix 3 for a breakdown of the features into the subgroups). The subgroups will be analysed independently with the other factor (time) common to all subgroup analyses. Time will have two levels (before and during lockdown). Responses which did not include any data for questions relating to the features of consultation or how their work had been impacted by the pandemic were excluded.

## 2.5 Reflections on pilot

### 2.5.1 Interview schedule

The interview was piloted with a Trainee Educational Psychologist (TEP) to check for flow and whether the interviewees understood the questions. The TEP commented on the definition of “features” in question 5. The word was changed to “features” and a clarification statement will be provided, along with a definition if necessary.

### 2.5.2 Observation schedule

To establish inter-rater reliability (IRR), an anonymous transcript of a previously recorded consultation was analysed for feature using the observation schedule. Three raters, including the researcher, assessed the transcript for feature of consultations in their relative order. Intraclass correlations [shrout\_intraclass\_1979] were calculated between the three raters. The relative frequency of each category was calculated for each rater and compared with one coder’s (the researchers) results. Because frequency counts were used, intraclass correlations (ICC) were suitable as the data is continuous. To calculate ICC, four factors must be decided upon prior to calculation [hallgren\_computing\_2012]. A two way model was used because the raters weren’t randomly selected from the population. Given that a non-timed sequence record design was chosen for the observation schedule, good IRR was defined as consistency in the ratings because it was more important that raters provide scores that are similar in rank order. A single measures ICC was calculated because the reliability of the other two raters needed to generalise to ratings of one coder (the researcher). And finally, a mixed model was used because the raters were not randomly chosen from a population. This

model was applied using the irr package [gamer\_irr\_2019] in R. This produced an ICC of 0.471 which, according to guidelines provided by Cicchetti1994 are ‘substantial’.

The categories are defined and operationalised prior to data collection [croll\_systematic\_1986]. They were derived from the relevant literature and were mutually exclusive. This was to increase the reliability as it reduces the chances of observations being coded differently according to the interpretation of an observer. To further reduce risks to reliability, the categories were limited to what was explicitly said. This was done to minimise the amount of inference the researcher had to use when deciding whether a category was observed [croll\_systematic\_1986]. Models of consultation, such as Solution-focused, were broken down into their constituent observable parts, such as exploring strengths and identifying exceptions, so the categories were more fine-grained and which specific features of the models were used during consultations.

### 2.5.3 Questionnaire

14 TEPs piloted the questionnaire. They identified a few questions which could be misinterpreted (“What will you do differently when things go back to normal”) and questions which would benefit from an explanation as to how the answering mechanic worked. They also identified additional types of work EPs could engage in during the lockdown. Overall the feedback was positive, with particular focus on the breadth of questions and the inclusion of changes to practice during the current lockdown. One TEP reported that questions 17 and 18 could be interpreted in different ways: do EPs think they should change their consultations compared with how they were conducted prior to the lockdown or how they are done now? Because the focus of the question is about what they will do differently as a result of their experiences, the question was changed to reflect this. A comment was raised about the order of the options when selecting the magnitude of the impact on different kinds of work due to the lockdown. It was decided it would be in ascending order as this makes more intuitive sense when reading from left to right.

## 3 Results

NEED INTRODUCTION TO SECTION

MAYBE THEMATIC MAP?

### 3.1 Interviews

30 EPs of varying roles and locations were interviewed. Participant’s roles included TEPs, maingrade EPs, specialist EPs, senior EPs, and Principal EPs. The participants worked in locations such as London, Yorkshire, Wales, and the Republic of Ireland. Thematic analysis identified 32 inductive codes, as well as the 15 deductive codes, relating to what features EPs believed were effective for consultation. 6 codes were identified for what made said features effective (see Appendix XXX for all codes and definitions). 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 super themes: Internal factors and External factors (see Appendix XXX for a complete mapping of codes to themes and super themes).

#### 3.1.1 Buy-in

This theme related to the importance of EPs creating a bond with those involved, including the consultee(s) and other school staff members not directly involved in the consultation, and using this relationship to facilitate change.

**3.1.1.1 Collaborative** One of the fundamental and most oft cited features for creating buy-in was making consultation collaborative. Within the consultation, this was achieved through a variety of factors. One of the key ones was making sure there was equal participation, such that everyone had a voice and different perspectives were heard: “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).

As a result of there being equal participation, there is a greater chance that everyone involved has the same understanding of the situation and the CYP: “to bring everyone together, and to co-create and co-construct a shared narrative” (Interview 11). Misunderstandings can be cleared up (Interview 5) and these help everyone feel involved in the process and ensure that the consultation is collaborative. The creation of a shared narrative can also include the the creation of a shared agenda. This helps guide the consultation so it is more effective as it is meeting the needs of those involved and everyone agrees to it: “I think a really fundamentally important part of that consultation is ensuring that we do have that shared agenda; we know why we’re there together and we all agree what we’re doing there together” (Interview 24) and “to arrive at a joint action plan, joint for the school and the parents, school are always involved as well, so it’s more collaborative” (Interview 10).

This shared agenda can be established by identifying what everyone is hoping to get from the consultation:

It would always start with a question about what are your best hopes from our meeting together? What are your best hopes from our work together? Because if we don’t start with that question, erm, then we don’t know where we’re trying to get to. (Interview 27)

By working collaboratively with those involved, EPs can facilitate collaboration between the home and school. This can potentially support both by helping maintain morale and creating a sense of shared responsibility:

There is something that goes on often, not always, in the room when you’ve got the family, and school together, the, you do you do bring that sense of, ‘We are working on this together; you are not alone school in this, you are not alone parents in this, we are doing this together’. (Interview 5)

**3.1.1.2 Contributions valued** A related code, and one which can facilitate a collaborative consultation, is the idea that everyone who is present in the consultation should feel able to contribute. Not only this, but they need to believe that what they say will be taken on board:

Where I would like to think that their views, their knowledge, their understanding is just as valid as mine... we are equal participants in this (Interview 13).

Equal participation, you know, as far as possible, or that everybody participates and that everybody feels valued, everybody feels that what they had to say is useful (Interview 20).

This can help give power to those who may not typically have it in the school environment, thus helping create a more level playing field and therefore a more collaborative consultation: “schools are by nature very hierarchical. So if you’ve got a TA they’re often not seen as the same as, you know, a SENCO or a head teacher’s views but in that situation they are” (Interview 1).

**3.1.1.3 Encouraging engagement** Removing power dynamics within a consultation was seen by many participants as an important part of the EPs role within consultation. This formed part of the code ‘EP encouraging engagement’. The EP must try and create a space so no consultee feels intimidated and in which all relevant people can contribute, even if they cannot physically be present:

The psychologist trying to level power dynamics is a really key, a really key part of any consultation and that erm that’s in relation to ourselves, as a professional with a doctorate normally, but also in relation to the family and the teacher, or the family and the school. (Interview 2)

Balance of people’s voices in the rooms. So, erm, making time for those that might not be able to be present in the meeting to hear their views and voices. (Interview 27)

This code related to any effort by the EP to attempt to include the voices of the relevant parties. One of the ways that this is through “active listening” (Interview 1). A key idea related to the EP facilitating others to participate:

I’m there to help facilitate the group in thinking about ways forward. (Interview 15)

Giving a space where people can listen to other people’s perspectives, then you take away the bulk of what it is that you’re, erm, using to try and make a difference. (Interview 21)

Not only does the EP need to facilitate others, but also challenge potentially harmful narratives and navigate difficult situations:

Being careful and being prepared to challenge. (Interview 25)

Sometimes a kind of mediation role because it’s, we work in complex and messy situations. And it’s not always that people are going to agree, or even really want to hear what they have to say. So there’s that kind of control in the, the floor that happens in a consultation, which doesn’t happen in other types of conversation. (Interview 3)

Being able to read body language was identified by a few EPs as being important for facilitating engagement:

You try to do an online meeting, you lose the gesticulations, you lose the, er, being able to point at things or being able to, you know, look at their faces better and realise, ‘Oh, they’re not understanding, I need to change the way I’m explaining it’ or something. I think you lose so much because it’s that non-verbal feedback that you get, that allows you to know where you are at with the relationship, to know the way you can develop within that consultation. (Interview 24)

However, this was not universal. A few EPs found that using technologically-mediated (tech) consultations did not lead to a decrease in quality of the relationship. One EP experienced her consultees asking for telephone consultations and that these were effective. (Interview 16)

**3.1.1.4 Rapport** The difference between in-person and tech consultations relates to another core feature, which is the development of a rapport with those involved in consultations. Within the consultation, an EP must quickly develop a rapport so that the consultees feel comfortable talking about potentially difficult topics:

Trust and credibility and shared mutual respect, I think are at the core of any consultation. You know, they value what I offer because I’m in touch and the fact they get on well with me, that almost therapeutic relationship. (Interview 7)

Built up that trust and sense of safety, that it’s okay to express their worries, that you can get quite a lot of information. (Interview 10)

The EP needs to not only develop a rapport with those involved, but encourage relationships between consultees: “building attuned interactions in a meeting with parents, with teachers, and then hopefully between them as well. It just kind of gets everyone on the same page, hopefully gets everyone pointing in the right direction” (Interview 30). This is especially important when relationships between the home and school have broken down:

Because if you don’t have that, you know, sometimes you have a breakdown between parents and the school, the relationship, you know, in a way that, you can be a person in between, and try and get that working through that, erm, which is, you know, a key feature of consultation, that, you know, you’re working in some difficult situations, erm, and if there’s a breakdown, in the relationship between both, erm, it’s a way of trying to bring it back together. (Interview 4)

Several EPs talked about the importance of having a good relationship with the school. A good relationship between the school (generally understood to mean at least the SECNCos and potentially Senior Leadership Team) helps consultation to be more effective:

If it’s going to be successful model in a school, I think the need is that, actually, you know, time for the EP to build a relationship with the school is important. (Interview 23)

The reason the relationship is crucial for improving consultation is that when the EP has developed a good relationship with the school and they are mutually supporting one another, it is easier to create an environment which fosters collaboration:

When you know the school especially, and they're supporting you in supporting the parents and the staff to do that, then you see it a lot more" (Interview 1).

Schools are often hesitant to adopt consultation as the main method of EP work: some of the SEN schools that I work with have a very rigid way of seeing the EP role and what we do, and they're, they're view is, more often than not, my role as an EP is to go in, do an assessment, write a report, and that's it. Er, so in those instances, I find it much harder to sell consultation as a, as a model. (Interview 11)

However, several EPs spoke of using their relationship with the school to change how they approach EP work and what the EP can do in the school:

Once you build a relationship with schools, and you've been working in it, you can shift things, you can move things around, to, you know, working with a bit more control, getting them to see how, you know, it can be more effective, working with consultation, not doing just lots of assessments. (Interview 4).

That's how you change it. I think that the relationship is super important. (Interview 23)

**3.1.1.5 EP view of consultation and Consultee view of consultation** An important feature of consultation that relates to rapport is the understanding that the consultees, EP, and school as a whole have towards consultation. How the EP and consultees view consultation can have a large impact on a consultation and its efficacy. A belief shared by many interviewees was that "both parties, kind of, know how consultation works" (Interview 24) and this "might depend on people's constructs of what consultation is" (Interview 29). Interviewees had an overwhelmingly positive view of consultation, highlighting its versatility and alignment with their values:

Consultation, I think, is a, is a framework with the complexity that matches the complexity of the concerns that are being raised. Erm, we're looking at concerns at an individual and a group and a systemic level (Interview 21).

I don't think you can be inclusive without using a consultative model (Interview 25).

Though many interviewees identified the value of consultation and the importance of clearly understanding it and what it involves, many also pointed out that there is a large heterogeneity of practice among EPs: "I think that concept of what a consultation is will vary from one EP to another" (Interview 24). There are also EPs who do not value it and prefer a more traditional style of assessing children and then writing a report. As one interviewee said: "I know there's a lot of EPs out there that continue to work in that way and I think, I think that's one of the barriers to shifting more to a consultation framework" (Interview 17). One interviewee, who had recently attended a course on consultation provided by their EPS, stated:

I'm not sure a lot of EPs really understand what it is. Being able to communicate that... even on that consultation course that I mentioned I went on, I was really surprised that people, people very open and very honest, and they said, 'We've been saying we've been using consultation, but we actually have not. We've realised now that we haven't really been using consultation'. (Interview 22)

This makes it difficult for consultees to gain a clear understanding of what consultation is and has led a few EPs to call for clearer communication and "being better at communicating... what it is and what it can do" (Interview 22). One of the reasons it is important consultees understand what consultation means is so they can see the value in it. Many interviewees described how some of the schools they work in do not appreciate it fully:

If I could click my fingers and change something on a systemic level, it would be the attitude toward consultation because I really view them as an investment. If you invest in a consultation, you're going to get better work and and outcomes. Whereas, sometimes they can be viewed as an expensive hurdle you have to get over to get a standardised score. (Interview 2)



I think there are some schools that, erm, have a negative view of consultation. Because of that. It's, it's more complex procedure I think, people realise. (Interview 10)

I think we need to educate our schools more about 'This is what the process is', because we say in sales blurb 'We do a consultation' and, erm, and then the schools are still stuck in that, kind of, old way of thinking. (Interview 28)

A recurring comment centred around the differences between primary and secondary schools, with primaries typically being more willing to engage with them:

Most primary SENCOs are very open to whatever I suggest. And they're quite open to different ways of working, as long as they have a report to use as evidence, er, for EP involvement, so it has that element of of a tick box. But most primary schools are very open to different ways of looking, I would say, but secondaries definitely aren't. (Interview 18)

**3.1.1.6 EP view of EPs and Consultee view of EPs** Another relevant strand to the different perceptions of consultations is how the consultees view EPs and their role. Several interviewees talked about how they were viewed as gatekeepers to resources or as someone who would fix the situation independently of any work by the consultees:

The associations that staff or parents can have of us as being, kind of, the deciders of resources. So we will go in and we will say, and we will think we are there to support to think about what we can do for this child, and they will think we are coming in to say 'Yes you can have any EHCP' or 'Yes you can have extra money'. (Interview 1)

If school are new to that way of working and they are used to having an EP come in and, sort of, tell them what to do. I do notice that sometimes there's a bit of confusion, er, especially from some teachers who are, 'Why are you asking me, aren't you supposed to tell me what I need to do'? (Interview 11)

How receptive a school is to consultation as a way of working "very much comes down to the school's view of my role" (Interview 14).

How the consultees view the EP can be changed in the consultation itself: "You're modelling how psychologists think... they might think a psychologist is on a pedestal or whatever, but you're modelling that psychologists are like everybody else" (Interview 7). To help level this power dynamic, EPs often try to present themselves as not having a privileged position, as some interviewees talked about "not putting themselves in an expert position" (Interview 27). This is because "It's the process of discussion itself, erm, that leads to, kind of, outcomes, rather than taking on an expert model." (Interview 14). However, a few EPs pushed back against the framing of the EPs non-expert stance as it can be counter-productive: "I think, erm, sometimes EPs can go too far the other way in not being the expert... it's a little bit disingenuous, because sometimes we've got a lot of good ideas to offer" (Interview 27). How strongly they take on the role of the expert was independent of the importance of most EPs placed on being empathetic and supportive:

You're in the situation as a human being, but also trying to be a psychologist as well, and they're quite difficult to do at the same time. (Interview 14)

I think you need to be an ally, and a guide, but not be, 'I know what you should do and you should do this'. (Interview 23)

**3.1.1.7 Willing to engage** All of these features though are dependent upon the consultees being willing to engage

The effectiveness is because of engagement, critical thinking process thinking, and then plan your own action plans, which you're also engaged in. (Interview 5)

At the same time, to know that the reason that everyone is around the table for this consultation is to try and shift that thinking in some way. And usually, you know, just by nature of showing up everybody does want that, even if they don't necessarily believe it to be possible, which is why I think those features of consultation are effective. (Interview 3)

Just general engagement from either the parents or school, and the willingness to, to change; the willingness to change their practice. (Interview 5).

**3.1.1.8 Consultee ownership** Several interviewees talked about how these features are effective because they help create a sense of consultee ownership of the situation. By being collaborativeThe consultees are more likely to buy into the process of consultation and are therefore more likely to feel they can be an active agent in supporting the CYP:

When people are active participants in a process, any process, they would be more likely to follow through with what has been agreed in terms of, whether that would be actions, whether that would be a specific approach that needs to be put in place. (Interview 11)

They retain some sense of ownership and some, er, sense of responsibility for putting in place what comes next. (Interview 20)

The point of that conversation is to leave something behind for the people who actually have power to do things and if you don't have their buy-in, then it's totally pointless. I'm struggling to think of a method, outside of consultation, where you could get that buy in and that information share and get to any kind of meaningful endpoint. (Interview 3)

**3.1.1.9 Realistic** Another commonly discussed mechanism for effective consultations was the increased chance of realistic recommendations and outcomes being established. If the ideas generated are more co-constructed and built on shared knowledge, they are more likely to be feasible:

It also allows for reality, so if you've, you know, hopefully you're not getting ideas or strategies that are completely unworkable. So it should be based within the practice of the class teacher. So it isn't, you know, somebody coming in and going, 'Well, you need to do this three times a day with, you know, dah, dah, dah, dah, dah'. (Interview 21)

The feedback we get from parents that things are very grounded in reality, that the ideas that we're talking about makes sense because they come from a position of understanding and making sense of whatever is being brought into the room and, sort of, helping to manage some of the complexity. (Interview 27)

**3.1.1.10 Consultees as experts** The final code from this theme relates to treating the consultees as experts of their own area:

I try to make it collaborative because erm, my stance is that we all bring our own expertise; they're experts as parents, they're experts on their child. Erm and as teachers, they're experts on, you know, teaching that child and teaching in general. (Interview 8)

I think they're effective because, we're capitalising on that idea that people are experts in their own lives. (Interview 22)

### **3.1.2 EP skills and knowledge**

The other most common theme related to the psychological knowledge and skills EPs need to use when engaging in consultation.

**3.1.2.1 Knowledge** 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). Other specific psychological areas included using principles from Narrative Therapy (Interview 17), an ecosystemic model (Interview 2), social constructivism (Interview 6), as well as psychologies such as positive psychology (Interview 9). Some interviewees saw their role as “sharing... and disseminating psychological theory” (Interview 18) and that consultation “helped [them] really use psychology with [their] schools” (Interview 11).

The use of a model was often spoken positively as “[giving] the consultation a structure” (Interview 11) and for one interviewee they were the most important part:

For me, the models of psychology are the number one priority, they have to be systemic and interactionist so that all behaviour is seen as a function of the person and the situation. So that if a concern is being described, we want to be looking at finding out about what was happening at the time or when it was happening. (Interview 27)

**3.1.2.2 Presenting problem** Many EPs mentioned specific features within different models. One such feature was exploring the presenting problem from the problem-analysis framework (Monsen et al., 1998):

Getting an idea of what their main concerns are because when it feels very big, it’s really the problem feels very big, the issue with the child is very messy. There’s a lot going on, it can be hard to know where to start. So focusing them down is something that I do where I’m like ‘What’s your main concern?’. (Interview 8)

This code also involved “further clarification around the difficulties” (Interview 11) and a discussion of “What are the conditions around it” (Interview 12).

**3.1.2.3 Treatments** Another code relating to the problem-analysis framework was the discussion of treatments for the CYP. This involved “planning recommendations” (Interview 2) and using the consultation “as a space where we can really drill down into exactly what you mean when you say ‘A social skills group’” (Interview 2) as you can decide what the intervention is specifically for.

**3.1.2.4 Suggesting solutions** Another frequently mentioned model was the Solution-focused model (Murphy, 1997). A key part of this model is suggesting solutions and several interviewees brought this idea up. These are typically recommendations “to be done at home and at school” (Interview 12) Several EPs stated they were happy to make recommendations but simultaneously did not want to dominate the consultation (Interview 11). The importance of taking on board what the consultees said was also voiced by a few interviewee so that the EP does not make recommendations that have already been tried (Interview 13)

**3.1.2.5 Exception seeking** Another code relating to the Solution-focused model was the discussion of times when the main difficulty is reduced or absent:

Building all those principles of, yes, psychology that we’re trained with, and we’re taught to use: exception seeking (Interview 24)

Finding out about other contexts when it was similar and other contexts when it was different, so that you’re able to hypothesise about what’s happening (Interview 27)

**3.1.2.6 Reflective** A feature mentioned by almost all participants centred around the importance of being reflective. This included the use of “reflective listening” (Interview 1) and “[checking] back in with people... working with them just to understand, have they progressed on that journey” (Interview 16). Many interviewees brought up the importance of checking with the consultees “whether we did what we wanted to do, and if not, what still needs to be done?” (Interview 21).

The importance of being reflective was not limited to within the consultation; the structure of consultation itself should also incorporate reflection:

It might be nice within models that we have with schools, if there's a definite agreement that there is follow up or a review, if it's not by me, if it's by someone in the school, because that, that, kind of, ensures that what's discussed in the consultation is actually, you know, implemented and monitored. (Interview 14)

I also like to have a consultation as a feedback meeting at the end to again, sort of, revisit what we've discussed in the first session, and obviously, by that time, I'll have gathered information from other sources to use that other information to further inform what is going to be done about the situation and to answer their referral question. (Interview 9)

This reflective structure extends to the gaining of feedback from consultees. The importance of feedback was mentioned by several interviewees, for example: "we have to treat it as a cyclical process which has to be reviewed and evaluated so that we can use that feedback to improve practices" (Interview 1). Learning from peers through observation and critical reflection with colleagues was also highlighted:

I would hope that I'm a reflective practitioner and also, erm, having other people observe consultation, is really helpful in terms of trying to figure out, sometimes, what's going on, what made a difference. (Interview 21)

peer supervision is really helpful in terms of, er, helping your practice because obviously, you've got all that shared, sort of, ideas and knowledge and bouncing off each other in the team. (Interview 9)

**3.1.2.7 Questioning** The use of question was discussed by more than half the interviewees, using questions like "I wonder what would happen if?" "What do you think might happen if?" (Interview 25) to explore possibilities and develop understanding. More banal questions are asked to explore a situation to gain a fuller understanding (Interview 5) as well as exploring the context (Interview 27). However, as the consultation progresses, questions can be used to get the consultees to think about what change would look like for the CYP and how they could go about achieving it (Interview 8). Not only is the content of the questioning important, but the manner in which they are asked is a key factor "how EPs are asking those questions, and the types of questions they're asking and, erm, the timing of those questions" (Interview 15).

**3.1.2.8 Use of aids** A third of interviewees discussed types of supports that they use in their consultations. Tools based on person-centred psychology, such as Planning Alternative Tomorrows with Hope (PATHs) and Making Action Plans (MAPs), was brought up by Interviewees 16 and 17. The use of metaphors was endorsed as means to safely explore difficult topics (Interview 12), as well as "the Japanese problem-solving fish" and "blob trees" (Interview 10).

### **3.1.2.9 Preparation**

### **3.1.2.10 Reflexive**

### **3.1.2.11 Summarising**

### **3.1.2.12 Efficient**

### **3.1.2.13 Varied space for approach**

## **3.1. Strengths-based**

### **3.1.. Empowering individuals**

**3.1.. What’s already working** One aspect which was frequently discussed was the exploration of what was already working for the CYP. Interviewees talked about “[trying] to build more of a strengths-based and positive outlook, and look at what’s working well, to shift things on” (Interview 22) and “trying to find what has been tried, what has worked” (Interview 28).

**3.1.. CYP strengths** The exploration of the strengths and positive qualities of the CYP was also mentioned by several interviewees, such as: “it’s exploring skills and competencies alongside the problem” (Interview 27). One interviewee stated that the discussion of strengths not only helps keep the discussion more positive but also allows the exploration of difficulties:

Solution-focused. . . you’re trying to find strengths, but at the same time, the strengths, you, kind of, the inverse, you know, often is, the problem is going unspoken, perhaps, but often not, as well because parents and teachers will still tend to want to talk about the problem. You’re trying to make them think about strengths. (Interview 2)

Efficient Outside system Varied space for approach Assessment Changing perspectives Clarity Confidential Different views Documentation Education systems EP workload Goal setting Individual differences Key people Language Preparation

I think it’s always about, planning that structure. (Interview 19)

Preventative Questioning Rapport Reflective Reflexive Resources Space Supporting consultees Time

I don’t think you can have, say an, effective 20 minute consultation. It’s not a consultation. (Interview 26)

Understanding of SEN Use of aids Way forward Willing to engage

**Intervention** By creating a safe space for exploration and potential challenging, another key feature of consultation can happen: the consultation acting as an intervention itself. This can be done

POTENTIALLY USE ELSEWHERE The EP is gathering and summarising the ideas and saying, ‘Given what we’ve discussed, and the ideas we’ve heard so far, what is going to make most sense for this young person and what’s going to make most difference’? And then it’s getting the ideas from the people. (Interview 27)

Collaboration was identified as a key factor not only because it increased the consultee’s willingness to engage but because it increased the chances of the recommendations being put in place:

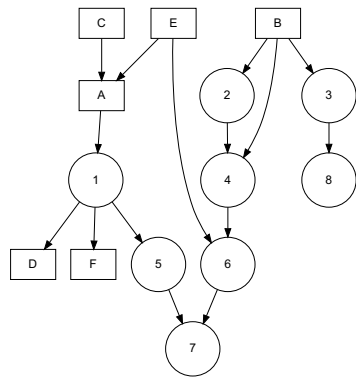
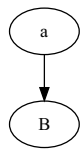
I think if you have a really good consultation and you can actually problem solve together, and the people that you’re consulting with, actually come up with some of the ideas, then it’s much more likely for those interventions to happen. (Interview 20)

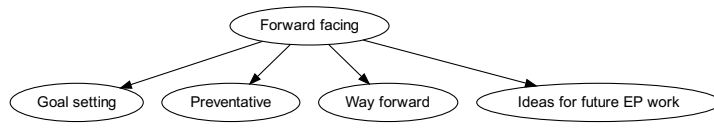
it underpins all of the work that we do with schools. So I would say every school visit, team meetings, organisational level consultations, we would be applying the same psychologies, the same frameworks. (Interview 27)

## 3.2 Questionnaire

### Observations

No pair-wise simplifications could be made as there were no consultations which saw change which differed by only 1 feature.





Error: syntax error in line 1 near 'emasc'

## Discussion

Buy-in was facilitated by the EP not taking an expert stance and creating a collaborative and sharing environment for the consultees to explore their thoughts.

# Appendices

## Appendix 1

- 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?
- 16) What has changed with regards to your consultation work during lockdown?
- 17) How have you found this change?
- 18) Advantages/disadvantages?
- 19) Will you do anything differently after this is over?
- 20) Should the service/EPs as a whole do things differently?

## Appendix 2

Categories	Definition
Info gather	Fact finding or discussion of non-key concern(s).
Suggesting solutions	The EP volunteering a solution to the presenting concern.
CYP strengths	Any discussion of the CYP's positive qualities: attributes, personality, actions, etc.
Discussing what's already working	Discussion (including evaluation) of any intervention/change which has improved the current situation for the CYP.
Everyone's contributions valued	Consultees giving their view on something e.g. presenting hypotheses, suggesting solutions, or the EP explicitly acknowledging someone for their contribution. Not just the consultee(s) speaking/giving an answer to a factual question.
Understanding presenting problem	Discussion of any aspect of the main presenting concern(s) including scope, environmental factors, exceptions, etc. and why a problem may be present [sheridan_school_2000]
Summarising	The EP saying back what has previously been stated by consultees in the consultation (potentially building on it but not necessarily).



Categories	Definition
Planning implementing treatments	Discussion and agreement between the consultant and consultee on any interventions that will be implemented to support the CYP [atsheridan_school_2000].
EP using expert knowledge	EP discussing topics which they have knowledge of (from both professional experience and academic reading) within school psychology theory and practice.
EP explaining role	EP explicitly talking about the work of an EP and its purpose.
Setting out plan for consultation	Discussion of what will happen over the course of the consultation.
Ideas for future EP work	Discussion of potential work an EP can do in the future, such as consultation, assessment, observation, etc.
Empowering individuals	Any comments or questions which aim to increase the skills of the consultees (teachers, parents, SENCOs, etc.)/upskilling consultees so they can solve their problems [atnolan_process_2014].
School knowledge	Any comments or questions which increase understanding of how the school works.

## Appendix 3

Level	feature
Solution-focused	Suggesting solutions; Highlighting the strengths of the CYP; Discussing what is already working; Exploring exceptions; Suggesting ideas for future EP work.
Problem analysis	Fully understanding the presenting problem; How to implement the interventions
Organisation and knowledge	Gathering information; Summarising; Using knowledge; Setting out a plan; Explaining what EPs do; School knowledge
Valuing everyone	Everyone contributing; empowering those involved

## References