
A Systemic View of Psychological Consultation in Schools

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Résumé

Les consultations psychologiques dans les écoles dépendent généralement de l'intervention d'un conseiller individuel qui s'adresse ensuite au client. Cette méthode ne tient souvent pas compte des progrès de l'entente systémique du comportement humain. On avance ici qu'un changement sera facilité si l'on considère le système d'ensemble qui est à la fois influencé par l'étudiant et aussi qui l'influence lui. Les interventions visant à des résultats optimums ont lieu dans le cadre de sessions où sont présents cadres scolaires et/ou parents, ainsi que l'étudiant. Cet article traite de diverses interventions et des situations qui ont une influence sur leur efficacité. Quelques cas particuliers servent à illustrer l'application de cette vue systémique.

Abstract

Psychological consultation in school has often emphasized intervention with an individual consultee who then deals with the client. This general approach has largely ignored advances in systemic understanding of human behaviour. This paper argues that change is facilitated when the wider system which directly influences and is influenced by the student is considered. Interventions for a maximum effect are delivered in consulting sessions, where school officials and/or family members are present with the student. The paper discusses various interventions and the situations which influence their appropriateness. Case studies are presented to illustrate this application of a systemic view.

A version of this paper was presented at the Canadian Guidance and Counselling Association Conference at Quebec City in May 1985.

A consultation model is increasingly becoming the preferred way of operating for many school psychologists. Caplan (1970) noted the confusion over the term and attempted to provide a restricted definition of mental health consultation. In his view, it is defined as an interaction between two people who are professionals, where one takes the role of the consultant and the other takes the role of the consultee. Any remedial action is the responsibility of the consultee. It is the consultant's responsibility to educate the consultee regarding the necessary action which should be taken with the client. While this definition seems very confining, it remains a beginning point for the discussion of an interactive or systems view of consultation. The literature, which will be briefly discussed next, provides a broader view of consultation than the above definition suggests.

A number of different models or approaches to consultation have appeared in the literature (Gutkin & Curtis, 1982; Meyers, Parsons, & Martin, 1979; Caplan, 1970). The models seem to vary along three major dimensions:

1. Consultation may vary in terms of direct or indirect intervention. Direct intervention requires contact with the identified client to solve a problem, while indirect intervention focuses on contact with a consultee who interacts with the identified client. Often a student is identified as the client and the intervention may take place directly with the student or indirectly by consultation with teachers, administrators, or parents.
2. Consultation may vary depending on who is defined as the target of intervention. Traditionally, this is seen as being the student, teacher, parents, or the organization. The psychologist may decide whose behaviour needs to be changed and then focus either directly on the client or indirectly on a consultee who is involved with the client.
3. Consultation may vary with the theoretical orientation of the consultant. The orientation may range from such major theoretical positions as psychoanalytic, behaviourist, or humanistic. A wide variety of counselling techniques have influenced the current theoretical approaches to consultation (Meyers, Parsons, & Martin, 1979).

This paper presents an approach to consultation which advocates a systemic view where the student is seen in the context of the school and family systems. The intervention is direct and the target of the intervention is the system, rather than an individual.

Following are a number of general guidelines suggested by advocates of a consultation model compared with systemic guidelines.

1. The relationship between the consultant and the consultee should not be hierarchical (Gutkin & Curtis, 1982; Caplan, 1970). Both should be involved in the decision-making process with the consultee having the right to reject suggestions made by the consultant. In comparison, while a systems approach may assume a hierarchical relationship, it is the responsibility of the consultant to maximize motivation through consultee involvement in decision making.
2. The focus of consultation should be educational and not psychotherapeutic in nature (Gutkin & Curtis, 1982). Caplan (1970) suggests that personal problems of the consultee must be avoided in this process. He (1970) then goes on to discuss the lack of objectivity that consultees may have because of their overinvolvement and identification with their client. He states that most problems handled by consultee-centred case consultation are of this type.

It seems that there is a very fine line between improving psychological functioning in the classroom and avoiding the personal problems of the consultee. It also appears that psychotherapeutic intervention with a consultee might have a role to play where there

is a lack of objectivity. Systematic views advocate interventions of this nature.

3. Any interventions which result from the consultation should be implemented by the consultee rather than the consultant (Gutkin & Curtis, 1982; Caplan, 1970). Meyers, Parsons, and Martin (1979) have addressed the issue of motivating consultees to implement psychological principles with clients.

As stated earlier, it is important for consultees to be involved in decision making regarding the plans for a client. However, at times, certain psychological principles might be incompatible with their beliefs. Thus, it seems important that interventions are presented in such a way as to maximize compliance. The presentation of interventions is usually an intervention by the consultant instead of the consultee in a systemic approach.

This paper questions the focus and target of the consultation. It is felt that the nature of the consultant-consultee relationship cannot avoid a psychotherapeutic element. The aspect of motivating a consultee to carry out an intervention is itself therapeutic, if there is an attempt to alter the belief system. When a consultee's lack of objectivity is part of the problem, it is difficult to imagine how consultation could be anything other than therapeutic. In recognizing this therapeutic dimension, the consultation process can begin to use models of communication that maximize the potential and motivation for change (e.g., Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967; Watzlawick, Weakland, & Fisch, 1974).

These models are more interactive in nature, suggesting a more systemic approach to problems. Fine (1985) has also advocated a consultation model using a systems view. The next section considers the theory behind such an approach.

A SYSTEMIC VIEW OF BEHAVIOUR

Consultation models discussed so far have attempted to define the target for intervention as being the student, teacher, parents, or the organization. Such an approach assumes that problems lie within an individual or group of individuals. This is a causal or linear view of a problem. However, the problem may be the nature of the interaction within the system. Meyers, Parsons, and Martin (1979) acknowledge the importance of the importance of the interaction within the school system, but seem to ignore the importance of the family system in determining behaviour. Smith (1978) states that one of the most powerful elements in bringing about change in behaviour problems at school is the family system. Fine and Holt (1983) have emphasized an integrated approach that involves both the family and school systems. From a systems perspective, behaviour takes on a logical and functional meaning when

the dynamics of the system are understood. Minor (1977) concluded that behaviour influences and is influenced by the environment or system. Thus, to determine a cause may be unimportant. The task of the consultant is to determine the social significance or the meaning of the behaviour rather than the cause. A Milan group of therapists assume that the behaviour of systems is maintained by interactions which follow from commonly held beliefs or rules (Salvini-Palazzoli, Boscolo, Cecchin, & Prata, 1978). Once these rules are changed through therapy, there is usually a corresponding change in behaviour. The following example may help to clarify this point.

In considering a learning problem from a systems perspective, the two systems in which the child is involved become the unit of focus: the family system and the school system. Sometimes the interaction between these two systems also becomes important in treatment. Sawatzky and Ryan (1984) cite evidence which suggests that learning problems may serve a functional place in the family. In the family system, the beliefs that the family holds about the school system, teachers, education, the ability of their child to learn or the importance placed on learning, may be crucial factors in designing a treatment plan. If parents had trouble learning, children may be under the mistaken belief that they should not or cannot learn either. A family may believe that the school or a particular teacher cannot teach their child. A child learning in this situation, could challenge family dynamics or the equilibrium established which supports or even facilitates the child not learning. Perhaps only when these beliefs are successfully challenged will a child begin to learn. Thus, the main task of the consultation in dealing with concerns of the family system, is to ascertain family beliefs and alter them in a non-threatening and logical manner.

If the school system is the unit of focus, then the beliefs which a teacher and child hold about each other become the targets of intervention. Possibly the child feels that one cannot trust teachers, that teachers are less powerful than students, or that teachers do not care about students. These feelings might result in the child choosing not to learn to read, which may confirm the belief by the teacher becoming exasperated with the child. The teacher might believe that the child is stubborn, that the child does not have the ability, or that the child is choosing to exasperate the teacher. These beliefs may help the teacher continue to feel competent, in spite of a child who is not learning to read. Interventions which alter these beliefs may change the dynamics so the child may begin to learn.

Finally, the interaction between the two systems could be the area of focus. Usually the beliefs of the school system and family system about the problem are different. This may result in an interaction, causing a clash which perpetuates the situation as both systems unconsciously try to verify their own understanding or view of the problem. Consultation

where interaction is the unit of focus requires both family and school systems meeting together to challenge beliefs at this larger systems level.

Considering the beliefs of the school, family system, or their interaction is an example of a systems view of the problem. As different systems and system members have differing views of the problem, all must be seen as contributing to the current situation. Each belief is equally important and is not necessarily true or untrue. An individual's reality is due only to perceptions which are chosen by that individual. These beliefs are often chosen by the way an individual interprets the things other significant people do and say. Problems usually arise when verbal and non-verbal messages in significant others are contradictory. Consequently, the consultation must accept the views presented by all system members and methodically offer beliefs which challenge the system through appropriate questioning and interventions.

A number of writers have attempted to delineate models for working with school problems using the school and family systems (Wendt & Zake, 1984; Fine & Holt, 1983; Green & Fine, 1980; Aponte, 1976). One of the most comprehensive models for practice is that of Fine and Holt (1983).

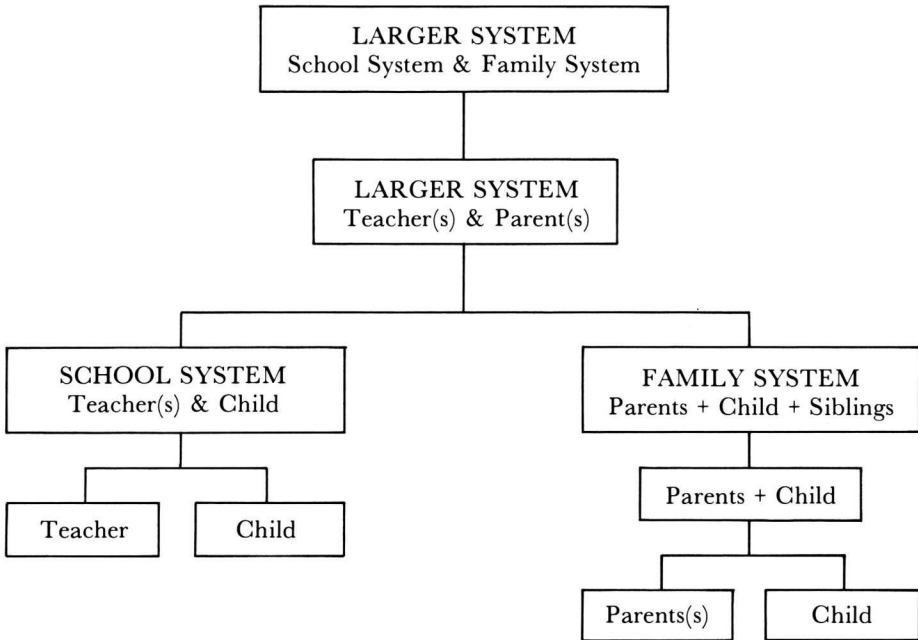
The family and school systems can be seen as two systems which overlap, with the interface being the child in school. When problems exist with the child, it is common for one system to blame the other system for the problems. This type of linear analysis is not productive in bringing about solutions. The suggestion of Fine and Holt (1983) of having a larger systems meeting consisting of family and school is an important initial step in understanding and formulating hypotheses about the problem. Sometimes, such a meeting is sufficient to challenge existing beliefs and change the dynamics of the system. Following a larger systems meeting, Fine and Holt (1983) suggest that the focus of intervention may then involve short-term family counselling or consulting with the teacher or with the family.

While it may be useful to consult with the family system, it is felt that the school system should also be seen as a target of intervention. From a systems point of view, the teacher should be viewed as part of the school system and should be seen with the child to emphasize the systemic nature of the problem at school. To merely consult with the teacher as Fine and Holt (1983) suggest, might be seen as a linear view with the child being responsible for the behaviour and the teacher correcting the problem by solutions offered in the consultation. This might also reinforce the idea in the teacher's mind that the child has the problem. Seeing the school system as a target for intervention reinforces the circular nature of problems at school.

The school system often appears to be more interested in change than does the family system. Thus, it is an ideal focus for intervention. At times a more pragmatic view requires the consultant to work with

FIGURE 1

Levels of intervention: Balancing the ideal and pragmatic concerns of a systems perspective.



smaller systems or subsystems rather than the ideal of a larger system. A child-teacher unit can be an effective compromise at school.

Figure 1 presents various levels of intervention. Systems consultation can often successfully be accomplished at the “school system” or “family system” level. However, practical considerations may require one of the other levels of intervention. Types of intervention will be considered in the next section.

INTERVENTION STRATEGIES

Strategies for treating systems will be considered under two headings which have been associated with approaches for changing family systems. They will be broadened to encompass strategies for changing school systems as well.

Structural Intervention

A structural approach determines the alliances and coalitions in the system and intervenes to correct inappropriate structures. In the family, Minuchin (1974) speaks of the boundaries that exist between subsystems or parts of the family. The boundaries may be disengaged, represented as being too delineated or distinct; enmeshed, as shown by

insufficient boundaries between system members; or somewhere in between. In the family system, examples of some sub-systems are the spouse, parent, and sibling sub-systems. In the school system, examples might be the teacher-administrator, the teacher-child or peer sub-systems.

In a recent case, an eleven-year-old boy was referred because of his immature behaviour in the classroom. Although he was judged by his teacher to be capable of doing the academic work, he spent most of the day playing with toys. His parents were elderly and relatively uninvolved with the boy. The classroom teacher was over-involved or enmeshed with the boy, to the extent of being unable to enforce any limits. The teacher was considering failing him because of his lack of maturity. The treatment of choice was to intervene in the school system. The boy and his teacher were seen to discuss the behavioural problems. The consultant used an enactment to get the teacher to set some limits with consequences (Minuchin & Fishman, 1981). This proved to be a difficult task, because the teacher continued to check with the boy about the acceptability of the limits. A boundary was reinforced between the boy and his teacher by encouraging the teacher to set a limit independently of the boy's approval. With firm limits, the boy began to respond by improving his behaviour in class. However, with the change in behaviour, the teacher stopped applying the limits. Through a number of missed and shortened appointments, it became obvious to the consultant that a strategic intervention was required. In this situation, a number of administrative difficulties led to the early termination of the case.

This case highlights the importance of having the commitment of the school system to the consultant process. It also shows how systems maintain some sense of balance through the resistance to change, commonly referred to as homeostasis. Strategic intervention, to be considered next, is a less direct approach to intervention in systems.

Strategic Intervention

Strategic interventions are defined as techniques where each presented problem is the focus of interventions designed by the therapist (Stanton, 1981). The problems are those presented by members of the school or family system. Tasks are often designed which will bring about change in the presented problems, but which will also change the dynamics of the system. For example, in the case of a seven-year-old boy who was disruptive in class, it was suggested to the teacher that the boy was acting younger than his age and thus required her warmth and support. She was encouraged to place an arm around his shoulders each time he acted out in class. Through this process, the dynamics changed in that the teacher started to feel more positively towards the child, and the child no

longer got the desired result of the teacher sending him out of the room for his uncontrollable behaviour. His behaviour in class rapidly improved.

Haley (1979) conceptualizes problems around the hierarchy and rules of a system which determine who has status and power. When a hierarchy is inverted, problems become apparent. A hierarchy is inverted when children have more power than adults. In a recent case, an eight-year-old boy was very aggressive with his peers. He would often punch them and throw objects at them in class. The teacher was told that the boy was more powerful than she was, because she could not control his aggressive behaviour. To return to an appropriate hierarchy, the consultant suggested that she encourage the aggressive behaviour in a paradoxical manner (Brown, 1986). When the boy was aggressive in class, the teacher immediately took him outside the classroom to encourage the inappropriate aggressive responses. He was told that by throwing things and hitting people, he was showing that he needed to make these movements and must be given the opportunity to exercise in this manner. When the boy refused to perform the movements, the teacher encouraged him to perform the actions by physically assisting him in the behaviour. This was done for about five minutes on each occurrence of aggression. Within two weeks, the aggressive behaviour had disappeared. By encouraging the behaviour, the teacher took control of the situation, thus correcting the inverted hierarchy. The strategies discussed above suggest a radical departure from many currently accepted modes of psychological consultation. The next section considers some of the issues involved in using a systemic perspective.

ISSUES INVOLVED IN SYSTEMIC CONSULTATION

Although there are some negative aspects to implementing systemic consultation, there are also a number of positive points. One of the advantages of the systems approach is that it does not require the regularity of interviews of some other methods. For strategic consultations, interviews have the maximum effect by spreading them between two- to four-week intervals. This means that the psychologist is available for consultation on a larger number of cases. Involving various members of the system through the use of tasks, is a way of encouraging a focus on the behaviour between sessions. This may increase the chances of success through increased awareness. The methods employed in systemic consultation are usually short-term, which again permits consultation on a larger number of cases. The number of interviews often range between one and ten with the norm being approximately four or five. Non-systemic consultation approaches often involve only one or two sessions. The effectiveness of such limited approaches is questionable because of a

seemingly inadequate follow-up. Thus, the above factors help to make a systems approach viable, given the caseloads of most consulting psychologists in schools.

The major problem for the school psychologist is changing from the linear role of psychometrist or consultant to the teacher, to a more systemic role of a systems consultant. Some of the problems from the writer's experience will be considered below.

1. Not all teachers are comfortable with a systems approach. They do not often see themselves as part of the system which maintains the problem. Seeing a teacher with a child reinforces the idea that the child and teacher are part of the same system. It is sometimes threatening for a teacher to have parents at a meeting. Some teachers are resistant to such an approach because they have been taught that psychological assessment is the way to find out what is wrong with a child. Fine and Holt (1983) also note this problem when they speak of the homeostatic quality of systems, which is to resist change. Experience with the approach and a chance to see success are crucial for teachers to feel more comfortable with the procedures involved.
2. Teachers often feel uncomfortable with the style of interviewing which emphasizes asking one person about another's feelings, thoughts, and behaviours. They tend to redirect the question to the person on whom they have been asked to comment. However, this valuable style of interviewing maximizes the new information which is generated into the system (Salvini-Palazzoli, Bascolo, Cecchin, & Prata, 1980). Often a word in the session about the style of interviewing helps to set the norm and makes teachers feel more comfortable with the procedure.
3. In a sense, teachers are placed in the role of client by this approach. Fine & Holt (1983) point out the difficulty with this when they speak of the ethics involved. However, the ethics involved with the teacher should not differ from the ethical concerns with a student. Where a trust relationship is built up between the psychologist and the teacher, the client role does not seem to provide undue concern. It simply acknowledges an expertise which the consultant possesses or a form of expert power. Where this is not the case, some time may need to be spent discussing the procedure and its rationale. At times, this type of consultation cannot be used, and a different level of intervention must be selected.
4. There are a number of pragmatic concerns which influence the implementation of a systems model. Finding an acceptable time for school and family systems to meet can be difficult. Often meetings need to occur before school begins, after school ends, or during

teachers' preparation times. It is often possible to have a classroom teacher relieved by an administrator or resource teacher so that such a meeting can take place. It is sometimes impossible to involve all members from both the school and the family systems. As compromises are made, the effectiveness of the consultation may be decreased. However, the preferred method of treatment might be the school or the family system. In such situations, intervention at a smaller systems level might be more effective than an alternative approach.

5. Psychologists might feel uncomfortable with the approach. Fine and Holt (1983) write about the competency issue. This is a major concern because the approach is very technical and certainly requires specialized training and supervision in intervention with systems. Because of the lack of expertise and the well-entrenched, traditional psychological assessment and consultation role, it is difficult for psychologists to change. For school psychologists to change their manner of consultation, they will need to become more familiar with it. Without extensive training, it is unlikely that such a change will ensue. It seems that a change to systems consultation could only occur with a committed in-service trainer providing both theory and supervision.

In summary, systems consultation seems to be a way of understanding classroom behaviour that provides for many levels and types of intervention. Facilitating change in systems ensures more stability to support changed behaviour. The strategies they learn may be helpful with other students and may also change their own overall approach. By working with the family systems, change is brought about which may facilitate improved classroom behaviour. As Fine and Holt (1983) note, the systems approach has not been adequately researched. Evaluation research is lacking for this new approach to consultation. However, from the case studies attempted so far, its effectiveness seems to be promising.

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