February 2008

The State of Scientific Research in School Consultation

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Handbook of
Research in
School Consultation

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Overview

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The overall state of scientific research in school consultation may be best characterized as promising but underdeveloped at present. However, it is decidedly not the goal of this chapter to provide a comprehensive review of the school consultation research literature that supports this assessment, largely because other handbook chapters successfully accomplish this goal. Instead, the two major purposes of chapter 1 are to establish an overall context for the handbook and to offer a preview of the book's content. To achieve these purposes, we present background issues, delineate significant influences on school consultation research and practice, specify the purpose of the handbook, and introduce its contents.

BACKGROUND ISSUES

Consultation within the human service professions represents an indirect model of delivering educational and mental health services by which a professional with specialized expertise (i.e., consultant) and a staff member (i.e., consultee) work together to optimize the functioning of a client in the staff member's setting. Consultation is regarded as an *indirect* helping approach because a consultant generally does not work directly with clients but rather helps clients through direct interactions with consultees. The two fundamental goals of consultation are to enhance services to clients and to increase consultees' capacities to deal with similar situations in the future (Gutkin & Curtis, 1999; Zins, Kratochwill, & Elliott, 1993).

There are several traditional aspects of consultation that distinguish it from other helping processes, such as supervision, teaching, and counseling (Caplan, 1970; Conoley & Conoley, 1982). These aspects include the

- triadic nature of consultation, involving a consultant and one or more consultees and clients;
- assumption of the optimal working relationship between a consultant and consultee (described as coordinate and nonhierarchical);
- direct focus of consultation on consultee work-related problems rather than personal problems;

- retention of ultimate responsibility for client welfare by a consultee;
- freedom of accepting or rejecting consultant guidance by a consultee; and
- communication between a consultant and consultee regarded as confidential (within specified limits).

Owing to the evolution of consultation within the human services, variations on these aspects can be found in different consultative approaches (e.g., Brown, Pryzwansky, & Schulte, 2006; Erchul & Martens, 2002; Sheridan & Kratochwill, 2007). Given these many variations, a universally accepted definition of *consultation* understandably does not exist.

Psychologists and other educational and mental health professionals have been active as school consultants in the manner described since the 1960s, when consultation first appeared in a formal sense in U.S. schools (Alpert and Associates, 1982; Sarason, 1971). Accounts of the practice of school consultation occurring some 40 years ago typically are narrative case studies of external consultants who, after negotiating entry with the school principal, proceeded to work with teacher consultees, either individually or in small groups (e.g., Newman, 1967; Weinstein, 1982). Often, the overt focus on a particular student client served as a springboard for discussion of a wide range of issues pertinent to teachers' professional functioning and development. Due to the prominence of psychoanalytic thought at the time, there is a strong presence of mental health consultation (Caplan, 1964, 1970) in these case studies.

In the 1970s, the rise of behaviorism saw the development and greater use of behavioral consultation approaches (e.g., Bergan, 1977; Tharp & Wetzel, 1969), a trend still evident in the schools (Kratochwill, Elliott, & Stoiber, 2002). The relative popularity of school-based behavioral consultation has been attributed to its well-operationalized interview procedures and reliance on applied behavior-analytical techniques, which have been shown to be effective in intervening with children's academic and adjustment problems (Martens, 1993). Of course, other models besides mental health consultation and behavioral consultation have been evident in schools over time.

Many graduate training programs in school psychology, special education, school counseling, counseling psychology, clinical psychology, and community psychology offer training in consultation, and most professionals currently practicing in these specialties spend some portion of their day engaged in consultation. For example, surveys of practitioners indicate that about 20% of the typical school psychologist's time is spent on activities related to consultation (Fagan & Wise, 2000), and the practitioner would prefer to spend more time (i.e., 31–40%) on consultation (Costenbader, Swartz, & Petrix, 1992). As in earlier times, school psychologists today consult with classroom teachers on students' academic, behavioral, and social problems. Though less common, school psychologists also consult at higher systems levels by working with administrators and other personnel to develop policies and programs that affect teachers, parents, students, and others (Erchul & Martens, 2002).

Despite the documented prevalence of consultation in schools, however, its research base has lagged considerably behind its practice (e.g., Gresham & Kendell, 1987; Gutkin, 1993) and therein lies the raison d'être for the *Handbook of Research in School Consultation: Empirical Foundations for the Field*. In essence, as a volume for both producers and consumers of school consultation research, the handbook attempts to lay a foundation for approaches to school consultation that are based on the best-available empirical evidence.

SCHOOL CONSULTATION: INFLUENCES ON RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

That school consultation is here to stay is not in dispute. Therefore, rather than building a case for why it should continue to exist, we proceed by acknowledging some of the forces that shape practice

and research trends in school consultation. Drawing mainly from a school psychology perspective, we offer some examples of notable influences on the present and future of school consultation. This selective listing is built around philosophical, legislative, and empirical influences.

Philosophical Influences

From early (Caplan, 1964) to more contemporary writings (e.g., Zins & Erchul, 2002), a significant undercurrent in the consultation literature is that consultation is concerned with the prevention of mental illness and educational failure. Although the terms primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention essentially have been replaced by the labels universal, selective, and indicated prevention, respectively (Gordon, 1987), the consistent message is that consultants work with consultees on existing problems mainly in the service of preventing the occurrence of future problems. Evidence supporting school consultation's primary/universal prevention purpose generally has been documented by reductions in number of referrals for special education services following consultation (e.g., Ponti, Zins, & Graden, 1988). This evidence is limited, however, to the point that it perhaps is more accurate to conclude that school consultation serves a secondary/selective or tertiary/indicated purpose rather than a primary/universal one (Zins, 1995). Thus, consistently attaining the elusive, perhaps aspirational, goal of primary/universal prevention via school consultation still remains a challenge.

A second philosophical influence on school consultation is the "paradox of school psychology" (Conoley & Gutkin, 1986; Gutkin & Conoley, 1990). The paradox holds that, "to serve children effectively, school psychologists must, first and foremost, concentrate their attention and professional expertise on *adults*" (emphasis added; Gutkin & Conoley, p. 212). Though seemingly running counter to the way many individuals perceive the field of school psychology, these authors construct a defensible argument indicating that, with the exception of remedial services (e.g., individual child assessment), almost all services that school psychologists offer either are indirect services (e.g., consultation) or result in indirect services (e.g., program evaluation). The implications of the paradox of school psychology are considerable and extend well beyond the scope of this chapter. However, there is great value in researching adult-to-adult interactions (i.e., those found in school consultation) to strengthen educational and psychological services provided to child clients.

A third philosophical influence on school consultation, based on both a prevention orientation and the paradox of school psychology, is a bold new vision for school psychology for the 21st century (Sheridan & Gutkin, 2000). These authors first specify the problems inherent to current school psychological services (e.g., reliance on medical model, ineffectual special education practices) and then propose a new comprehensive services model for the field. Their new model recognizes systemic realities of school-based services and, using ecological theory, promotes connections within schools, societal contexts, and families. Sheridan and Gutkin advocate that activities such as consultation, prereferral intervention, parent and teacher training, program planning and evaluation, organizational development, and family therapy be emphasized to address the paradox of school psychology successfully because these services "facilitate relationship building, and intensive, ongoing, and collaborative communication between school psychologists and strategic adults in children's lives" (p. 499). It is clear that effective consultation practices figure highly in operationalizing this new perspective.

Legislative Influences

School psychology as a professional specialty has been greatly affected by federal legislation, from most notably the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (Pub. L. No. 94-142), through its recent

reauthorization, the Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) of 2004 (Pub. L. No. 108-446). The regulations for IDEIA 2004 Part B, released in August 2006 for implementation during the 2006–2007 academic year, have several implications for school consultation; two of these implications involve response to intervention (RTI) and positive behavior support (PBS).

Regarding documenting a suspected learning disability, IDEIA 2004 Part B regulations permit an RTI approach to substitute for the well-known IQ/achievement discrepancy eligibility determination. RTI can be described straightforwardly as a series of steps: (a) the student is presented with effective/research-based instruction by the classroom teacher; (b) the student's academic progress is monitored; (c) if the student does not respond (i.e., improve academic performance), then the intervention is intensified; (d) the student's progress is again monitored; and (e) if the student still does not respond, the student qualifies for special education services or for a formal psychoeducational evaluation that may lead to special education placement (Fuchs, Mock, Morgan, & Young, 2003). It is clear that RTI, which places intervention ahead of formal eligibility assessment, will elevate the stature of consultation as a means to deliver research-based interventions in schools.

IDEIA 2004, like its predecessor, the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) 1997, emphasizes the importance of PBS. PBS typically is conceptualized as a proactive, schoolwide intervention effort that promotes discipline through "defining, teaching, and supporting appropriate student behaviors to create positive school environments" (Office of Special Education Programs, n.d.). Within PBS, the goal is to create and sustain universal (i.e., schoolwide), selective (i.e., small-group), and indicated (i.e., individual) support systems that improve lifestyle results for all children by minimizing the impact of problem behavior and maximizing the functionality of desired behavior. PBS is somewhat similar to RTI in that both are based on the same problem-solving framework and system of hierarchical interventions (Dee & Cowan, 2006). PBS's preventive orientation and systemwide focus is highly consistent with the overall aims of school consultation, and this consistency will serve to increase the prominence of school consultation.

Empirical Influences

As scientist-practitioners, we strongly believe that school consultants' actions should be guided by the best-available empirical evidence, and it is primarily this belief that led to the development of the *Handbook of Research in School Consultation*. Two specific ways that empiricism has influenced school consultation are through the (a) conduct of research studies of school consultation that link processes (i.e., independent variables) to outcomes (i.e., dependent variables) and (b) accumulation of this empirical knowledge through literature reviews, methodological reviews, and meta-analyses of consultation outcomes. Table 1.1 contains a list of major reviews and meta-analyses published since 1975 that have focused on outcomes of school consultation.

It is not our intent to summarize the results or themes found in these 17 sources, which together provide a comprehensive picture of school consultation research across time. We will, however, state a basic conclusion: Despite the methodological limitations that plague the consultation outcome research literature in general, the overall consensus is that much of the time the implementation of school consultation results in improved outcomes for clients and consultees. Certainly, other contributors to the handbook elaborate on this straightforward conclusion as well as draw out its subtleties.

What may be equally important to emphasize is the *datedness* of the references displayed in Table 1.1. For example, the most recently published meta-analysis of consultation outcomes (i.e., Reddy, Barboza-Whitehead, Files, & Rubel, 2000) — now 8 years old — examined outcome studies published from 1986 to 1997. Among other things, this scenario unfortunately suggests the field

Table 1.1 Major Published Research Reviews and Meta-Analyses of School Consultation Outcome Studies

Mannino and Shore (1975)
Medway (1979)
Medway (1982)
Alpert and Yammer (1983)
Medway and Updyke (1985)
Pryzwansky (1986)
Gresham and Kendell (1987)
West and Idol (1987)
Duncan and Pryzwansky (1988)
Kratochwill, Sheridan, and VanSomeren (1988)
Fuchs, Fuchs, Dulan, Roberts, and Fernstrom (1992)
Gresham and Noell (1993)
Gutkin (1993)
Busse, Kratochwill, and Elliott (1995)
Sheridan, Welch, and Orme (1996)
Reddy, Barboza-Whitehead, Files, and Rubel (2000)
Lewis and Newcomer (2002)

may be basing its conclusions for the current practice of school consultation on the study of past practice. Regarding the issue of empiricism, we believe the school consultation research enterprise needs to be more forward looking than it is currently.

In our view, a forward-looking perspective applied to school consultation research includes an evidence-based intervention (EBI) orientation. Also known by the terms *empirically supported treatment, empirically validated therapy,* and *evidence-based practice,* an EBI approach holds that a professional's actions should be informed by the best-available scientific evidence. The EBI orientation was clearly in its infancy at the time Reddy et al. (2000) conducted their meta-analysis, yet today its centrality to the fields of mental health (e.g., Norcross, Beutler, & Levant, 2006), professional psychology (e.g., APA Presidential Task Force on Evidence-based Practice, 2006), and school psychology (e.g., Kratochwill & Stoiber, 2002) cannot be underestimated. As a specific process of helping, school consultation will clearly benefit from more careful scrutiny within an EBI framework, and authors of several handbook chapters undertake this challenge.

A perspective on school consultation research that is focused on the future naturally will need to incorporate other scientific concepts in addition to EBIs. A sampling of the possibilities includes advanced statistical techniques (e.g., structural equation modeling), specialized computer programs (e.g., Sequential Data Interchange Standard-Generalized Sequential Courier; Bakeman & Quera, 1995), and less commonly seen data collection and analysis strategies (e.g., ethnographic methods). Again, handbook chapter authors address these and other concepts associated with the empirical study of school consultation.

PURPOSE OF THE HANDBOOK

Given the preceding context, the *Handbook of Research in School Consultation: Empirical Foundations for the Field* intends to accomplish several goals. Specifically, as coeditors we have attempted to develop a single volume that

- offers critical, integrative, and progressive coverage of the state of the art of school consultation research;
- plots the future of the field by advancing cutting-edge research agendas, thereby pushing researchers to maximize research methodologies to explore important new questions;
- strikes a balance between offering content relevant to those who are consultation researchers and those who wish to learn more about the research literature to become more evidence based in their approach to consultation;
- promotes a scientist-practitioner framework by providing guidance for consultation practice that is based on research findings when defensible within this framework;
- considers the essence of school consultation to be a process of helping that produces significant outcomes for consultees and clients and therefore focuses explicitly on the specification of, and linkages between, the processes and outcomes of consultation;
- identifies the aspects of consultation practice that have not been adequately researched to date; and
- ultimately offers a forward-looking perspective on the enterprise of school consultation, thereby moving it closer to other recognized treatment approaches (e.g., psychotherapy) for which a strong evidence base exists currently.

In short, the 18 chapters comprising the *Handbook of Research in School Consultation* together provide an exhaustive review of the current research literature and specify what we know and what we need to know about school consultation research. An overview of the handbook and brief descriptions of individual chapters follow.

DESCRIPTION OF THE CONTENTS

This edited volume is comprised of five major parts. Besides the introductory and conclusion sections, the three others respectively provide content corresponding to methodological, measurement, and statistical foundations of school consultation research; process/outcome findings from five consultation models utilized in schools; and process/outcome results from four consultation research perspectives that inform — or have the potential to inform — school practice. At the end of each of these three parts are commentary chapters that integrate themes found in the section's chapters and propose future research issues and directions.

Section A, Introduction, consists of this overview chapter and a stage-setting chapter by Jennifer Frank and Thomas Kratochwill. Frank and Kratochwill's chapter 2 functions essentially as the substantive introductory chapter one typically encounters in a lengthy edited volume. Some provocative questions raised by these authors include the following: Is problem-solving consultation an intervention? If so, is it an EBI? How can research on effective consultation practices and EBIs be integrated to advance research and practice in both areas? Their answers are at times surprising and lead to a thoughtful consideration of how a consultation research agenda may progress using multitier prevention and levels-of-evidence frameworks.

In Section B, Methodological Foundations, there are four chapters that inform the reader of the primary methods or "tools" at the disposal of the consultation researcher, how these tools may be used, and implications of their use. Chapter 3, by Ann Schulte, focuses on the many psychological measurement issues present in school consultation research. Unique to Schulte's presentation is her consideration of perspectives offered by several sources reporting current standards or best practices in treatment research and her application of these perspectives to consultation research. Frank Gresham and Mike Vanderwood's chapter 4 offers a comprehensive review of quantitative

research methods and designs in consultation, with a special emphasis on single-case experimental designs. They also highlight the importance of several sets of research standards as applied to the enterprise of consultation research.

Chapter 5, contributed by Joel Meyers, Stephen Truscott, Adena Meyers, Kristen Varjas, and Amanda Smith Collins, describes and critiques qualitative and mixed-method designs. The authors build a strong case for the application of these approaches to school consultation research and in particular argue for greater use of action research models. In chapter 6, Amanda VanDerHeyden and Joseph Witt comment on the preceding chapters, focusing on the scientific evidence that is needed to declare consultation an evidence-based practice and what makes a consultant effective.

Section C, What We Know: Process/Outcome Findings From Selected Models of Practice, is the lengthiest section of the handbook, perhaps reflecting that "consultation model" as a categorical scheme has been a time-honored way to organize the field's literature. The models considered are mental health consultation (MHC) and consultee-centered consultation (C-CC); behavioral consultation (BC); conjoint behavioral consultation (CBC); instructional consultation (IC) and instructional consultation teams (ICTs); and organizational development consultation (ODC). Each chapter in section C concludes with an extensive research agenda for the particular consultation model reviewed.

Chapter 7, by Steven Knotek, Maureen Kanuika, and Kirsten Ellingsen, describes and evaluates MHC, the original model of human services consultation, and C-CC, a modern version of MHC that appears well suited to the daily realities of schools. These authors discuss the future of C-CC relative to the model's effectiveness, transportability, and dissemination. In chapter 8, Brian Martens and Florence DiGennaro review BC, summarizing its past and posing future challenges to ensure the model will remain highly relevant to school-based practice. In their analysis, Martens and DiGennaro emphasize the importance of direct service components (e.g., client interventions, functional behavioral assessments) within BC.

Chapter 9, coauthored by Susan Sheridan, Brandy Clarke, and Jennifer Burt, offers a comprehensive look at CBC, the only model included in this volume that has a distinct home-school focus. Sheridan et al. summarize the model's growing empirical literature and conclude with a detailed research agenda that encourages CBC researchers to consider new settings, diverse clients, relationship effects, long-term outcomes, preventive aspects, and different methodological designs. In chapter 10, Sylvia Rosenfield, Arlene Silva, and Todd Gravois present ongoing research and program evaluation on IC and ICTs, two problem-solving consultation approaches that deal explicitly with the instructional context. As ICTs have been implemented in over 200 schools in the United States, these authors address the challenges inherent in moving from research to practice.

Chapter 11, by Robert Illback and Margaret Pennington, reviews the literature and research associated with organizational development and ODC. Although school-based ODC efforts generally have a limited empirical basis, Illback and Pennington note that PBS is one area that presents encouraging outcome data. Finally, in chapter 12, Emilia Lopez and Bonnie Nastasi offer their comments on the five other chapters in the section, noting integrative themes across consultation models and advancing issues for future study.

Section D, What We Know: Process/Outcome Findings From Selected Research Perspectives, is comprised of five chapters. In chapter 13, Colette Ingraham addresses the complicated topic of how to study multicultural aspects of school consultation. She reviews the literature through both content and methodological lenses and concludes by presenting sensible ways that cultural perspectives may be integrated into consultation research. Chapter 14, co-authored by William Erchul, Priscilla Grissom, and Kim Getty, centers on the role of social influence in school consultation as it plays out within consultant and consultee face-to-face interactions. Their review is constructed around the social power base and relational communication perspectives.

In chapter 15, George Noell points out the centrality of treatment plan implementation (TPI) to school consultation. Key questions he addresses are as follows: What are meaningful and practical methods for assessing TPI? How does TPI influence treatment outcome? What variables significantly influence TPI? Chapter 16, contributed by Jan Hughes, Linda Loyd, and Michelle Buss, revisits Caplan's (1970) model of mental health consultation. These authors review school consultation outcome research; present an updated version of MHC; and conclude with a discussion of implications of the model for training, practice, and research. Finally, in chapter 17 Susan Forman and Joseph Zins discuss themes found in the chapters of the section and highlight the importance of the consultee, context, and intervention implementation and sustainability issues within school consultation.

In Section E, the epilogue chapter, we attempt to integrate critical issues and offer some predictions about the future of school consultation research and its potential to guide practice. Although an optimistic note is sounded, considerable work remains to be done.

CONCLUSIONS

It has been stated that empirical research in consultation lags 20 to 30 years behind comparable research in psychotherapy (Meade, Hamilton, & Yuen, 1982) and 15 to 20 years behind comparable research in interpersonal communication (Erchul, 1993). On a related theme, we conclude this chapter by emphasizing that the practice of school consultation has developed at a much faster rate than the research base that should logically support it. Therein lies a central challenge and intended contribution of this handbook: to lessen the divide between practice and research in school consultation. We hope that the chapters that follow stimulate considerable thought and action, resulting in a greatly expanded scientific knowledge base that ultimately will lead to more efficacious and effective consulting practices in schools.

AUTHOR NOTE

It is with our heartfelt appreciation that we dedicate this chapter to Joseph E. Zins, who passed away unexpectedly in March 2006. During his career, Joe made many notable contributions to the science and practice of school consultation. Among these contributions was his service as editor of the *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation* and consulting psychologist to the Beechwood, Kentucky, Independent Schools. Perhaps most relevant to us was Joe's role as senior editor of the *Handbook of Consultation Services for Children* (Zins et al., 1993), the most direct predecessor to this handbook. Joe Zins was an ardent supporter of our professional efforts, and his impact on the field of school consultation will surely continue.

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