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Angaben zur Veröffentlichung / Publication details:

Woolfson, Richard C., Donna Bryce, Lindsay Mooney, Michael Harker, Dorothy Lowe, and Ellen Ferguson. 2008. "Improving methods of consulting with young people: piloting a new model of consultation." *Educational Psychology in Practice* 24 (1): 55–67. https://doi.org/10.1080/02667360701841270.

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Improving methods of consulting with young people: Piloting a new model of consultation

Richard C. Woolfson*, Donna Bryce, Lindsay Mooney, Michael Harker, Dorothy Lowe and Ellen Ferguson

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National and international legislation has increasingly placed a duty on professionals to consult with young people about matters affecting their lives. Consequently, conducting consultation exercises with young people in order to improve the quality of services available is becoming established practice in many areas. Following on from previous research which asked children and young people about ways they prefer to be consulted, this study developed a new model of consultation to enhance the effectiveness of meetings that young people attend in order to discuss their additional support needs. This model was implemented in a series of consultation meetings in three secondary schools, and was evaluated by examining the views of the key stakeholders (pupils, parents, school staff, visiting professionals) through questionnaires and interviews. The findings suggest that this new model did have a positive impact on the young people who were involved and was perceived positively by all stakeholder groups. This model can provide guidance for EPs and other professionals who wish to effectively involve children and young people in the consultation process.

Introduction

The increasing recognition that children and young people should be consulted and involved in decision-making about their lives is reflected in national and international legislation. Development of such legislation stems from the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), which was approved by the UK government in 1991, and additionally accepted in Ireland in 1992. This legislation makes clear the duty professionals have to consult with children about matters that affect their lives.

In England and Wales, this principle is given further weighting by the *Children Act* (1989) which states "before making any decision with respect to a child whom they are looking after, or proposing to look after, a local authority shall, so far as reasonably practicable, ascertain the wishes and feelings of the child" (section 22.4). Comparable legislation exists nationally in Scotland, the *Children (Scotland) Act 1995*, and Northern Ireland, the *Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995*, which take into account the obligations under the European Convention on Human Rights.

More recently the *Additional Support for Learning (Scotland) Act* (2004) came into force in Scotland in 2005. The Code of Practice for this act states:

> … the education authority may have to make specific arrangements to seek out the views of some children and young people … it is just as important and relevant for them to have their views listened to as it is for those who can easily express views.

This emphasises not only the need for children and young people to be involved in consultation but also the importance of adopting appropriate consultation methods to ensure young people are

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able to participate effectively in such discussions (for further examples of legislation both nationally and internationally, see Woolfson et al., 2006).

Making consultation meaningful

The need to involve children and young people in the development of services is widely recognised and, in recent years, numerous guides about consulting with young people have been developed (Connexions, 2005; Lightfoot & Sloper, 2002; Shaw, 2004; Sinclair, 2004). These studies provide a clear focus on the valuable contribution to service improvement that can be made through consultation with young service-users. However, the impact of such consultation can be undermined if young people suspect "tokenism", that is, if they do not have any evidence that their suggestions actually influence the development of services. Young people have cited tokenism as a deterrent to participation, and are reportedly "aware of this and resent it" (Stafford, Laybourn, Hill, & Walker, 2003).

In addition, Kirby and Bryson (2002, p. 18) note "there is an often cited assumption in the participation literature that services will be better if they involve young people in planning, partly because they will best respond to young people's needs … this assumption has rarely been investigated." This concern is also highlighted by other researchers (Carnegie Young People Initiative, 2001; Cavet & Sloper, 2004).

Although adults may consider consultation to have occurred successfully, this might not be reflected in the experience of the child or young person (Lightfoot, Wright, & Sloper, 1999). These concerns were also noted in Woolfson et al. (2006) which suggested that many participants recalled previous experiences of consultation that had been unsatisfactory because they could not express their views as they wished, or because they felt their views had not been properly acknowledged. If consultation is to be truly successful, the person being consulted must have some choice about how the consultation takes place. Therefore it is important to gain the views of young people regarding the effectiveness of consultation exercises.

Woolfson et al. (2006) ran a series of focus groups which explored children's views of consultation with regards to their additional support needs. The term "additional support needs" (ASN) has replaced the term "special educational needs" (SEN) and encompasses a wider range of children who require additional support for learning, for any reason. The results confirmed that young people want to be involved in identifying, assessing, monitoring, reviewing and planning their additional support needs – they want to have a say in decisions made regarding their future. Not only are they capable of expressing their views about how they would like to be consulted, but they hold these views strongly. Suggested improvements for formal meetings centred mainly around giving young people more choice. In addition, they want to be fully informed in discussions about their needs, to decide who should be involved, and to have some influence over the outcome of such discussions. These suggestions are consistent with the general advice about consulting with children, given in the more recently published *Supporting children's learning – code of practice* (Scottish Executive, 2005).

Current study

The aim of this current study was to pilot a new model for organising and running inter-disciplinary consultation meetings with young people, held to discuss their additional support needs, in order to improve young people's experience of such meetings. This type of meeting would usually involve at least one parent, a teacher and the young person themselves, although it often involved various other professionals, for example, EPs, learning support teachers and peripatetic staff. This new model for organising and running consultation meetings is based upon previous research (Woolfson et al., 2006).

Piloting this model addresses concerns previously outlined in the research literature regarding tokenism, by clearly demonstrating that the views of young people have been taken into account by directly influencing the development of a new model of consultation. Furthermore the current study responds to the assumption that involving young people in consultation will improve a service by putting young people's suggestions and ideas to the test in a real-world context and investigating the views of key stakeholders.

New model of consultation

The new model of consultation was applied to inter-disciplinary consultative meetings during which a pupil's additional support needs were discussed. The initial stage of development of the new model involved identifying key strategies from the findings of Woolfson et al. (2006) which, if addressed, young people thought would improve meetings. The eight key strategies identified are that young people should:

(1) Be fully informed about and prepared for meetings;
(2) Attend meetings only with adults whom they already know;
(3) Be asked their preference for who attends a meeting;
(4) Have a choice in how they express their views in a meeting;
(5) Be given evidence of being listened to during a meeting;
(6) Always understand the language used during a meeting;
(7) Be involved in decisions made during a meeting;
(8) Receive written feedback after a meeting.

Current practice and school resources were taken into consideration in the creation of this model and a deliberate decision was made to embed the model in a real-life context. Therefore the essential elements of this model for consultation were applied by school staff. The key role was that of the "mediating teacher", namely, the teacher who had the main responsibility for ensuring the eight strategies were implemented before, during and after the additional support needs meeting.

Implementing the new model

Each of the eight key consultation strategies were implemented as described in Table 1, below.

Training the mediating teachers

Teachers who accepted the role of mediating teacher participated in a training session, run by the research team, in the theory and practice of the new model. Following this training, mediating teachers were provided with:

- A handbook containing a summary of their role in the new model;
- A phone conversation script for use when seeking parental consent for the research team to contact them;
- A consultation checklist for use with each pupil, to ensure thorough implementation of each step of the model.

These documents helped ensure uniformity of practice when gaining informed consent from participants and implementing the new model. The checklist acted as a guide and prompt.

Guidelines for creating a pupil-friendly meeting

All professionals who attended an inter-disciplinary consultation meeting involved in the study (school staff, visiting professionals) received written guidelines which gave advice about meeting

Table 1. Summary of implementation procedures for each key strategy.

Strategy	Implementation procedures
Strategy 1	The mediating teacher held a meeting with the young person to inform them of the purpose of inter-disciplinary consultation meetings and prepare them to make contributions.
Strategy 2	Professionals who had not already met the young person were asked by the research team to make contact with the pupil before the meeting, either in person, by telephone, or by letter.
Strategy 3	The mediating teacher asked the young person their preferences for who should attend and tried to accommodate this (this may involve a professional providing a written report instead of attending in person).
Strategy 4	The mediating teacher asked the young person to state their preference about a way to express their views (e.g. speaking in person at the meeting, using an advocate, submitting a written statement).
Strategy 5	Before the meeting, all participating adults were reminded that during the meeting they should demonstrate that they are listening, for example by giving feedback in response to the young person's comments.
Strategy 6	Before the meeting, all the participating adults were asked to avoid using acronyms and technical jargon during the meeting, and to check that the young person understood the discussion.
Strategy 7	Before the meeting, all participating adults were reminded that during the meeting they should ask the young person for their suggestions and involve the young person in discussions about future recommendations.
Strategy 8	Soon after the meeting, the mediating teacher provided the young person with written feedback about the discussion and any decisions reached at the meeting. This was given to the young person personally.

the young person before the meeting, demonstrating that the young person was listened to, ensuring the young person understood the language used in the meeting, and involving the young person in decisions made at the meeting.

Method

Participants

Participating schools

Three secondary schools participated in this study and were selected according to two criteria – first, they expected to hold a number of consultation meetings to discuss pupils' additional support needs in the foreseeable future (which suggested there would be a pool of potential participants for the study); and second, they represented different geographical areas within the local authority. The schools' pupil populations ranged from 400 to 1450.

Pupils

The school staff identified all pupils who had an inter-disciplinary consultative meeting (that is, a meeting in which at least one parent, one teacher and the pupil themselves are present, and in which their additional support needs are discussed) planned within six months of the start of the research project. Parents and pupils were informed about the project and invited to participate. Approximately 20 young people were invited to participate. However, some pupils did not wish to participate in this research. In addition, a high attrition rate occurred when meetings were postponed or cancelled, and the timescale in which consent had to be sought further reduced the number of young people able to participate in this study. Consequently, nine pupils took part in

the study. A range of additional support needs and pupil ages were used in order to assess how appropriate the new model was for use with a diverse pupil population.

Mediating teachers

Mediating teachers for this study were teachers working within the school and were selected by head teachers. These were the teachers who normally arranged inter-disciplinary consultation meetings and who knew the pupils in this context. The number of teachers in each participating school who became mediating teachers varied, depending on the size of the school, staff structure and staff compliance. Six teachers undertook the training.

Parents and other professionals

All adults who attended a consultation meeting that was part of this study were invited to complete questionnaires which ascertained their views of the new model immediately after the meeting was completed; this included parents, teachers and visiting professionals (such as educational psychologists, home-link workers, teachers). Twelve parents and 40 professionals attended the nine meetings in the study.

Data collection techniques

Pupils: semi-structured individual interviews

Semi-structured individual interviews were conducted with each pupil before the inter-disciplinary consultation meeting (concerning the last meeting they attended, if they had experienced a meeting before) and after the new model had been implemented (about the new format of the meeting). The main areas discussed during the semi-structured interview were:

- How well each strategy was implemented (in both previous meetings and current meeting);
- How comfortable each feature made the young person feel;
- Suggestions to further improve the model of consultation.

Where the young person had previous experience of an inter-disciplinary consultation meeting, questions assessing how much the meeting had been improved on each of the eight key strategies of the new model (rated on a three-point scale from "less effective", "the same as before", "more effective") were also included in the post-meeting interview.

The "before" interview took place as soon as possible after parents and young people gave consent to participate (this typically occurred two schooldays before the meeting was scheduled). The "after" interview took place some time after the meeting in order to allow time for the young person to have received written feedback (typically eight school days after the meeting).

Parents, mediating teachers and other professionals: questionnaires

Questionnaires were used to gather stakeholder views regarding the new consultation model from all adults (parents, mediating teachers and other professionals) who participated in a meeting which utilised the new model. This was distributed immediately after the meeting had finished. Each mediating teacher completed a questionnaire for every meeting, and therefore there were nine completed questionnaires from the six mediating teachers. The same basic structure was used for all these adults, with some minor alterations depending on the person's specific role in the meeting. The main areas of enquiry were:

- The impact of seven (out of eight) key strategies of the model on the meeting, rated on a three-point scale (Strategy 8 – written feedback – was not rated as it had not been distributed at the time of questionnaire completion);
- The implications for them specifically of implementing the model;
- Their views on the new model of consultation.

Mediating teachers: focus group and individual interviews

After the model had been piloted in a number of meetings, six mediating teachers were invited to take part in a focus group to give their opinions, highlight strengths and weaknesses of the model and to offer suggestions for improvement. The areas discussed were:

- The eight key strategies;
- Challenges experienced in implementing the model;
- Perceived strengths of the model;
- Possible improvements to the model.

The focus group discussion was recorded, transcribed and then erased. The transcripts were analysed by two independent research assistants to extract the main themes. In addition, semi-structured individual interviews were conducted with those mediating teachers who were unable to attend the focus group. The same topics were discussed.

Results

Pupil questionnaire data and mediating teacher views

As it was acknowledged by researchers that some of the key strategies may have been carried out in previous consultation meetings, before the new model was formally implemented, the four young people who had previous experience of consultation meetings were asked how well each of the key strategies had been conducted in the past. Following a meeting run according to the new consultation model, all nine young people were asked how well each strategy had been implemented and their views on each strategy were ascertained. Mediating teachers were also given an opportunity to comment on each strategy.

Strategy 1: young people should be fully informed about and prepared for meetings

After having experienced a consultation meeting arranged according to the new model, seven out of nine young people reported being well informed, which is an improvement on previous experiences. Eight meetings were as pupils expected, although there were still some aspects of the meeting that were unexpected or had not been mentioned in the pre-meeting consultation. Seven mediating teachers commented that ensuring this strategy was implemented improved the meeting, and noted that the process of informing and preparing the pupil was very beneficial. Although this strategy demanded extra time from the mediating teachers, they did not see it as particularly challenging. Three teachers commented that they had already changed their everyday practice accordingly, as a result of taking part in the study.

> It was better than I expected. (Pupil)

> I do think it's very good preparation for the kids. (Mediating teacher)

Strategy 2: meetings should be conducted only with familiar adults

The new model made no difference to the number of unfamiliar adults attending meetings. However, when the new model was implemented, some of the unfamiliar adults made an effort

to meet with the young person before the meeting took place, with positive results. Young people still expressed concerns about the number of unfamiliar adults attending meetings. Professionals provided explanations as to why they had not met with the young person prior to the meeting which referred to the systems and processes to which these professionals adhere.

Mediating teachers commented that the strategy of visiting professionals meeting pupils prior to a consultation would improve meetings, but they recognised that practical constraints made it difficult. They also noted that it was preferable for the professional and pupil to meet face-to-face before the meeting, rather than by telephone or letter.

I think it is a very important aspect. (Mediating teacher)

I spoke to him [visiting professional] just before the meeting, that was good. (Pupil)

Strategy 3: young people should be asked their preference for who attends a meeting

At previous meetings, none of the young people had been asked who they wanted to be present. Although pupils were more likely to be asked who they wanted to attend their meeting when it was arranged according to the new model, three young people reported not having been asked. Those who were consulted had positive views of this strategy, and most were comfortable to speak in front of the people at the meeting.

Mediating teachers had mixed views about this feature of the model. They found that pupils typically did not make any changes to who was invited, and found this choice puzzling. One teacher expressed concern that a pupil might take advantage of this. Overall though, teachers thought that this strategy improved the meeting.

Could be difficult if the child objected to key people. (Mediating teacher)

It was good that it was my choice. (Pupil)

Strategy 4: young people should have a choice in how they express their views in a meeting

On previous occasions, none of the young people had been asked how they wanted to give their views at meetings. When the new model was implemented, all the young people were asked how they wanted to express their views, and even if they did not take the opportunity to express themselves differently, this was appreciated. Most of the young people were comfortable with the way they expressed their views. Although none of the young people in this study chose to express themselves in any unusual ways, mediating teachers noted that it may have been beneficial in preparing them to contribute to the discussion.

It may have helped slightly in having them think a wee bit more. (Mediating teacher)

It was better to have a choice, but I didn't take it. (Pupil)

Strategy 5: young people should be given evidence of being listened to during a meeting

Young people reported that they were listened to most of the time in meetings they had attended in the past. In meetings run according to the new model, however, a larger majority of young people felt they were always listened to. In general, mediating teachers commented that this was largely achieved even before implementing the new model. However, three teachers commented that highlighting good practice is beneficial.

It's good to be reminded of how a meeting should be focused. (Mediating teacher)

Bit better, 'cause last time I wasn't really listened to at all. (Pupil)

Strategy 6: young people should always understand the language used during a meeting

In describing previous meetings, young people expressed mixed responses about how much of the discussion they understood during the meeting. When the new model was implemented, however, young people reported they understood most, if not all, of the language used during the meeting and viewed this as a positive strategy. Mediating teachers stated this strategy was achieved and improved the meeting as pupils were more likely to understand what was said.

> At the beginning of the meeting they flagged it up. (Mediating teacher)

> It was useful. (Mediating teacher)

Strategy 7: young people should be involved in decisions made during a meeting

Pupils had mixed views on how involved they had been in decision-making during previous meetings; they typically felt their input had made a little difference to the decisions reached and three pupils were unsure about what should have been happening next. With the new model, young people had more positive feelings about their involvement in decisions and seven pupils commented that their input did make a difference to the decisions made.

Three mediating teachers thought that this procedure was generally in place before the new model was implemented. However, they noted that distributing the guidelines ensured that everyone attending the meeting was more sensitive to involving the young person in decisions. Overall, teachers commented that ensuring the young person was involved in the decisions made the meeting more effective.

> They gave me the opportunity to speak, suggested things and asked for my opinion. (Pupil)

Strategy 8: young people should receive written feedback about what was discussed and agreed at the meeting

None of the four pupils who had previously participated in a consultation meeting had received written feedback after that meeting. When the new model was implemented, three of the four reported that this key strategy had improved the meeting for them. In addition all other pupils who received written feedback responded positively to this (however, it should be noted that not all pupils received written feedback). Mediating teachers had positive perceptions about the impact of this.

> He was really pleased to have something formal about himself. (Mediating teacher)

> It was good. I had forgotten most of the things so it was good to see it again. (Pupil)

Stakeholder views on the effectiveness of each key strategy

All stakeholders were asked to make a comparison between previous consultation meetings and consultation meetings run according to the new model. Respondents were asked to indicate whether each strategy made the meeting "more effective", "less effective" or "just the same". Although all parents, professionals and teachers had previously attended a meeting about the child, only four young people had attended this type of meeting before therefore only four young people responded to these questions.

Mediating teachers' views

Mediating teachers were consulted, through a focus group or individual interview, to ascertain their views regarding the challenges and strengths of the model and to allow further improvements to be suggested. The following points emerged.

Table 2. Stakeholder views on effectiveness of key strategies.

Strategy	Stakeholder group	Less effective	Same	More effective
Strategy 1	Pupils	0	2	2
	Parents	0	4	5
	Professionals	0	15	25
	Mediating Teachers	0	2	7
Strategy 2	Pupils*	0	0	1
	Parents	0	5	4
	Professionals*	0	18	21
	Mediating Teachers	0	2	7
Strategy 3	Pupils*	0	2	0
	Parents	0	5	4
	Professionals*	1	10	25
	Mediating Teachers	0	3	6
Strategy 4	Pupils	0	1	3
	Parents	0	3	6
	Professionals	0	15	25
	Mediating Teachers	0	3	6
Strategy 5	Pupils	0	0	4
	Parents	0	3	6
	Professionals	0	9	31
	Mediating Teachers	0	2	7
Strategy 6	Pupils	0	0	4
	Parents*	0	3	5
	Professionals*	0	13	26
	Mediating Teachers	0	2	7
Strategy 7	Pupils	0	0	4
	Parents	0	4	5
	Professionals	0	11	29
	Mediating Teachers	0	2	7
Strategy 8**	Pupils	0	1	3

*These questions were not answered by all questionnaire respondents.
**Only pupils were asked to comment on written feedback. As all others completed questionnaires immediately after the meeting, written feedback had not been distributed at this time.

Challenges

Mediating teachers expressed some concern that professionals who could make significant input to an interdisciplinary collaborative meeting may be excluded if young people are given a choice in who attends the meeting. They felt that in most cases this could be overcome by submitting a written report but acknowledged the difficulties that may result from this.

> I think it could potentially be difficult … because it might negate the purpose of the meeting.

Strengths

Mediating teachers commented that all the key strategies of the pilot model of consultation represented good practice, and they were comfortable implementing each feature. In particular the initial meeting conducted with the young person to inform them about the purpose of the meeting

was viewed in a very positive light. Mediating teachers suggested that the model would be particularly useful for teachers who were new to participating in or chairing additional support needs meetings and that the accompanying documentation (the guidelines, the checklist) provided them with an easy-to-follow structure.

> It [the pre-meeting consultation] is very good preparation for the kids.
>
> The model was not challenging and represented good practice.
>
> I think it was putting good practice into a natural definite structure.
>
> It gives them a degree of ownership.

Suggested improvements

Although mediating teachers expressed some concerns regarding implementation of Strategy 3, they did not feel this should be removed from this model of consultation. Mediating teachers did not make any suggestions for improvement.

Pupil, parent and professional views

Stakeholder views of new model

Most parents and professionals felt that it was suitable to allow pupils some control over the format of the meeting. In addition, a majority of parents reported that the decisions reached at meetings were more appropriate when the child was involved using this model of consultation. All four pupils who had previously participated in collaborative meetings reported that using this model of consultation had made them more comfortable to participate in discussions of this nature.

> The meeting was well put together – much to the benefit of [my son].
>
> Allows him control of decisions and choices. Should make him more positive. (Parent)

Suggested improvements

All stakeholder groups were asked for suggestions to further improve this model of consultation through questionnaires, focus groups or interviews. No new suggestions were made by any stakeholder group.

> I think it was fine the way it was. (Pupil)

Discussion

In this study, a new model of consulting young people about their additional support needs was developed, implemented and evaluated. The eight key strategies of this model were based on young people's suggestions from an earlier study (Woolfson et al., 2006) and the model was implemented in nine meetings which took place in three secondary schools. The findings suggest that the new model had a positive impact on the young people involved, made the consultation experience more satisfying and more purposeful for them, and also enabled them to participate more effectively in meetings that discussed their additional support needs.

Most of the adults who participated in meetings using the new model of consultation considered the meetings to be more effective as a result. They also confirmed their commitment to the concept that young people's views should influence the format of the meeting. The mediating teachers highlighted numerous strengths of the model and identified changes they had made to

their own general consultative methods as a result of participating in this pilot study. The model was considered straightforward to implement, and the structure of the model and documentation was praised. Mediating teachers who participated in the study also perceived the model as having significant potential value in guiding new teachers towards good consultation practice.

Sixty-two per cent of stakeholders considered the strategies to have made a positive impact on the meetings, 37.5% considered the strategies to have made no difference, and 0.5% considered the strategies to have made the consultation meetings less effective. However, some stakeholder groups expressed apprehension regarding three of the strategies. Strategy 2 (meetings should only be conducted with familiar adults whom the young person knows) proved problematic to implement, as visiting professionals did not consistently meet with pupils before meetings. Professionals explained that time constraints often prevented them from completing this strategy. Despite this concern, professionals felt this strategy was worthwhile and this was received positively by pupils and teachers when it was achieved. Teachers and pupils continued to raise this as a concern when it did not occur.

Professionals and mediating teachers expressed some concern about Strategy 3 (young people should be asked their preference for who attends a meeting), although pupils themselves viewed this favourably. One teacher described a potential difficulty in dealing with pupils if they objected to the presence of an adult whose input was considered by others to be vital to the meeting. However, the guidelines advised mediating teachers to "explain the reasons for the teacher's [or other professional's] attendance to the young person. If [that person's] presence will make the young person feel uncomfortable, explain that everyone at the meeting will help him to be involved".

Parents gave a mixed response to questions examining the impact and effectiveness of Strategies 2 and 3. Five out of nine considered that Strategies 2 and 3 made no difference to the effectiveness of the meeting. It is not clear why certain parents responded in this way to these strategies, although it is possible that some parents responded in this way because Strategy 2 was not fully implemented. Further research is required to clarify the reasons for these parental responses.

Five of the nine young people taking part in the study were unable to comment on the impact of Strategy 8 (young people should receive written feedback about what was discussed and agreed at the meeting) because that strategy was not implemented, due to teacher time constraints and workload. However written feedback was viewed favourably by the young person when it was achieved. Teachers also acknowledged the benefits of this strategy and viewed this as an essential element of the new model. Many teachers did eventually achieve this strategy although the delay in distributing written feedback may lessen the impact of such a procedure.

Methodological issues

Collecting data from four groups of people who each played a different role in a consultative meeting elicited triangulated data. This proved valuable, because despite the limited number of pupil participants, data was collected from a total of 67 participants. The main threat to the validity of these findings is the relatively small sample size, that is, only nine meetings were actually included in the study. The reasons for this included multiple barriers to consent (parents and young people were anxious prior to meetings and often preferred not to participate in research), a high attrition rate when meetings were postponed or cancelled, and the short time span between initial planning of meetings and the date at which the meeting took place (which resulted in there not being enough time to carry out all the steps of evaluation).

Additionally it is worth noting that not all eight key strategies were fully implemented with every young person. For instance some young people did not know all adults attending their

consultation meeting and some young people did not receive written feedback. It is necessary to ensure that these strategies are fully implemented as they were viewed favourably by stakeholder groups.

All these methodological concerns could be minimised in future research by increasing the time period over which the study is conducted and by recruiting more schools to participate. This would maximise the number of potential participants, compensate for the high attrition rate and allow more time for each key strategy to be carried out effectively.

Future directions

Consultation has become part of the current ethos of working with children and young people. Continued research, which may inform practice further and improve the effectiveness of consultation meetings is therefore becoming increasingly important. However, this study included only young people within mainstream education of secondary school age or above. Previous studies have demonstrated that children of primary school age have been successfully included in consultations (Hoppe & Wells, 1995; Morgan, Gibbs, Maxwell, & Britten, 2002; Roose & John, 2003), and even pre-school children could be reliably consulted (Cremin & Slatter, 2004). Furthermore, consultation has been successfully carried out with children and young people with a variety of learning and communication difficulties (Clarke, McConachie, Price, & Wood, 2001; Minkes, Robinson, & Weston, 1994; Owen, Hayett, & Roulstone, 2004; Street, 2004). Therefore, there is scope to develop this new model of consultation with younger children, and with children and young people who have more severe and/or complex learning difficulties.

Conclusion

This study supports the findings, highlighted by Kirby and Bryson (2002), that services are improved when young people are involved in their development. The evidence suggests that young people's suggestions can improve their experience of attending consultation meetings.

All stakeholder groups (including pupils, parents, school staff and external professionals) held positive views of this model of consultation and mediating teachers expressed strong support for this model. Furthermore mediating teachers felt this was an appropriate model for implementation within a school environment.

National and international legislation places a requirement on professionals to seek the views of young people. Therefore, involving young people in consultation is an essential element of the EP's role.The positive views expressed by all stakeholder groups suggest that this model may be an appropriate way to ensure young people are successfully involved in the consultation process. Careful planning and commitment by adults involved in consultation meetings with children and young people can make the experience more effective and satisfying for the young people involved.This model can provide guidance for EPs and other professionals who wish to effectively involve children and young people in the consultation process.

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