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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the assets and problems that occur when a school system relies on part-time, external mental health services. In this case, the "part-time, services" are provided by local university (Yale) graduate students in the role of counsultants The greatest problem encountered is the attitude of the regular teaching staff who find the consultant's role very ambiguous as it often depends upon the degree to which each particular consultant develops it. Consultants are often regarded as either intruders or saviors; neither attitude is productive. Another problem is caused by the time lag during which the consultant can do little more than acquaint himself with the school system. Advantages include an expansion of services along with a general intellectual "recharging" for much of the teaching staff. In addition, new approaches to education reach the school system more quickly through the students' influences. Finally, the staff benefits from outside, objective appraisal. The author suggests that some problems would be alleviated through the use of an explicit, mutal contract so both the consultant and the school system know what is expected, and so that all regular personnel are informed of consultant's specific roles. (Author/HMV)

Consultation from a Consultee's Perspective

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Ansonia Public Schools

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Consultation from a Consultee's Perspective

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As the only full-time psychologist in a lower-middle class school system, an important part of my role has been to develop and coordinate our use of outside mental health resources. For several years one of these resources has been school consultation by certain staff and graduate students of the Yale Psychology Department. This paper will discuss the assets and problems inherent in relying on diverse, part-time, external mental health services for a school system. We will focus on the consequences of the presence and actions of outside consultants in the school system on two levels: the consequences to the system itself, and those that affected me as coordinator of these services.

To give you the framework for this analysis, let me first describe briefly the particular school system, my own history in it and my relationship with the consultants. Ansonia is a town where there is a history of distrust and misunderstanding between the community and the school system. It has a social and economic tradition of seeking occupations not requiring extensive educational backgrounds. Education is largely seen as an intellectual frill and a legal necessity. Related to this is a strongly conservative attitude toward change and a negative feeling toward doing anything about education that might increase taxes. Five referenda for a school building program have been defeated in the last few years. The result of community apathy and negativism toward education has been one of frustration, anger and poor morale among the school staff, many of whom are Ansonia born and educated. A recent bitter teacher's strike was one way the teachers retaliated and expressed these feelings.

In such a parochial, anti-intellectual community one feels there is much that can and should be done to make the schools more responsive to the mental health needs of the students and school staff in order to help facilitate the educational process. Because of a basically very limited school budget and a Board of Education and Administration ordering of priorities that has not placed mental health very high, the in-school mental health resources have been few. For the 4000 students in 11 schools we now have 1 1/2 School Psychologists, 2 paraprofessional social workers under EEA and a group of four paraprofessional ladies working as Helping Aides under Emory Cowen's Primary Mental Health Project model. These women work with psychologically needy children in a supportive and/or tutorial relationship. Part of my responsibility is to coordinate these services. In addition, we occasionally turn to community mental health resources, but these are very limited too. There is a regional psychiatric clinic with a very small staff, and there is the possibility of referring children for treatment to Catholic Family Services with its staff of two.

Even though outside resources are sparse, the school system is not utilizing them to the fullest extent. There is a clear dysfunction between need for service and use of services. For example, parents will not take their children to the psychiatric clinic saying they "might get worse" or it will "make them crazy." Appointments are broken, and there is little follow-through. The community as a whole does not push for more mental health services or avail itself of existing ones.

Because of these internal and external insufficiencies, the school system has turned to local colleges for help for several years. We have chosen to use this particular resource because it is school based and seems to us to give the greatest variety and depth of services. Positive experiences with this type of

mental health service have multiplied, and we have continued to open our doors to the Yale and other university consultants. It is a comfortable arrangement on all sides, both economically and professionally: the schools serve as a training ground for graduate students while we have additional mental health resources. In spite of our serious need, we do not see ourselves as a passive recipient of some crisis-oriented "ambulance service," but as an active participant with our consultants in promoting the prevention of mental health problems and helping to remedy situations untenable to students and school staff. We have an interdependent relationship, both sides giving and getting equally.

My personal history in this school system-university relationship is somewhat unique in that I was a Yale consultant to Ansonia before I became a psychologist for the Ansonia School System. My first contact with the Ansonia School System came five years ago when I was working at the Yale Psycho-Educational Clinic as a Staff Psychologist. One of my responsibilities was to consult to three schools within the Ansonia School System. Three years ago, with the coming demise of the Psycho-Educational Clinic, I went to work full-time in Ansonia as their first School Psychologist. Being a consultant and then a consultee has been a good progression for me, letting me see the school system from the outside, getting a feeling for its problems and alternatives for action before moving into a position of internal responsibility. It has allowed me to take the situation of being the only full-time school psychologist for over 4000 students in some proportion, going a long way toward preserving my sanity. Having seen the school system in worse straits, I can maintain some detachment in my continuing efforts to beg, borrow, or create additional psychological resources, coordinating those we have, and searching for new ones.

With regard to the Yale consultants, this coordinating role has consisted of helping in the initial contacts between school and consultants and being available for meetings on a regular basis. My relationship with them is reciprocal and interdependent. They have supplemented what I can offer the system in the way of psychological services, while I have acted as in-house resource for them as much as possible The consultants have relied on me for briefings about the schools and information about the community. We have had weekly meetings to discuss their progress and problems in their schools.

Several factors influence my thinking as a consultee in this relationship and have led to my particular perceptions of costs and benefits in this relationship. First, there is the uniqueness of my dual relationship with Yale and the school system. Another important factor is that the consultants and I share the same profession, which is also a potential source of conflict . Third, being a permanent staff member I feel more lasting responsibility for the services they provide. Other staff members tend to identify the consultants with me since I usually introduce them and this tends to reinforce my feeling of personal responsibility for what they do.

Any interdependent relationship involves relative costs and benefits. We have both those in our relationship with the Yale consultants. The assets of having these outside consultants are great. Their presence stirs up our values and mobilizes us individually and in groups, giving us support for change which we do not get easily from the school environment. For me, and I suspect for many of us in the school, there is an intellectual recharging when one talks to a consultant. New approaches to education come to the school long before they would in traditional ways. With the consultants we are encouraged to look at the

conceptual framework and all the implications of what we do. For example, several consultants have been very helpful this spring in our planning for a new class for emotionally disturbed adolescents. On the basis of their experience (five of them have taught the disturbed) and their ideas, I feel we have much better hopes for the classes' success than I would otherwise. Work in education can be a lonely and isolated business, particularly for teachers, captives in a classroom, and the chance to talk and 'let off steam' to a friendly, impartial person who will collaborate, but not dictate or evaluate, is a great help. The consultant offers us outside appraisals in as much depth and candor as we want it, of what we are doing in education and where we are going. In this he serves as a role model. With the flexibility of his many different skills and roles, and with the detachment of one who can view the system from the outside, but not be caught up in it, he can respond to challenges creatively. We have learned a lot in the schools by participating in this experience with the consultants. The consultants' eagerness to learn and ability to tolerate mistakes and to question and be questioned has helped to stir us out of our defenses. In many ways the consultants have been therapeutic catalysts, supporting us in our move toward a better educational program as well as doing these things themselves, helping in very practical ways, e.g., administering 40 psychological evaluations this year. As a model in perceiving the school's needs and then formulating an effective flexible strategy of intervention, they have been very helpful.

Our consultants have been more than facilitators or catalysts. As people, who they are as well as what they know has been important to us. Our relationships with the individual consultants have been warmly positive. In most cases the consultant is seen as an important part of the school staff, even on occasion as a

personal friend someone to be kept in touch with after he leaves the area. There have been many benefits for us in the schools in the consultant-consultee relationship. There have also been costs in this relationship, although some of the problems have had a positive side too.

The problems involved in having outside psychological consultants may result in frustration on all sides and in inefficient use of possible resources. The following then are some of the difficulties we incurred. A recurring problem in spite of five years of exposure to different Yale consultants was the ambiguous way in which the role of consultant was seen by the school staff. Many people wondered with perplexity why they were in the schools and what they were doing there. The consultants were also often broadly labelled as either an intrusion or a salvation. Neither of these roles is productive. As intruders, there was a defensive feeling they were there to be judgmental and to "do their own thing." When seen as our saviors, there was an inevitable discrepancy between fantasied solutions and what was actually done.

This selective perception was highlighted by the Yale aura which literally scared many parents and teachers. As strangers to the community coming from Yale, the consultants were stereotyped as ivory tower kinds of people. The separation brought about by feelings of intellectual elitism was strengthened when clinical jargon was used. Because the consultants were labelled also as "psychologists," their skills were seen as magical, and, at times, a penicillin-like, all embracing cure was expected for the school system. The delusion grew that these services would solve all our mental health problems. On the other hand, if overcompetence was sometimes mapped on to the consultants, at times the consultants were underestimated because they were seen as "students." The distance

between the consultants and the staff grew when it was felt by some staff that the occasional Yale student looked down on the Ansonia school system as generally ineffective, perhaps because the majority of his experience had been and still is in high status education. Another stereotype entered in as well. Like many small, parochial towns, Ansonia is very internally conscious, trusting only people it knows well, preferably ones who were born and grew up there. When the Superintendent introduced me at a Board of Education meeting he referred to the fact that I was, like himself, a "carpetbagger" in the school system. This carpetbagger reaction to outsiders was part of the cultural conflict between Yale and Ansonia, and caused misperceptions and distancing.

There is another problem related to role ambiguity. This is the seemingly inevitable defensiveness a consultee feels with a consultant. Because the contract is usually unclear, i.e., who is being helped, child or teacher, what is being observed and because the relationship is formal, flexible, and unstructured, which it has to be if it is to be helpful, many paranoid feelings may be projected onto the relationship. The teacher or school psychologist may anticipate the consultant's evaluation, expecting it to be a judgment. Teachers have said in a decidedly ambivalent way to the consultants, 'Are you here to psychoanalyze me?" The consultant may see the staff member as resistant and anxious, comparing him to a sick patient. Inherent in the consultant's thinking may be the idea that change is "good." This puts an inequitable pressure on the school system, for it is uneasy to be a focus of change.

At times I too have had these defensive, threatened feelings with the Yale consultants. In addition, I have tangled with a competitive feelings, i.e., who can be more help, the Yalies or me. These feelings, which all the staff have to

a greater or lesser degree, make for constraints on commitment and engagement in the consultation process. Research done by Yale students in the schools feeds these feelings too. We have had some bad experience with Yale graduate students and others doing research in the schools. A feeling of paranoia, bad faith, and a cynical reaction of being used has built up in the system's staff because of incompleted research, lack of feedback about results and a feeling of 'so what' when the results actually do arrive. This affect may transfer to the consultant relationship, even though it had nothing to do with a particular consultant or consultation in general. Expectations have evolved from the research relationship about how psychologists work in the schools.

The problem of entry is one we grapple with too. Consultants arrive at the start of the school year unfamiliar with their school and with the system (and perhaps even with schools in general). From the school's perspective, it often takes an inordinate amount of time for the consultant to stop learning about the setting and start helping. There may be no other way around this latency between arrival and helpfulness, for learning about a setting is something that has to be experienced. These issues are compounded because each succeeding consultant may have a distinct notion of what a consultant should do. Each consultant also brings his own area of interest, expertise and style of consulting. There may be problems if the consultant's interests are not what the school feels it needs, We have developed no fixed or even evolutionary model of his role, which in many ways is a strength in that there is flexibility, but which tends to confuse those staff members who have developed expectations about what consultants do based on past experience.

Consultants are assigned to schools on the basis of their skills and the

school's needs, e.g., a Yale student had previously taught in an open classroom and studied the literature on the concept. He was placed in a school with a new open class. This was done with some thought, but to many teachers, the consultant's presence may be felt as something dictated from above, a service imposed upon them; something they had no say in nor could reject. All of these entry problems subside as the year goes on; but they sometimes recur when a new student appears the next year.

Another issue involves defining the different tasks performed by myself and the consultants. Personnel in the school, including the school psychologist, as McNeil put it, often stake out claims for what is their territory and then build defenses against claim jumpers. This protectiveness causes resistance to change even if one appreciates intellectually the need for change. Rather than have territorial disputes, I have found it more comfortable for me to agree with the consultants early in the year about what would be most helpful to me and the school system in terms of their skills and interests. It has turned out that this often means that they take over some of my functions in a particular school. In this way there is no duplication of services or feeling of competitive infringement.

One of my particular difficulties lies in the question of loyalties. Besides the question of whose advocate I am within the school system (child, teacher, principal or superintendent), I sometimes have a feeling of conflict of loyalty between Yale and Ansonia. Because I am still involved with the Yale Psychology Department to some extent, at times resenting the students' freedom and envying their detachment, I feel that I am an interpreter for two foreign countries with a home in neither. In this way my move from consultant to consultee has broadened my boundaries, but made the question of primary allegiance complicated. There is

another kind of loyalty problem, and this is one the school personnel have had. When a school has become used to one style of consultant and a different person succeeds him the following year, confusion, conflict and residual loyalty to the "old" consultant may follow the arrival of the newcomer. At the very least there will be a comparison of services. New consultants inherit the aura of past ones' expectations are based on old experiences.

A final problem has been really the most insurmountable, but not unambiguously negative, one. This is the one of transiency. During the consultant's year, because of his own time pressures, he can only give a day or two a week to his school. He is not always on the spot when needed. Because the consultants generally spent only a school year in the school, and this shortened by the discrepancy between college and public school vacations, continuity of services was a problem. No one wants to depend too much on something that will disappear. Yet, teachers, partly in a defensive shifting of responsibilities, did tend to become dependent on the consultants. Children who formed a therapeutic relationship with a consultant had to terminate this relationship in June, manage alone during the summer, and begin to build a new relationship in September. The history of this transiency has been such, for example, that one particular teacher's group in one school had a different consultant-leader for four different years. Each consultant varied in his style and in his overt purpose and hidden agenda for the group. The teachers were an adaptable group and seemed to enjoy the variety in their meetings. They were, however, frustrated by having to stop and begin again once they really got going. Although the reality demands of the consultants' lives are such that transiency is inevitable, the school, perhaps unfairly, has questioned the worth of the consultants' involvement, partly because it is time limited.

Transiency is not altogether a negative thing, however, as Caplan points out. With a stable, long term relationship, the consultant loses distance from the consultee, which has characterized the helping process. The longer one is in a place, the less objective one can be about it. What must be done is to deal with transiency in a way that brings out its benefits as well as its costs. The school can learn to appreciate differences in consulting styles which result in a richer experience for school personnel, giving us multiple perspectives as the consultants vary in their viewpoints and ways of operating. Because the consultants are outsiders not dependent on the school for hiring, they are freer to evaluate and criticize the educational process. We can learn from this too. And, of course, there is the fact that if a consultant does not work out in a school, we know we don't have to live with him forever. It is possible to turn some of our costs into benefits.

Many of the so-called problems we have discussed are surmountable with time and communication. The consultant's year invariably ended with a feeling that he had learned a great deal and had been helpful. This was particularly true when there was communication about the assessment of success from either side. As far as the school goes, we have felt that there are more assets than difficulties in having mental health consultants in our system. That is why we have continued the program for five years.

To conclude this paper, let me mention a few possible solutions that might improve the consultant-consultee relationship and make the consultant's role more effective. It should be possible to mesh the consultant's interest with the school's needs more closely by making an explicit mutual contract. Before the consultant arrives, each school should consider what they could use the consultant for and

discuss this with the consultant An early series of negotiation meetings should serve to plan ahead the structure of the reciprocal relationship, both sides clarifying issues and redefining the contract as the consultant's role develops. During this process the school should be less reluctant to state its needs and interests rather than taking a nonactive stance. It is also important to be sure all school personnel know why the consultant is there and how they can use outside resources, so that they do not view consultants ambiguously or try to use them inappropriately or not at all. There will be less defensiveness if the school is clear that the consultant-consultee role is a confidential one, less threat involved if consultation and research roles are explicitly spelled out and not left fuzzy. With this type of contract, the consultant will accomplish more and there will be less latency between the consultant's arrival and helpfulness.

There is no rule that consultants have to take an academician's stance and "wait and see" how they want to structure their role. This can be decided early by mutual contract. To succeeding consultants in the same school, the school may choose to offer fewer options in functioning, requesting the consultant to fill the same role the previous consultant did with the difference of his own style. With all of these changes, some of the problems mentioned in this paper would be alleviated, and the school would be brought into the consultant-consultee relationship as a more active partner.

After measuring the costs and benefits of having outside consultants provide mental health services to a school system, I feel very strongly that the ledger totals up in black ink. The consultants do make a positive difference. They offer help, and it is effective. We need them. Without them we would have few resources

for serving the needs of the school staff and the children. Not only that, but with the consultants' help, we are moving forward toward a better educational program.