

The external school consultant as a proposed agent for school improvement¹

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ABSTRACT

Worldwide, but particularly in South Africa, school change and the provision of quality education for all, is essential. Schools are required to improve continuously to keep up with global innovation and workforce demands. To achieve this aim, the participation of different stakeholders such as school principals, school governing bodies, teachers, parents and even learners is essential. However, this involvement is often inadequate. In South Africa, with its restricted monetary resources, helping a school improve is a problem of great extent. In this regard, there is another role player that can be of aid, namely the contribution of an external school consultant, which is overlooked. As it is not a known role-player in the school improvement context in the South African sphere. This article, informed by social change, conceptual change and general systems theory, examines the role of external school consultants in school improvement as a beneficial role player that can deliver a service where essential knowledge can be imparted. As Education Consultants generally work as independent contractors, data were gathered through an internet-based inquiry, structured around open-ended writing prompts in which participants described their role as consultants. The sample comprised 17 credentialled international school consultants, selected by purposeful sampling on the basis of an active homepage, where they advertised and comments of their services were visible with data available to contact them. Findings indicated the value of a consultant's role as a versatile expert, an agent for school improvement and effectiveness, a professional in the service of the school community and an ethical partner in the consultancy relationship. Subsequent recommendations are that a professional body for school consultants be established and training be provided to school consultants to ensure uniform competency and ethical standards to provide an ethical basis to train and perform subsequent school improvement in schools in South Africa.

Keywords: conceptual change, ethical conduct in school consultation, expert specialist, general systems theory, internet-based research, Posner, Von Bertalanffy, Vygotsky

INTRODUCTION

School improvement has many faces. It can be about governance, leadership, faculty, students, curriculum, instruction, finances or any of the many areas related to school operations. There are also many role players involved in the process of school improvement. One important but overlooked role

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player, especially in the South African context, is the school consultant. External school consultation should gain more attention in the South African context because of its highly valuable aspect which concerns significance and relevance in the advice that can be constructed through this service to and in all sectors of the school to engage with schools to identify areas in need of improvement, to determine best solutions, and to ensure success (Hollinger, 2017). There can be no restriction to look for extra capacity of external agents in order to improve schools which would not only imply other resources but other agents as well in an effort to Africanise and decolonise schools. Agents within schools who address issues relating to school improvement may be defined as internal consultants (Dougherty, 2009). However, as members of schools, internal consultants may share the same 'blind spots' that the schools have towards a problem and therefore often prove inadequate to deal with the highly complex and multi-tiered nature of school-based issues (Sanetti, Chafoulas, Fallon & Jaffrey, 2014). Consequently, internationally, many schools progressively turn to external school-based consultants to implement innovation and change (Hargreaves, Lieberman, Fullan & Hopkins, 2010), who, as non-members of the organisations, are often better situated to introduce major changes (Avakian & Clark, 2014). The main question to be answered in this study is how the role of the external school consultant can contribute to school improvement. Potential difficulties arising from the consultancy process include the perceived idea that they are well remunerated but, in the findings, and recommendations this problem is addressed through the establishment of an organised Consultation body.

Yet consultants should be aware that problems should be managed by the consultant him or herself as difficulties may vary from situation to situation. The consultant through having the necessary background knowledge about the consultancy process will then be able to intervene professionally. The aim of this research was to encourage the role of the external school consultant for school improvement. Critically it is important to note that roles and perspectives presented is from an international perspective, but future research will address issues as this practice is implemented in schools locally.

Hopkins's (2001) categorisation of strategies to effect school change includes the participation of external experts such as school consultants as a valid means to achieve this end. A school-based external consultant, defined as 'a professional with specialized expertise' (Erschul & Sheridan, 2014: 3), or a team of external consultants are important agents for school improvement. An external consultant introduces, leads and supports innovation within a school as he or she works with the school and its stakeholders (Berger Yiu, Nelson et al., 2014). The consultant may intervene within the school to improve any number of issues: school management and leadership, interpersonal relationships, school climate, curriculum, instruction, academic performance, socio-emotional development of children and parent involvement (Meyers, Meyers, Graybill, Proctor & Huddleston, 2012).

The practice of employing the services of an external consultant to improve organisational functioning is common in many different professional settings and is variously defined in each. Consultation is sometimes confused with counselling, as practised in psychological health services. While there are recognisable differences between the two activities, consultation, like counselling, is also a form of providing help and assistance, and follows a similar process as a type of professional human service (Dougherty, 2009). In the absence of a generic definition of consultation, Dougherty (2009) and Erschul (2011) propose identifying aspects of consultation that are commonly agreed upon. First, consultation is an indirect form of service delivery (Erschul, 2011) and a distinct and voluntary form of interaction or participation (Saam, 2012) or intervention (Brady, Busse & Lopez, 2014; Gravois, 2012; Frank & Kratochwill, 2014; Kratochwill & Pittman, 2002; Newell, Newell & Looser, 2013). This process involves a tripartite cooperation between an expert or a specialist (the consultant), as a person who possesses the contextual knowledge and is an expert in the consultation process and the person(s) who recognised the problem (the consultee(s)). In order to solve the problem (consultee-the problem which needs to be addressed) systematically (personalised

as the client) through social influence and independent and professional support should aim at best practice (Erschul & Martens 2006; Newman, Ingraham & Shriberg, 2014; Wickham, 2004). These three elements (consultant, consultee and client) are always present in a consultative relationship and the relationship is unique, should be mutually enriching and productive, and constitutes a viable approach to organisational improvement (Erschul, 2011; Lambert, 2004). Second, the aim of consultation is to provide expert professional and practical advice and/or services towards solving a problem and is thus both preventative and remedial (Dougherty, 2009; Erschul, 2011; Erschul & Martens, 2006; Zahn, 2004). In addition, consultation aims to empower consultees to manage and to sustain interventions in the future (Newman et al., 2014; Rosenfield, 2013). Third, the consultant should have a high degree of knowledge of a certain subject and the highest level of competence acquired through experience or training (Stryker, 2012). Fourth, a consultant acts as an intervention facilitator who provides help to individuals, groups and organisations with a view to identifying and analysing problems or opportunities (Avakian & Clark, 2014) and achieving agreed upon goals constructively, exchanging one situation for another, improved one (Hargreaves et al., 2010; Kratochwill & Pittman, 2002; Newell & Newell, 2011). In this sense, a consultant may be conceived as a 'critical friend', which implies a safe and unconditional tolerance for mistakes, with emphasis on confidentiality (Erschul, 2011; Erschul & Martens, 2006). A consultant is also a professional who should conform to the technical and ethical standards of consultancy as a professional occupation, thus implying that underhanded practices or taking advantage of the consultee's need should be strictly avoided (Dougherty, 2009; Zahn, 2004). When applied to the school situation, all of the above identifying features of a consultant are valid. However, the interaction between different consultation roles and skills, as well as the diversity of individual school contexts, makes it difficult to generalise a specific consultation role for an external school consultant (Rimehaug & Helmersberg, 2010). The role adopted by a school consultant differs according to the context and the problem. A situational approach allows for flexibility, depending on context and process (Rimehaug & Helmersberg, 2010).

In South Africa where learner performance presents a problem (Department of Basic Education, 2014, Samoff, 2012, Spaul, 2013), this points to immense obstacles to improvement in the quality of schooling. In this regard, multifaceted expert input is necessary; however, in South Africa, this aspect which should focus on the role of external school consultants in school improvement, is very little explored. A literature search indicated only two papers, by Druker and De Jong (1996) and De Jong (1996) respectively, that are dedicated to the topic. The broader significance of external assistance is often overlooked and perceived as help provided by educational psychologists.

In an attempt to gain access and make assurance of this service in South Africa a further, internet search for external school consultants' webpages that advertised consultancy services in South Africa only produced lists of education consultants registered with the LinkedIn facility (LinkedIn, 2015a: Education consultant profiles in South Africa; LinkedIn, 2015b: Education consultant profiles in Johannesburg area, South Africa). However, many of these consultants were employed by higher education institutions or other public organisations such as the South African Police Service, or were self-employed consultants offering diverse services ranging from language editing, instructional material development, publishing and general consulting. A possible factor militating against the more frequent use of external school consultants is the varied cost of this service, which most public schools in South Africa may not be able to carry. Disadvantaged schools, in particular, which are most urgently in need of specialist help and would benefit the most from the services of school consultants, are likely to find this service beyond their means.

Educational research in South Africa is faced with a number of challenges such as those that touch on transformation issues on decolonisation of knowledge, the widening of opportunities to the marginalised, and the implementation of programmes on participatory development (Mbembe, 2016; Patel, 2014). These calls encourage the rethinking of knowledge production that could help to get rid of the dominant

top-down research paradigms (Van der Westhuizen, 2017). It is therefore essential that a controlling body for external consultants and services be established.

The theoretical framework and choice of methodology will be discussed in the next two sections.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF SCHOOL-BASED CONSULTATION

School-based consultation is focused on organisational change. Interventions are adopted that require systemic change in a school as an organisation, which is affected by school leaders, teachers, parents, learners and other stakeholders who have to learn new facts, skills and behaviours. No single closed theory encapsulates the consultation process (Erschul & Martens, 2006). Thus, this study draws on conceptual contributions from three different schools of thought, each illustrating a distinct facet of consultation. First, we discuss the contribution of Vygotsky's (1978) socio-cultural theory of development, which recognises person-to-person influence during organisational learning and change (Jones & Brader-Araje, 2002; Moll, 2014). Second, we draw on conceptual change theory as propounded by Posner, Strike, Hewson and Gertzog (1982), who articulate the change process as a rational activity whereby people are helped to exchange their core organising concepts from one set to another, which is incompatible with the first. Finally, we refer to general systems theory as proposed by Von Bertalanffy (1968), in terms of which schools are studied as dynamic environments in interaction with constituent parts and other segments of society.

Vygotsky (1978) suggests that members of an organisation can learn and change based on the support they receive from more knowledgeable persons in areas just beyond their existing knowledge or schemas (the zone of proximal development). School consultants provide such support to members of the school community (the consultees) to enhance their learning about proposed interventions. This is referred to as scaffolding, because new knowledge is built on prior knowledge and experience (Jones & Brader-Araje, 2002). Further, the consultees must actively engage in the process of school consultation if this knowledge is to be incorporated into their schemas. Through this process of social interaction between the parties, an improved situation is achieved. Individuals in the school community (consultees) or identified and problematic aspects of school functioning (client) are helped or 'other regulated by the help of expert consultants to become 'self-regulated' with a view to achieving a successful outcome through the consultancy process (Jenkins, 2000).

According to Posner et al. (1982), conceptual change requires that prior knowledge be modified by new information that changes an existing concept and leads to the acquisition of a new concept or set of concepts (Chi, 2008; Limón, 2002; Zirbel, 2004). In this change process, people relinquish old, inconsistent and vague concepts in favour of a new set of precise and potent ways of conceptualising the world. School consultants act as agents of change, who help members of the school community to exchange old ideas, practices, strategies and processes for new ones in order to remain competitive and responsive to the needs of their customers. Thus, school consultation implies that consultees undergo a process of cognitive restructuring, which involves a conceptual shift or change that leads to enhanced organisational effectiveness (Lambert et al., 2011). However, members of the school community must first experience dissatisfaction with their existing concepts of school functioning and seek expert advice. Through the input of the consultants, old knowledge is replaced by new information, then reorganised, transferred and accepted as a new concept (diSessa & Wagner, 2005; Limón, 2002; Zirbel, 2004). However, consultees must find the new ways of conceptualising to be intelligible, plausible and fruitful for successful conceptual change to occur (Vosniadou, 2013). 'Intelligible' means that the new concept must be clear enough to make sense to the consultee; 'plausible' means the new concept must be seen as plausibly true; and 'fruitful' means the new concept must appear potentially productive to the consultee for solving current problems (Posner et al., 1982).

Von Bertalanffy (1968) regarded a system as a configuration of parts, connected and joined together by a web of relationships. A system, such as a school, should not be reduced to its smaller units, but seen as a dynamic integrated whole that is connected with the broader society. All systems are goal directed and seek to achieve objectives through the collective effort of individuals and groups within the systems. According to the general systems perspective, a school consultant should recognise that a school is a social system with complex properties and subsystems embedded in a larger environmental context. Interventions to effect school improvement should thus consider, expand and deepen relationships between the school and the home, the community and other stakeholders. The consultant should recognise and engage subsystems, such as classrooms, the functioning of teachers in the classroom and the parent community, during broader school interventions (Sabatino, 2014). The consultant should continually make provision for feedback loops from the top of the organisation to all subsystems to implement any successful intervention (Bowen, 2004). In addition, input, processing and output are of significance. School consultants provide knowledge (input) to help consultees see the connection between knowledge and their concerns (the process), enabling them to develop best practices (output). In this way, schools are helped to develop more sophisticated and dynamic approaches for achieving school success (Sabatino, 2014; Wickham, 2004). Consultation based on general systems theory has as its goal an increase in the level of problem-solving in a school as a dynamic system (Dougherty, 2013).

METHODOLOGY

The role of external school consultants was investigated by means of an exploratory qualitative study. Data were gathered through an internet-based inquiry, which elicited e-mailed accounts structured around open-ended writing prompts in which participants described their role as consultants with a view to making recommendations for improving practice (Hine & Stewart, 2000). In this case, we were primarily interested in understanding the role of consultants from an emic point of view, that is, the point of view of the consultants themselves. Seventeen (17) international external school consultants from diverse contexts replied on an invitation to take part in a study which was directed to the effect of external consultancy on schools. The criteria used for the selection of the participants was on the basis of an active webpage that advertised their services and their status as licensed and credentialed professional external school consultants who should have a very good knowledge of the consulting process. As indicated there were also a list of comments with clients details available and though not contacted, a sign of satisfaction with services rendered. Purposive sampling aims at locating information-rich individuals or cases, that is, individuals or cases that are likely to be knowledgeable or informative about the phenomena under investigation (Johnson & Christensen, 2014). The internet was used to identify and to connect with information-rich participants. In so doing, we were able to include experts otherwise unavailable for study for practical and financial reasons, thereby increasing the pool of participants and the potential for data gathering, which would not have been possible if we had relied on face-to-face contacts (Markham, 2004) as these were not available in an internet search. This contributed to the feasibility of this study to try to stimulate interest in such a service in the South African context.

Ethical requirements were met by ensuring that participation was voluntary, and participants were assured that their privacy and anonymity would be protected through the use of pseudonyms and the omission of information that could cause them to be identified. Conditions for participation, aimed at the protection of participants, were contained in an e-mailed letter of invitation. Data were gathered through written e-mailed accounts that were approximately three pages in length, in which participants described their experience as consultants. The e-mailed accounts were structured around a set of flexible open-ended questions, which acted as a prompt for writing. We developed the questions based on the literature review presented earlier in this study. However, participants were not limited to these questions and could add any information that they considered significant. Solicited personal documents such as these accounts that focus on perception and meaning comprise a useful research strategy in qualitative research (McMillan

& Schumacher, 2010). Webpages provided detailed additional information regarding the participants' services. According to Johnson and Christensen (2014), personal accounts are classed as a non-interactive data gathering strategy and are a legitimate source of vivid and detailed data. Non-interactive strategies such as written material (e.g. journals, letters, self-reports or e-mails) require little or no interaction between a researcher and his or her subject (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). In this research, the written responses were considered as first-person documents, which describe 'an individual's actions, experiences and beliefs' about a particular phenomenon (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010: 361). Further, the value of solicited internet communication on a specific topic allowed participants the time and opportunity to consider and to revise their statements before sending them. This implied that participants had a greater degree of control over the meaning of the message and the presentation of self (Markham, 2004).

Data analysis included the following steps: Printed e-mailed accounts were read and reread independently, and tentative themes were identified. First, relevant extracts in the text were highlighted and then grouped without comments under themes (Delamont, 2002). Thereafter, the themes were clustered into categories, and suitable quotations were selected as rich data to illustrate the categories. The trustworthiness of interpretation was maintained by checking with participants to clarify issues or to ask for more information, and by cross-checking with a second researcher, who provided an expert opinion. Furthermore, the limitations of this qualitative study are acknowledged. The inquiry was limited to a purposeful sample and the findings cannot be generalised in any way.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Four main findings regarding the role of external school consultants emerged from the data: the external consultant as a versatile expert; the external consultant as an agent for school improvement and effectiveness; the external consultant as a professional in the service of the school community; and the external consultant as ethical partner in the consultancy relationship.

The external consultant as a versatile expert

All participants agreed that the role of an external school consultant is primarily that of an expert. In this regard, a participant said:

A consultant's aim is to provide high-quality, cost-effective consultancy and training services tailored to clients' needs, for the benefit of professionals and pupils, which meet or exceed clients' expectations.

This requires knowledge of educational policy, school policy and national policy; an understanding of school climate; and knowledge of the curriculum, the roles of school management and teachers and the dynamics of learner achievement. Added to this, a school consultant should have extensive knowledge of the consultation process and ethically correct procedures, and should contribute to the support and development of school performance using approaches of partnership, collaboration, mentoring and guidance. Consultants particularly require technical knowledge, which will enable them to realise a specialist role in the systematic gathering of empirical data during the internal audit that forms the first phase of the diagnostic process, data analysis and appropriate data presentation, both quantitatively and qualitatively, to the school community, so that data-driven decisions can be made to address needs in a school. Where the consultant requires additional or specialised expertise in data gathering, he or she should know where and how to procure this help from specialised agencies.

Beyond this consensus, participants added a number of other dimensions to the discussion of the role of consultants as experts. One participant described a consultant as a

helper who provides assistance and helps the school choose better mechanisms to achieve school improvement.

This ties in very well with Von Bertalanffy's (1968) philosophy where schools are studied as dynamic environments. To do this, a consultant should have broad knowledge of a wide range of different strategies for school improvement, and should not be limited to a single 'one size fits all' type of solution; flexibility is essential. Another participant commented:

A consultant is not hired to come and give a 'canned program'.

Further, one participant emphasised that

a universal blueprint is almost a guarantee for failure. Don't come with the attitude, 'Hey, it worked in New York, it can work here.'

The idea of a single best practice should be replaced with the notion of good practice, which can be adapted to fit unique circumstances. Moreover, the role of an external school consultant requires interpersonal expertise. A consultant often assumes the role of liaison between school leaders and the school district, the teaching staff, parents and learners, through the expert knowledge for which he or she is hired. The skill he or she should possess is to be a resourceful and creative professional who is in possession of a compendium of skills to apply in a multifaceted problem-solving environment.

Participants also stressed that a consultant does not hold the ultimate responsibility for school success; he or she provides suggestions for improvement. These limits to a consultant's responsibility should be carefully stipulated in the written contract.

In summary, the role of a consultant is that of a versatile expert who accompanies the school to a higher level of development through sensitive and considerate social interaction (Moll, 2014); he or she is responsible for an objective and expert analysis of the school as a complex organisation at a given time; he or she should provide not only technical but also emotional support to assist the school to 'see' and to reflect on its needs and to exchange old ideas for new, improved ones (Posner et al., 1982).

The external school consultant as an agent for school improvement and effectiveness

A consultant should engage role players in the process and discourage dependence on him or her (the consultant) to do the work. A participant stressed that a

consultant does just that – consult. It is up to local administrators and teachers to follow through and bring about effective change.

School improvement is defined as a distinctive approach to educational change that aims to enhance student outcomes and to strengthen the school's capacity for managing change (Hopkins, 2001). This involves the availability of different resources, such as competent teachers and support staff, effective administrative services, well-resourced classrooms, furnishings and equipment, adequate school feeding programmes, comprehensive parent involvement and quality assurance. School effectiveness is taken to be measured according to the improvement in student learning and achievement. However, participants did not always distinguish between the two terms, and used them interchangeably. They understood school improvement broadly in terms of the many features of a school environment that encourage student learning. Effectiveness was seen more narrowly in terms of concrete improvements in learning achievement as represented by student grades and test scores which Vygotsky's (1978) social cultural theory recognises person to person influence during organisational learning and change.

One participant linked school effectiveness strongly to student output, remarking that school effectiveness has

to do with the extent to which learning has been successful and if all [of the school's] students achieve successful education on leaving the school.

Yet, for effectiveness to be achieved, a variety of resources in the school environment should be present and accessible to all learners. If these elements are lacking, school improvement strategies that are more wide-reaching should be implemented. Safety and order should be established in the school, teachers should be on task and parents should be involved. A participant noted:

Students can focus better on their learning when their other needs are taken care of.

It is particularly in this area that consultants are expected to make a contribution. Participants stressed the importance of both school infrastructure, such as the management and care of equipment, school grounds and buildings, and the enhanced engagement of all role players in the school, such as the management team, teachers, support staff and parents. A prerequisite is a clear mission for the school to which all role players are committed, and consultants frequently assist the school community in reviewing and updating the school's mission. A participant explained:

There can only be effective schools and school improvement if all concerned agreed on the goals of that school system or systems. If there is no agreement on what kids need to be successful, then all people in the system will be going in different directions.

This point is also supported by Von Bertalanffy (1968). Participants stressed the methodical nature of school improvement and the necessity to accompany the school community through a systematic process of improvement. The first step in this process is a data audit of the school, so that decisions can be driven by concrete data and not by mere intuition or anecdotal evidence. A participant explained:

Many schools decide on school goals based on intuition rather than data. And too often the goals seem to have no relationship to the improvement of student learning.

The audit includes gathering quantitative and qualitative data, compiling a detailed description of the school context and analysing the findings. Data are required on the performance of learners and the degree to which the school meets social expectations. A participant commented:

Education is not just tests; society measures schools on how well they do. We have to recognize that a school system needs to be based on the expectations of the society which it serves.

One participant pointed out:

There needs to be a quality program that focuses on both state goals and local goals and it needs to be assessed both externally and internally.

After the audit, the consultant helps the school management to identify gaps in the school's performance. Based on this analysis, an improvement plan is drawn up and the roles and responsibilities for different actions are allocated to the management, staff and parents. The plan requires negotiated agreement about functionalities and roles; it 'must include prime movers, tasks and a timeline', as one participant noted. This plan should be encapsulated in writing and provides a point of reference throughout the process. Further, the plan should encourage maximum participation from the school community. One participant stressed:

We need to recognise that schools need to be continually improving and evolving to meet the changing needs of the world in which we live with the goal of any and all improvement directly related to

improving the quality of instruction for the student. Such should involve input from all the players in the process: the school, the staff and the parents.

The effect of interventions requires continual monitoring and successive cycles of data gathering. The consultant should remain on board for the implementation and monitoring to ensure that the plan is fully implemented and the school does not 'simply skirt around it'. This requires commitment. One participant noted:

A culture of professionalism should be developed, dedicated to constant improvement and serving the students' needs first.

The above findings are in line with systems theory, emphasising that all systems should be in place for a school to function successfully.

The external consultant as a professional in the service of the school community

A school consultant functions within the unique paradigm of a service provider; his or her role is to serve the school community by helping it reach its vision and priorities. To do this, the consultant has to employ a variety of techniques that will engage and instruct all stakeholders in the process, including those members of the school community who may be threatened by change. A participant explained:

A good consultant needs to make the process clear to others and at the same time ensure they are comfortable with it.

Thus, the consultant must fulfil the role of expert, while simultaneously fulfilling the role of one who serves the community, appreciates the school's culture and does not try to impose his or her expertise upon the school without obtaining its participation. The consultant should direct and guide without engendering an unhealthy dependence. It is essential that the school community take ownership of the change processes that flow from consultation, because the school community has the responsibility of sustaining improvement long after the consultant has withdrawn his or her services. One participant stressed this aspect of a consultant's role:

Consultants, who honour the culture of the community, see the community as the basis for change and engage people to develop the skills necessary to make the changes themselves, are effective consultants. Skills training should help the community to take charge of the event.

To serve the school community, a consultant should manifest a willingness to enter into dialogue and show flexibility, trust, openness and a readiness to share skills and knowledge. According to a participant,

the consultant should be clear, open, able to discuss and explain, able to be flexible ... encouraging and persuading people to be more reflective.

The establishment of a relationship of trust takes time; one participant pointed out the necessity of

a series of preliminary on-site visits to gather information and [to] learn what local expectations are.

In this capacity, a consultant takes on the role of critical observer and listener so that he or she can determine the needs and devise the right way of communicating some *modus operandi* for improvement. The process of data gathering, needs analysis, prioritising of goals and development of an improvement strategy should be carried on while maintaining

an on-going conversation with decision-makers who should be engaged in the discourse of how needs will be addressed.

One participant stressed that an overbearing or know-it-all attitude is extremely detrimental to the process. The consultant must keep all stakeholders on board during all stages. This is a delicate process in which the consultant should motivate and persuade them to accept the perceptions of an 'outsider'. The process is time-consuming; it requires

meetings with senior management teams, heads of department and other stakeholders to reach consensus and to produce an agreed upon plan of action for the development and improvement of the school,

as stressed by one participant.

A number of participants endorsed the difficulty of managing the fine balance between the role of expert and the 'servant' role of one who assists the school community by listening, guiding without controlling and encouraging participation and ownership. Moreover, while acting with sensitivity and tact, a consultant should maintain an objective view and stand aloof from organisational biases and internal politics. In this regard, a participant explained:

Many times, a consultant is only used to confirm what a district already knows or to take the heat off decision makers who are reluctant to take unpopular decisions.

A consultant must be one who says 'what is needed and not what is wanted'. Consultancy requires a person with a certain profile in addition to expert knowledge: one with nuanced interpersonal skills, the ability to be firm and decisive as well as flexible, and one who displays an attitude of selflessness by placing the honour of the school community above his or her professional success. Ultimately, a consultant should help school leaders to reach a level of maturity where they are able to make changes themselves. These findings allude to Vygotsky's (1978) theory of trust and social interactions between parties.

The external consultant as ethical partner

All participants agreed that external consultants are bound to uphold ethical principles during school consultation. A participant stressed that

a high level of ethics is needed in this profession.

An ethical approach requires honesty and open dialogue. A participant explained:

Everything discussed should be out in the open. The consultant has to be brutally honest about the shortcomings of the system in order to improve it.

Consultants' records of previous successful consultancies should testify to their integrity and honesty so that a school that employs a consultant may be assured of 'honest and open dialogue and a sound relationship – no surprises!' Integrity means that a consultant should refrain from making exaggerated promises to a school. A participant mentioned:

The consultant must be honest and not make promises he/she can't keep.

Unrealistic and dishonest promises and claims should be avoided at all costs. Further, a consultant

should not identify problems and needs which don't exist in order to create more employment for him-/herself.

Honesty should also be demonstrated by a willingness to identify weaknesses in a school that might prove unpopular. A participant stressed:

Consultants need to tell the truth and seek to help the school improve and not just say what others want to hear.

Other ethical requirements include discretion and a lack of bias as emphasised by Posner et al. (1982), whereby people are helped to exchange their core organisational concept from one set to another. A consultant must remain 'neutral and unbiased throughout'. Openness and the ability to explain information clearly, to analyse recommendations and to answer questions honestly are important traits. A participant referred to the importance of a

willingness to be questioned about one's recommendations and the ability to explain comments.

Playing the role of an all-knowing expert is to be eschewed. A participant noted in this regard:

We must show respect, humility and the ability to work with others as equal partners in the process.

Notwithstanding, the demand for an ethical relationship is reciprocal. A participant stressed the responsibility of the client in this regard:

Since you are hiring the person, you (the client) must also live/abide by ethical standards.

To formalise ethical behaviour, consultants should be full members of a central or a professional organisation with its own professional code. A participant pointed out the importance of involvement in professional networks.

Ethical behaviour also requires a consultant to be accountable to the students of schools; all actions, direct and indirect, must be directed at learner achievement.

A participant stressed:

Most of all, the consultant must see the good of the kids being the bottom line and that takes precedence.

Another agreed, remarking as follows:

There is only one need, the interest of the child and improving the quality of instruction. Further, a consultant should guard sensitive information about the school community. He or she needs to balance the role of the information seeker and the confidante for the leadership.

These findings tie in with the theories of Vygotsky (1978) and Posner et al. (1982), pointing out a relationship of trust and the ability to modify and to change in order to improve the school community.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

When schools want to improve, it is apposite to call on external help to guide the process of improvement and change, as emphasised by Posner et al. (1982). This study investigated the role of external school

consultants in this regard. This service cannot be underestimated in the endeavour to synergise all available sources and new resources schools need, to venture towards improvement and effectiveness, which is supported by Von Bertalanffy's systems theory (1968). In the light of this, it is important for a school to hire an expert who is well-versed in school improvement; who will serve the school community in an ethical manner; who has the necessary credentials to unthreateningly deal with the problem(s) at hand; who can engage in open dialogue; and who can reveal the shortcomings of the school with confidence and honesty.

On the basis of the findings of the literature study and the inquiry, it is recommended that schools be receptive to the advice given by external consultants and accommodate and utilise new suggestions. Schools should trust consultants' judgement and insight into problems and cooperate with them to the best of their ability, which is linked to Vygotsky's theory of support and social interaction (1978). Such mutual collaboration is the best way to gain value from this expert assistance. Schools should also realise that the success of the consultancy experience lies with their implementing and sustaining new patterns of behaviour and persisting with suggested changes, rather than falling back into old patterns.

School consultation for school improvement is well established as a strategy for school improvement internationally. These perspectives are from an international group of consultants and therefore future research would be needed to align school stakeholders' views on these to compare or discuss. Given the contextual challenges in education in terms of calls for cognitive justice and decolonisation of knowledge, South African schools can benefit from a service that is aimed at enhancing effectiveness and improved school functioning and transformation. Further, it is recommended that a central professional body for school consultants be established by the Department of Basic Education (such as district directors, circuit managers and subject advisors) that sets down qualifications and a code of conduct to which all consultants are subjected to ensure the status, reputation and remuneration of the profession. Through this professional body, the reliability of consultants in the field could be regulated and consistency assured. This regulated body would, similarly, be able to require that its members comply with a distinctive ethical code of conduct, which would serve as a measure to ensure ethical conduct. Finally, it is recommended that training programmes be designed to train prospective school consultants in consultancy skills, taking transformation into consideration. Providing training that encompasses certain expert competencies such as specialised knowledge, relationship building skills, analytical skills, decision-making skills, integrity and communication skills could ensure that future consultants have the competence to implement and to adapt consultation practices effectively across a range of clients, problems and contexts.

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