Consultants' and Consultees' Perceptions of the Skills and Characteristics Important to the Effectiveness of Special Education Consultation in British Columbia

by

Heather Kristine Strong

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We accept this thesis as conforming to the required standard

[redacted]

Dr. D.G. Bachor, Supervisor (Department of Psychological Foundations)

[redacted]

Dr. A. Marshall, Departmental Member (Department of Psychological Foundations)

[redacted]

Dr. A. Pence, Outside Member (School of Child and Youth Care)

[redacted]

Dr. Martha Haylor, External Examiner (School of Nursing)

Supervisor: Dr. Daniel G. Bachor

## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to replicate a study on consultation skills, done by Knoff, Hines, and Kromrey (1995) while expanding the sample base to include teaching assistants and parents. The Consultant Effectiveness Scale (CES), a questionnaire consisting of 75 consultant skills and characteristics, was used to survey the perceptions of 75 consultants and consultees (18 consultants, 23 teachers, 17 teaching assistants, and 17 parents) regarding the degree to which they believed each skill was important to the effectiveness of consultation. Results were examined for differences across groups, for consistency with the factor structure obtained by Knoff, Hines, and Kromrey (1995), and to determine the impact of demographic variables. A follow-up telephone interview was conducted with 2 consultants, 3 teachers, 3 teaching assistants, and 3 parents to verify questionnaire results.

The ratings of respondent groups were compared and contrasted across the top 15 ranked items and several consistencies were found to exist across groups. Parents were found to have rated all items generally lower than consultants or teachers. A factor analysis was completed using the 52 items from the original four factors (Knoff, Hines, & Kromrey, 1995) and resulted in a high degree of consistency with the original factor structure generated by Knoff, Hines, and Kromrey. A one-way ANOVA was conducted and significant differences were found on three of the four factors with the consultants rating the items higher than the parents ($p < .05$). No significant differences were found

across demographic variables. The results of the telephone interviews were consistent with the high ratings of many of the interpersonal and relationship-building skills and content skills identified in the questionnaire responses.

Recommendations are made calling for future research to further validate the scale, and to confirm differences between respondent groups. The value of the scale and its contents are highlighted in the context of preservice and inservice training for consultants.

Examiners:

[redacted]

Dr. D.G. Bachor, Supervisor (Department of Psychological Foundations)

[redacted]

Dr. A. Marshall, Departmental Member (Department of Psychological Foundations)

[redacted]

Dr. A. Pence, Outside Member (School of Child and Youth Care)

[redacted]

Dr. Martha Haylor, External Examiner (School of Nursing)

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# DEDICATION

To my parents who have given me the encouragement to dream of possibilities, the courage to reach for those dreams, and the unconditional love and support to achieve them.

And to Morgen and Kahlua without whose love and attention I could not have achieved my goal with my sense of humour intact.

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION TO THE PROBLEM

As mainstreaming and inclusion of students with special needs in today's schools have increased, so too has the field of special education consultation grown. Special education consultation has been found to provide essential support to regular education teachers and the students with special needs in their classrooms (Dustin & Ehly, 1984; Fuchs, Fuchs, Dulan, Roberts, & Ferstrom, 1992; Silverman, 1974). One field of focus in the consultation literature is the effectiveness of consultation and the variables that influence its effectiveness. The focus of this research study is on consultant skills and characteristics as they are perceived by consultants and consultees to impact upon the effectiveness of consultation.

The field of consultation skills itself consists of two domains which have received attention. In the first, authors such as Bradley (1994), Brown (1985), and Parsons and Meyers (1984) have written about the content or technical skills of consultation. The second domain involves a focus on the process or interpersonal communication skills required by consultants (e.g., Bradley, 1994; DeBoer, 1986; Fine, Grantham, & Wright, 1979). Consultants use the former group of skills to solve the problem for which a referral was made, and the second group of skills to facilitate an effective relationship within which to work with consultees to solve the problem. In other words, content skills reflect *what* is done, while process skills reflect *how* it is done.

Despite the existence of literature exploring consultant skills, little empirical research has been conducted. As Salend and Salend (1984) state, "while numerous case studies reporting the efficacy of the consultation process can be found, few elaborate on

the distinguishable characteristics that make the process effective" (p.25). Knoff and colleagues (Knoff, McKenna, & Riser, 1991; Knoff, Sullivan, & Liu, 1995; Knoff, Hines, & Kromrey, 1995), in particular, have attempted to address this gap in the research by focusing their studies on identifying skills, or behaviors, and characteristics perceived to be related to consultation effectiveness. The product of these studies is the Consultant Effectiveness Scale depicting a series of consultant skills and characteristics found to be important to successful, effective consultation.

## Purpose and Definition

The purpose of this thesis was to identify what consultants and consultees perceive to be the skills and characteristics important to the effectiveness of special education consultation in public elementary schools in British Columbia. Consultants included school- or district-based, government- or agency-based, and/or private consultants, while consultees included teachers, teaching assistants, and parents. Respondents were also asked to evaluate their past consultation experiences against their perceptions of an ideal. Results were examined for similarities and differences between participant groups, then discussed with regards to the findings in the literature.

For the purposes of this study, consultation is defined as individuals with varied expertise working together to solve problems in a reciprocal relationship characterized by equality, mutuality, open communication, and shared responsibility (Johnson, Pugach, & Hammitte, 1988; Lopez, McKenna Dalal, & Yoshida, 1993; West & Idol, 1990). It is

meant to reflect a relationship in which the consultant and consultee(s) work together to address concerns regarding an individual student, or a group of students, such as a class.

Definitions of the terms "students with special needs" and "special educational needs" were taken from the British Columbia Ministry of Education's *Special Education Services: A Manual of Policies, Procedures and Guidelines* (1995). In this manual, students with special needs are defined as those who "have disabilities of an intellectual, physical, sensory, emotional or behavioural nature, or have a learning disability or have exceptional gifts or talents" (Sect.A, p.1). Special educational needs are defined as

> those characteristics which make it necessary to provide a student undertaking an education program with resources different from those which are needed by most students. Special educational needs are identified during assessment of a student; they are the basis for determining an appropriate educational program (including necessary resources) for that student" (Introduction, p.9).

## General Overview

With the growth of special education consultation over the past number of years, there has come a corresponding increase in the amount of literature focusing on the many factors associated with its effectiveness. Gresham and Kendell (1987) conducted a review of the literature on consultation. They concluded that "most consultation research can be described as limited in scope, univariate in nature, nonexperimental, devoid of a strong theoretical base, and unsophisticated in terms of research design and statistical treatment of data. Future research must employ a more sophisticated approach to the design, measurement, and evaluation of variables in school consultation" (p.313). Fuchs et al. (1992) also searched the research literature on consultation effectiveness. This search

covered studies published between 1961-1989 that looked generally at the outcomes and efficacy of school consultation. Fuchs et al. concluded that support existed for the effectiveness of school consultation but cautioned that these studies have not provided sufficient information regarding "which type of situation calls for what type of consultation, and how consultation may be made more effective, efficient, and attractive to teachers" (p.163).

Considerable attention has been given in the literature to the skills or competencies and characteristics of collaborative consultants that ensure effective results and satisfying consultation experiences for all parties involved (Bradley, 1994; Conoley & Conoley, 1992; Daniels and DeWine, 1991; Idol & West, 1987; Knoff et al., 1991; Knoff, Sullivan, & Liu, 1995; Knoff, Hines, & Kromrey, 1995; Tindal, Parker, & Hasbrouck, 1992; Tindal & Taylor-Pendergast, 1989; West & Cannon, 1988). The focus of much of this literature has been on the content or technical skills required to consult effectively (e.g., Bradley, 1994; Brown, 1985; Dinkmeyer & Carlson, 1973; Parsons and Meyers, 1984), and on the process or interpersonal skills (e.g., Daniels & DeWine, 1991; DeBoer, 1986; Dustin & Ehly, 1984; Fine et al., 1979). Conent skills refer to those skills required to solve the problem of referral, such as identifying the problem, developing and implementing intervention strategies, and evaluating progress. Process skills, on the other hand, are considered to be the interpersonal skills that allow the consultant to effectively apply content skills as they move through the stages of consultation. DeBoer argued for the importance of consultation process skills, contending that consultation requires people

knowledge and interpersonal skills; without these, the consultant is likely unable to address and work effectively at the content level.

Despite the attention given in the literature to the development of consultation, only a fraction of this literature is supported empirically. The empirical research that does exist has investigated specific skills as they relate to consultation outcome (Bergan & Tombari, 1991; Gutkin, 1986; Randolf & D'Ilio, 1990); the relationship between preservice training and the perceptions of consultees regarding the effectiveness of consultation and consultants' skills (Costenbader, Swartz, and Petrix, 1992; Idol-Maestas & Ritter, 1985); and the identification and rating of specific consultant skills with the aim of evaluating consultants (Friend, 1984; Knoff et al., 1991; Knoff, Sullivan & Liu, 1995; Knoff, Hines, & Kromrey, 1995; West & Cannon, 1988).

The intention of this investigation was to explore further the existing survey research, in particular the work of Knoff and his colleagues (Knoff et al., 1991; Knoff, Sullivan, & Liu, 1995; Knoff, Hines, & Kromrey, 1995), by analyzing the perceptions of both consultants and consultees with regards to the skills and characteristics important to effective special education consultation. Content or technical skills are considered in the context of the various stages of consultation. Process or interpersonal communication skills are investigated in relation to the development of a collaborative relationship. Consultant characteristics are discussed within the framework of the execution of the technical skills as well as the development of a collaborative relationship.

## Research Questions

1. Using the Consultant Effectiveness Scale (CES) developed by Knoff et al. (Knoff et al., 1991; Knoff, Sullivan, & Liu, 1995; Knoff, Hines, & Kromrey, 1995), what do consultants and consultees identify as the skills and characteristics important to the effectiveness of special education consultation in public elementary schools in British Columbia?
2. What differences and/or similarities can be observed between the respondent groups in rating the importance of these skills and characteristics? In particular, do any significant differences exist between the Teaching Assistant or Parent groups and the Consultant and/or Teacher groups?
3. How well does the factor structure generated in the study conducted by Knoff, Hines, and Kromrey (1995) fit with the results of the present study?
4. How do demographic variables impact upon respondents' ratings of skills and characteristics?
5. What observations can be made regarding the skills and characteristics of effective special education consultants identified as important in this study in relation to the findings in the literature (specifically the findings of Knoff, Hines, & Kromrey, 1995)?

# CHAPTER 2

# REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This review of the literature begins with a brief summary of two key reviews of research in consultation. Subsequently, two general areas of the literature on consultation skills are examined. In the first, consultant skills are discussed as individual competencies required for successful consultation. This body of literature can be broken down into the areas of the content or technical skills implemented at each stage of consultation, and the process or interpersonal skills required by the consultant throughout the consultation interaction. Secondly, research that has been conducted in the area of consultant skills is explored.

## Reviews of Consultation Research

Gresham and Kendell (1987) reviewed the research on school consultation with the purpose of critiquing research methodologies and recommending alternative methodologies. These authors focused their attention on reviews of the research previously published in the late 1970's and the 1980's. From their analysis, the authors organized the literature into three categories: outcome, process, and practitioner utilization. They then explored these research areas in light of three primary research issues that arose out of the previous reviews: "a) the difficulty of conducting consultation research, b) the paucity of single case experimental designs, and c) the 'mind set' of consultation researchers" (p.307). Gresham and Kendell concluded that the majority of the research was descriptive, in which training practices were described, attitudes were

surveyed, or the frequency of practitioners' use of consultation was assessed. They argued that while this was valuable, it did not explore the key variables influencing consultation. They called for further research in this area to develop greater understanding of the specific variables involved in consultation as well as the relationships between these variables.

In the early 1990's, Fuchs et al. (1992), in discussing the plethora of consultation literature, asked a pertinent empirical question: "Where is the research on consultation effectiveness?" While it would seem that there was no shortage of literary discussion about consultation and which variables are believed to influence its efficacy, few authors had conducted empirical research in the area. Furthermore, the few studies that had been conducted were rarely cited in other articles. In attempting to answer their own question, Fuchs et al. conducted a search of the extant literature between 1961 and 1989, looking solely at research on consultation outcomes and efficacy. They found a total of 119 published studies and 59 dissertation abstracts and categorized them by number per year, number of journal articles per journal type, and number by study design, model, measure, outcome, client and setting. Fuchs et al. found that there were fewer than five publications a year, an average of 2.1 per year, with psychology journals publishing the most. The authors concluded that while their search provided them with evidence of the effectiveness of consultation, there were insufficient details regarding the type of consultation called for in specific situations, and what could be done to make consultation more effective, efficient, and attractive to teachers.

## Consultant Skills

While little empirical evidence exists in the area of consultant skills, several authors have written descriptively about the skills and characteristics of consultants as they are thought to influence the effectiveness of consultation (e.g., Bradley, 1994; DeBoer, 1986; Dustin & Ehly, 1984; Freeze, 1995; Parsons & Meyers, 1984; Salend & Salend, 1984; Ysseldyke, 1986). Consultant skills, as discussed in the literature, fall primarily into two groups: content or technical skills, and process or interpersonal skills. DeBoer (1986) and Gutkin (1986) described content skills as the technical knowledge and abilities required to identify the problem, develop and implement intervention strategies, and evaluate progress. Process skills are the interpersonal skills that allow the consultant to relate to the consultee(s) and effectively apply content skills as they move through the stages of consultation. DeBoer asserted that consultation takes place on two levels. "On one level, you address the content of the problem; on the other, you focus, usually implicitly, on the process for delivering the content. . . . *The process yields the product*" (p.14). Idol (1990) referred to consultation as a "scientific art," or conversely, an "artful science." She argued that consultation, like teaching, involves both a scientific base consisting of content skills and knowledge, as well as an artful base, involving what she referred to as process skills.

### Content Skills

Content or technical skills of consultants are often discussed in the context of defined stages of consultation (Bradley, 1994; Brown, 1985; Dinkmeyer, 1973; Dustin & Ehly,

1984; Fine et al., 1979; Parsons & Meyers, 1984). Each stage of the consultation process demands a particular set of consultant skills and characteristics.

Different authors tend to outline slightly different stages of consultation, with some describing as few as four stages (e.g., Bradley, 1994; Tindal & Taylor-Pendergast, 1989) while others write of as many as seven (e.g., Dinkmeyer & Carlson, 1973). For the most part however, five major stages are identified with consistency, including: 1) entry or relationship building, 2) problem identification, 3) intervention development and implementation, 4) evaluation, and 5) termination. Although the stages are presented sequentially and discretely, they are actually more dynamic than separate (Parsons & Meyers, 1984; Bradley, 1994). One does not simply complete one stage then move onto the next without ever revisiting the former. Consider a consultant at the evaluation stage who determines that an intervention has not been implemented correctly. If, in relaying this information to the teacher, the teacher becomes defensive, the consultant must once again engage in relationship building. Similarly, if an evaluation indicates that an intervention is ineffective, the consultant must return to the second and third stages to reconsider problem identification and generate a new intervention.

Entry

In the entry, or relationship building stage, the consultant focuses on developing a collaborative relationship with the individuals involved in consultation. This may include a single teacher or an entire multidisciplinary team consisting of regular and special education teachers, a teaching assistant, administration, and/or therapists from a variety of

disciplines, such as speech/language pathology or physiotherapy. Identifying the expectations and motivations of the consultee(s) is essential in the entry stage, as they can influence consultee dissatisfaction and resistance in consultation (Bradley, 1994; Conoley & Conoley, 1988; Erchul, Hughes, Meyers, Hickman, & Braden, 1992; Lopez, McKenna, Dalal, & Yoshida, 1993; Parsons & Meyers, 1984; West & Idol, 1987). Erchul et al., in investigating factors in the consultation process that affect outcome measures, found that when there was compatibility between the consultant's and consultee's understanding of the consultation process, their perceptions of the outcome were more positive.

According to Dustin and Ehly (1984) the development of and ability to exhibit specific relationship skills is critical in the entry stage of consultation. Many of these relationship building or process skills are addressed later in this review.

Problem Identification

In the problem identification stage of consultation the consultant must identify and assess the problem and specify the concerns of the consultee(s). It is important at this stage to isolate any extraneous or misleading behaviors which may misdirect the problem solving process. Bradley (1994) and Dustin and Ehly (1984) consider this stage essential, suggesting that identifying the problem accurately is the best predictor of plan implementation. Bergan and Tombari (1991) conducted a study of how consultant variables and problem identification predicted plan implementation and problem solution. They found that "consultant variables had their greatest impact on the problem-solving process at the problem-identification phase. . . . When the consultant lacked skills and/or

was inefficient, there was a substantial likelihood that problem solving would never be initiated" (pp. 82, 83). To succeed in correctly identifying the problem the consultant requires the ability to collect and analyse information by effectively carrying out interviews and conducting observations to gather data first hand.

Intervention Development and Implementation

Once the problem(s) has been clearly identified and agreed upon, the consultant and consultee(s) must work together to develop and implement an appropriate plan of intervention. In their text *Consultation: Concepts and Practices*, Hansen, Himes, & Meier (1990) stress the importance of the consultant and consultee working together in this stage of the consultation process. They argue that consultees will take greater ownership of and responsibility for interventions if they are involved in their development. By including consultees in the process of generating intervention strategies, the consultees will develop greater confidence in their own skills and be less reliant on the consultant. Further, involved consultees will be better able to independently generate effective interventions in the future, prior to seeking a referral for consultation (Conoley & Conoley, 1988; Kurpius & Fuqua, 1993).

The third stage is perhaps the most demanding with respect to the number of technical skills required by the consultant. Not only does the consultant need to be competent in content skills of consultation, but he or she must also be skillful in his or her own area of expertise (Knoff et al., 1991; Knoff, Sullivan, & Liu, 1995; Knoff, Hines, & Kromrey, 1995; West & Cannon, 1988). Skills specific to consultation at this stage, include

diagnostic ability, problem solving, conflict resolution, modelling, and the ability to give clear directions (Knoff et al., 1991; Knoff, Sullivan, & Liu, 1995; Knoff, Hines, & Kromrey, 1995; West & Cannon, 1988). Additionally, the consultant must have a range of skills related to his or her own area of expertise for which he or she was called. For example, if the consultant was called in to assist in dealing with a student with a behavior problem, then the consultant must be knowledgeable and skillful in behavioral analysis and behavior management. Someone called in to consult on a small group of children with learning disabilities must have skills in this area. A consultant further needs to know how to work within the organizational system of the particular classroom, school or district to which he or she has been called, and be familiar with policies, procedures and regulations, such as how to access client records or other pertinent information.

Evaluation

The fourth stage, evaluation, is also consistently regarded as essential to the consultation process (Bradley, 1994; Dustin & Ehly, 1984; Friend, 1984; Parsons & Meyers, 1984; West & Cannon, 1988). The intent of this stage is to assess the efficacy and appropriateness of the intervention by determining what changes, if any, have occurred (Fine et al., 1979). Dustin and Ehly have suggested the consultant's role in the evaluation stage is to determine how well the intervention is working towards meeting the needs of the consultee(s). They have argued that the "evaluation phase ends when the consultee is satisfied with the outcomes of the change process" (p.27). If the intervention is not working, the consultant must work with the consultee(s) to confirm the

identification of the problem, reassess the appropriateness of the program plan, and evaluate implementation procedures. Revisions and modifications may be required at any or all of these stages.

Not only does the evaluation process provide valuable information about the effectiveness of the intervention, but as Parsons and Meyers (1984) have described, evaluation can also be an opportunity for the consultant to assess the efficacy of his or her own consultation abilities. The information gathered regarding the consultation can serve as a "pragmatic justification for continuation of consultation as a service delivery model" (Parsons & Meyers, 1984, p.207).

Termination

The final stage of the consultation process involves terminating the consultative relationship. According to Brown (1985) termination "occurs under at least two circumstances: when the goals of consultation have been achieved and when it is apparent that the goals cannot be achieved" (p.422). In the latter circumstance a referral to another resource may be the best solution (Dustin & Ehly, 1984). In the former circumstance, clearly setting predetermined goals will facilitate the termination process, as both the consultant and consultee(s) will be able to recognize when the goals have been met (Brown, 1985).

The termination stage can be important in cultivating independence in the consultee(s) (Parsons & Meyers, 1984). The support and collaboration the consultee(s) experience in the consultation process has the potential of creating a sense of dependence

on the consultant. Furthermore, a consultant may inadvertently perpetuate dependency out of a need of his or her own, which the consultant can address by identifying his or her own needs and clearly defining a point of termination.

In this final stage of consultation interpersonal relationship skills are again critical as the consultant focuses on reviewing and summarizing the consultation process, and obtaining and giving feedback regarding problem solving, interventions, and consultee satisfaction (Dustin & Ehly, 1984). "Termination, if done with an eye to closing, summarizing, highlighting, and encouraging, can be a renewing experience" (Parsons & Meyers, 1984, p.121).

## Process Skills

Perhaps the most important of the consultant process skills are interpersonal communication skills. Virtually any list of the skills and competencies of effective consultants will include a discussion of communication (Daniels & DeWine, 1991). In her discussion of consultation as a scientific art, Idol (1990) referred to process skills as the artful component; "how well the classroom consultant *works with* [emphasis added] classroom teachers" (p.15). Thus, while content or technical skills are critical in identifying and solving the problem for which the consultant was referred, the process, or the manner in which the consultant applies his or her content skills and works and communicates effectively with the consultee(s) may determine a successful outcome.

Relationship

The most basic, fundamental component of the consultation process is the establishment of a collaborative, helping relationship between consultant and consultee(s) (Dinkmeyer & Carlson, 1973; Fine et al., 1979; Idol, 1990; Idol-Maestas & Ritter, 1985; Parsons & Meyers, 1984; Randolf & D'Ilio, 1990; Salend & Salend, 1984; Silverman, 1974; Wade, Welch, & Jensen, 1994; Weissenburger, Fine, & Poggio, 1982). Collaborative consultation is defined as individuals with varied expertise working together to solve problems in a reciprocal relationship characterized by equality, mutuality, open communication, and shared responsibility (Johnson, Pugach, & Hammitte, 1988; Lopez et al., 1993; West & Idol, 1990). A collaborative approach to consultation means that the consultee is involved in identifying the problem and developing interventions. Collaboration is "not a relationship which assumes that one of the parties has all of the skills and answers, and hence, needs only to supply the less adequately trained individual with the necessary information" (Dinkmeyer & Carlson, 1973, p.169).

Several researchers have found the establishment of a collaborative working relationship to be critical to successful consultation (Silverman, 1984; Wade et al., 1994; Weissenburger et al., 1982). While important at every stage of consultation, relationship building at the entry stage has important significance and implications that influence each subsequent stage. For example, in the entry phase of consultation the consultant must be sensitive to the readiness or willingness of the consultee to accept consultation services. By the time a referral for consultation is made, a teacher is often feeling frustrated by

repeated failures and perhaps defensive at the need to bring in another individual for assistance. In such a situation, it is critical that the consultant identify and address all potential sources of resistance and clarify the consultee's expectations for the consultation process (Parsons & Meyers, 1974). This requires that the consultant possess effective skills in conflict resolution, active listening, and good public relations in order that the consultee feel heard, supported, and open to consultation.

Interpersonal Communication

Communication has central importance in the development of any relationship (Daniels & DeWine, 1991). A consultant's proficiency in communication is crucial to the collaborative process that impacts upon interpersonal relationships and influences the consultee's commitment to and interest in the problem solving process. In communicating openly, a consultant not only shares freely, but also accepts information from the consultee, implying respect for the consultee's own expertise (Conoley & Conoley, 1988).

In their respective lists of essential skills of consultants, both Knoff and his colleagues (Knoff et al., 1991; Knoff, Sullivan, & Liu, 1995; Knoff, Hines, & Kromrey, 1995) and West and Cannon (1988) found communication-related skills integral to the consultation process. In Knoff et al.'s 1991 article, the authors used factor analysis to organize 75 consultant skills identified through an extensive review of the literature and then through interviews with school psychology practitioners and consultation experts. Two of four factor groups, *Consultation Process Skills* and *Interpersonal Skills*, contained a variety of

communication related skills, such as, *good facilitator, able to over-come resistance, encourages ventilation,* and *empathic*. In the second study, Knoff, Sullivan, and Liu (1995) surveyed teachers using essentially the same instrument, with two items modified. The skills were again factor analyzed, but this time into only two factors: *Consultant Knowledge, Process, and Application Skills* and *Consultant Interpersonal and Problem-Solving Skills*. The second factor, as its title suggests consists mainly of various interpersonal communication skills. In a third study, Knoff, Hines, and Kromrey (1995) surveyed practising school psychologists using the original 1991 questionnaire. A series of factor analyses resulted in four factors, the first and largest being *Interpersonal Skills*. This factor, similar to its counterparts in the two previous studies, includes such skills as *interested, approachable, tactful,* and *attentive*.

West and Cannon (1988) used a Delphi technique to survey an expert panel on the skills deemed essential for effective collaborative consultation. The result of their study was the generation of a list of 47 competencies that fell into eight categories. *Interactive Communication,* and *Collaborative Problem Solving,* were two of the three categories receiving the highest panel ratings. (The third, *Personal Characteristics* are addressed in the discussion of Characteristics of Effective Consultants.) Examples of identified skills included *Utilize active ongoing listening and responding skills to facilitate the consultation process (e.g., acknowledging, paraphrasing, reflecting, clarifying, elaborating, summarizing)*, and *Generate viable alternatives through brainstorming techniques characterized by active listening, nonjudgmental responding, and appropriate reframing*.

*Counselling.* Many of the interpersonal communication skills identified in the literature as critical to the process of consultation are similar to those found in the counselling literature. In their article discussing the training needs of consultants, Dinkmeyer and Carlson (1973) emphasized the need for consultants to be trained in counselling techniques and theories. They likened consultation to counselling, citing a helping relationship "based on empathy, open communication, commitment, encouragement, and all of the essential components of counseling" (p.165). Dustin and Ehly (1984) also compared the similarities in consulting and counselling skills. They claimed that counsellors use counselling techniques that may be applied to the stages of consultation, suggesting that even the stages are similar.

*Active Listening.* Active listening is a communication skill cited by many as essential to the effectiveness of the consultation process (Bradley, 1994; Conoley & Conoley, 1992; Dinkmeyer & Carlson, 1973; Dustin & Ehly, 1984; Knoff et al., 1991; Knoff, Sullivan, & Liu, 1995; Knoff, Hines, & Kromrey, 1995; Parsons & Meyers, 1984; Salend & Salend, 1984; West & Cannon, 1988). There are many components to active listening which all refer to the manner in which an individual attends to the verbal and nonverbal communication of others. Bradley described active listening as a collection of several behaviours, such as reflective listening, paraphrasing, and understanding. In their book on school consultation, Conoley and Conoley included a chapter on consultant skills. Here they consider active listening as composed of acknowledging, reflecting, paraphrasing, summarizing, clarifying, and elaborating.

*Conflict Management.* Conflict management, or conflict resolution, is another interpersonal skill required by effective consultants (Bradley, 1994; Conoley & Conoley, 1992; Hansen et al., 1990; Knoff et al., 1991; Knoff, Sullivan, & Liu, 1995; Knoff, Hines, & Kromrey, 1995; West & Cannon, 1988). Being proficient in conflict management skills will help consultants deal with any misinterpretations and divergent expectations on behalf of one or more consultees. When conflict exists between two or more ingroups (e.g., between two teachers, or the teacher and teaching assistant), the consultant may first be called upon to mediate and assist in the resolution of the conflict before moving on to recommending interventions for the identified problem (Hansen et al., 1990).

## Characteristics of Effective Consultants

Consultant characteristics are difficult to discuss in isolation. Most characteristics are closely interrelated with many of the interpersonal communication skills noted above and some overlap is inevitable. Nevertheless, in most discussions of consultant skills there is also reference to specific characteristics or personality traits of consultants that are deemed necessary for effective consultation (Bradley, 1994; Dinkmeyer & Carlson, 1973; Idol-Maestas and Ritter, 1985; Knoff et al., 1991; Knoff, Sullivan, & Liu, 1995; Knoff, Hines, & Kromrey, 1995; Polsgrove & McNeil, 1989; Salend & Salend, 1984; Weissenburger et al., 1982; West & Cannon, 1988). There is consistency in the identification of these characteristics, with *warm, empathic, respectful, supportive, open, positive* and *enthusiastic,* and *flexible* as the most commonly cited characteristics. The importance of personal characteristics, in addition to skills, and their potential impact on

the effectiveness of consultation is clear. As Parsons and Meyers (1984) stated, "the most productive consultant will be one who has a warm, accepting, genuine, and respectful attitude toward the consultee and who actively conveys these attitudes to the consultee" (p.83).

In their list of 47 competency statements, West and Cannon found that seven statements fell in the category of *Personal Characteristics*. The mean of panel ratings of the relative importance of this category was 3.61 (of a possible 4), emphasizing the significance of these characteristics to the consultation process. Two competency statements in this category were amongst the ten most highly rated statements in this study. They were: *Exhibit ability to be caring, respectful, empathic, congruent, and open in consultation interactions*, and *Demonstrate willingness to learn from others throughout the consultation process.*

In the three Knoff et al. studies (Knoff et al., 1991; Knoff, Sullivan, & Liu, 1995; Knoff, Hines, & Kromrey, 1995), a variety of personal characteristics were identified as being associated with effective consultants. In the first study, five factors were generated for each of the two sample groups. Four of these were virtually the same for both sample groups, particularly the factor entitled *Personal Characteristics.* Individual personal characteristics included *intelligent, positive attitude, takes risks, trustworthy, resilient,* and *flexible*. *Warmth, accepting, encouraging,* and *empathetic* were also factored into the *Interpersonal Skills* factor for both samples. In the subsequent studies, while no factor specifically labelled *Interpersonal skills* was generated, many of the same characteristics were rated as highly indicative of effective consultants.

## Consultation Skills Research

Given the number of descriptive papers written about the skills deemed critical for consultants to be effective, one would expect a sound basis of empirical research to support authors' claims. Unfortunately, very few empirical studies have been conducted in the area of consultant skills. There are three groups into which the limited number of studies can be organized: skills as they are related to outcome; the relationship between preservice training and the perceptions of consultees regarding the effectiveness of consultation and consultants' skills; and the identification and rating of specific consultant skills with the aim of evaluating consultants.

### Outcome

The three studies in this area address both the relationship of skills present and objective measures of outcome, as well as consultees' perceptions of consultant skills and perceptions of outcome or effectiveness. Bergan and Tombari (1991) investigated how the presence of consultant skills and efficiency predicted the occurrence of problem identification, how consultant skills and efficiency and problem identification predicted the implementation of an intervention plan, and how all these variables predicted the attainment of problem solution. They examined the consultation practices of 11 psychologists responding to the referrals of 806 children in kindergarten through grade three in 10 communities in the United States representing a variety of ethnic groups, and rural and urban settings. The psychologists had all participated in a consultant training

program at the University of Arizona. Bergan and Tombari found that consultant skill level and efficiency impacted most markedly on the problem-solving process at the problem identification stage of the consultation process. When there was an absence of consultant skill or efficiency, the likelihood of solving the problem was diminished. Lack of consultant skill was not only associated with lack of problem resolution, but "when the consultant lacks skills, *consultation* is unlikely to occur" (p.86, emphasis added).

Over a six year period Gutkin (1986) examined the subjective perceptions of consultees as they related to consultees' understanding of the consultation process, interest in active involvement, the consultant's process skills, the consultant's content skills, and the consultant's enthusiasm. He surveyed 191 teachers in 24 elementary and junior high schools where consultation services were offered for the first time. Teachers were asked to complete a questionnaire that consisted of nine questions intended to measure their perceptions of a variety of factors involved in the consultation process, including the consultant's process and content skills. While cautioning against over-interpretation or misinterpretation of the data, Gutkin found that consultees' perceptions of the process and content skills of consultants were consistently and significantly related to consultees' perceptions of outcomes.

In a study on consultation effectiveness, Randolf and D'Ilio (1990) investigated participants' perceptions of the influence of four different conditions on the consultation process. Twenty-four graduate applied psychology majors and 36 undergraduate pre-professional psychology majors each viewed one of four videotapes reflecting each of the experimental conditions. They hypothesized that the degree of facilitativeness in the

consultation relationship and the appropriateness of the recommended problem solution were the most important aspects of consultation. The four conditions were: 1) positive facilitative, appropriate problem solution; 2) positive facilitative, inappropriate problem solution; 3) negative facilitative, appropriate problem solution; 4) negative facilitative, inappropriate problem solution. They found that the consultant's ability or skill in developing a facilitative relationship and in generating appropriate plans of intervention had a significant influence on the consultees' perceptions of consultant effectiveness.

Preservice Training

In an exploration of how preservice training influences consultation effectiveness, Idol-Maestas and Ritter (1985) conducted a follow-up study of resource/consulting teachers, examining the factors that facilitate or inhibit the consultation process. In part a program evaluation, this study involved telephone interviews and survey questionnaires with 27 graduates from the Resource/Consulting Teacher program at the University of Illinois between 1979 and 1983.

Respondents were asked to rate 34 skill statements with respect to their current level of proficiency, necessity of skill to the job, and how well these skills were developed in the program. It is not clear how the skills statements were identified for inclusion on the questionnaire, but they included "referral systems, assessment procedure, behavior management, instructional programs, consultation, interaction with parents, and professional readings and meetings" (p.125). The mean ratings of all skill statements with respect to current levels of competence were between 3.7 and 4.8 (of a possible 5).

Regarding the necessity of skills for the job, six skills statements had mean ratings of 4.5 to 4.8, and only three had mean scores of less than 3.2. The mean ratings of all skill statements fell between 2.3 and 4.8 with respect to how well these skills were addressed in the program.

Costenbader et al. (1992) also examined the relationship between preservice training and consultant skills. Specifically, the purpose of their study was to investigate the delivery of consultation services in schools in relation to four variables: preservice training, current practices, psychologists' perceptions of consultative skills, and the real and ideal levels of psychologists' involvement in consultation versus other duties.

The authors randomly surveyed 333 members of the National Association of School Psychologists across 46 states representing rural, urban and suburban school districts. The survey consisted of 30 items, multiple choice and short answer, and gathered information on demographics, preservice training, actual and preferred consultation practice (including actual and preferred time spent in consultation). It also contained a self-rating scale to measure the participants' perceptions of their consultation skills. The skills targeted in the scale included ethical and procedural components of the consultation relationship.

The authors found a significant difference in the amount of actual versus preferred time spent in consultation, with respondents preferring more time for consultation. Between 11% and 20% of consultants' time was typically spent in consultation while consultants reported preferring to spend an average of 31% to 40% of their time consulting with others. While 76% of the sample reported that training in consultation

was "very important," almost two thirds had received no, or less than one semester of formal training in consultation. On the self-rating scale all skills received mean scores between 2.94 and 3.90 (of a possible 5), indicative of "moderate ability" to function as a consultant.

Identification and Rating of Consultant Skills

The last group of studies reflects attempts at generating comprehensive lists of skills required by consultants for effective consultation. All involved attempts to develop rating instruments for the purposes of evaluating consultants. Friend (1984) created a rating scale consisting of 17 statements of skills and activities of resource teachers involved in consultation with regular educators. The statements were derived from the literature in the areas of special education, counselling, and educational psychology. One hundred and fifty resource teachers were asked to rate each item on the basis of necessity and in terms of their own level of competence. Using the same questionnaire, 194 regular education teachers and 176 principals were asked to rate each item according to whether or not resource teachers should have each skill, and also on their perceptions of the proficiency level of the resource teachers with whom they had previously interacted. Each item was analyzed according to the percentage of agreement for necessity, while ratings of proficiency were "summed and treated as a single global measure" (p.247). The majority of the respondents reported all skills as being necessary. In addition, resource teachers were rated as displaying moderate proficiency in consultant skills. Friend concluded that

given the need for and expectation of high skill level in this area, greater focus on consultation is warranted in preservice training programs.

In 1988, West and Cannon determined to identify and validate a comprehensive list of essential skills for regular and special educators involved in collaborative consultation. Using a Delphi technique the researchers surveyed a panel of 100 interdisciplinary experts from 47 states. The survey was developed through a review of the consultation literature in special education and other related professions. Relevant competencies were organized into one of two groups: "technical skills associated with effective teaching of handicapped and at-risk students" and "knowledge, skills attitudes [sic], and characteristics thought to be needed by persons who engage effectively in the process of collaborative consultation" (p.57). Only competencies falling in the second group were included in the questionnaire. There was a total of 100 items. Panellists were asked to rate each competency statement on its essentialness to the collaborative consultation process. From the survey results West and Cannon developed a list of 47 competency statements in eight categories that all received mean ratings of 3.5 and over (on a 4 point scale) and consensus scores of 75% and over. Highest ratings were awarded to skills in the areas of interactive communication, collaborative problem solving, and personal characteristics. This finalized list of competencies was intended for application in the development of curricula in both preservice and inservice training programs for consultants.

Knoff and colleagues (Knoff et al., 1991; Knoff, Sullivan, & Liu, 1995; Knoff, Hines, & Kromrey, 1995) have also attempted to identify the skills, or behaviors, and characteristics of consultants important to consultation effectiveness. In the first study,

(Knoff et al., 1991), school psychology practitioners and university-based school psychology trainers were asked to rate 75 items using a seven point Likert scale ranging from "Extremely Unimportant" (1) to "Extremely Important" (7). The items for the questionnaire (Consultant Effectiveness Scale - CES) were a series of skills or behaviors and characteristics that the authors had compiled through interviews with school psychologists in the greater Tampa, Florida area, as well as an extensive search of existing literature on consultant skills.

From the school psychology practitioner sample a total of 307 usable surveys were obtained; the total usable from the university-based expert group was 177. They used an independent common factor analysis using the principal axis factor extraction technique to analyze the available data for each sample group. For each of the two groups, the items were organized most efficiently into five factors. While there were some differences in the distribution of the items within the factors, the first four factors were essentially the same for both sample groups. The first four factors were labelled *Consultation Process Skills, Expert Skills, Personal Characteristics,* and *Interpersonal Skills*. The fifth factor for the expert sample was *Professional Respect*. For the practitioner group it was *Consultant Directiveness*. With the degree of correspondence in the first four factors, the authors suggested the possible existence of a common factor structure.

In an attempt to replicate and expand upon the findings of the 1991 study, Knoff and colleagues (Knoff, Sullivan, & Liu, 1995) surveyed a large sample of classroom teachers from a school district in central Florida representing urban, suburban and rural schools at both the elementary and secondary levels. The purposes of this second study were to

survey the teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of consultants, analyze how the factors identified in the present study compared to that of the previous research, and explore the relationship between the teachers' professional and demographic characteristics and their responses. The authors used the same 75 item Consultant Effectiveness Scale with minor revisions in which two items were eliminated and two remaining items were each expanded into two additional items.

Using the same method of data analysis, two factors were generated: "*Consultation Knowledge, Process, and Application Skills*" (35 items) and "*Consultant Interpersonal and Problem-Solving Skills and Qualities*" (33 items). Seven items did not load on either factor. The ten highest rated items included *Maintains confidentiality, Trustworthy, Knowledgeable in the area of expertise, Skillful in the area of expertise, Practices in an ethical manner, Attentive, Open-minded, An active listener, Emotionally well adjusted,* and *Objective*. Significant differences were found on Factor I as a function of age [$F(5, 333=9.29, p<.01$], academic degree level [$F(5,330)=18.06, p<.01$], and years of teaching experience [$F(5,333)=17.87, p<.01$]. On Factor II significant differences were found as a function of gender [$F(1,337)=9.84, p<.01$].

In a third study by Knoff and colleagues (Knoff, Hines, & Kromrey, 1995), the Consultant Effectiveness Scale (CES) was finalized. In this study 225 school psychologists across the United States completed two copies of the original CES (Knoff et al., 1991), first rating each item while considering the *most effective* consultants with whom they had previously been associated, and then while considering the *least effective* consultants. Using a series of *t*-tests and factor analyses, four final factors were generated

consisting of 52 items (the remaining items did not load on factors) Based on the nature of the skills in each factor, the factors were labelled *Interpersonal skills* (24 items); *Problem Solving skills* (14 items); *Consultation process and application skills* (11 items); and *Ethical and professional practice skills* (7 items). The authors describe the finalized CES as a heuristic scale useful in identifying effective consultant behaviors and characteristics, thus increasing the prevalence of such in practising consultants. They also suggest that the CES would be valuable in the training and supervision of consultants, thereby increasing their effectiveness and accountability.

## Summary

While it is clear that many authors have declared a variety of consultant skills and characteristics as being essential to the effectiveness of consultation, little empirical research exists to support these claims. Furthermore, the existing research has focused almost exclusively on the perceptions of university-based educators, school psychology practitioners, and teachers despite the potential for various other participants in the consultee role. For example, parents and paraprofessionals, such as teaching assistants, are being called to become increasingly more involved in the development and implementation of program plans with special needs students (Fine & Gardner, 1994; Handleman, 1990). While one may assume that consultants would require the same skills and characteristics to work with teachers as with teaching assistants and parents, it would be valuable to confirm this by surveying parents and teaching assistants themselves.

The Consultant Effectiveness Scale developed by Knoff et al. (Knoff et al., 1991; Knoff, Sullivan, & Liu, 1995; Knoff, Hines, & Kromrey, 1995) appears to be the most comprehensive list of consultant skills and characteristics, while excluding the duties or activities performed by consultants during consultation, such as was done by Friend (1984) and West and Cannon (1988). Nevertheless, the results of the Knoff, Hines, and Kromrey (1995) study require further and independent replication with expansion of the sample base. The purpose of this investigation was to replicate the Knoff, Hines, and Kromrey study using the same questionnaire but expanding the sample to include parents and teaching assistants.

# CHAPTER 3

# METHODOLOGY

In the study, a 75 item questionnaire was used to survey consultants, teachers, teaching assistants, and parents regarding their perceptions of the skills and characteristics important to the effectiveness of special education consultation in public elementary schools in British Columbia. A follow-up telephone interview served to support and further verify the results obtained from the questionnaire.

## Participants and Sampling Procedure

Respondents in the consultant group (n=18) included school- or district-based, government- or agency-based, and/or private consultants whose *primary* role was to provide consulting services to individuals working with students with special needs at the elementary school level. Consultant respondents were required to have a minimum of one year experience consulting with families and service providers with respect to children identified as having special needs.

Consultee respondents consisted of three groups: teachers (n=23), teaching assistants (n=17), and parents (n=17). All respondents of the Consultee group were required to have had at least one previous special education consultation experience within the past two academic years. The Teacher group included public elementary school teachers who have been teaching in a regular classroom for a minimum of two years. Teachers were required to have in their classroom at the time of the study a student identified as having special needs.

The Teaching Assistant group consisted of teaching assistants who, with two exceptions, all had a minimum of one year experience working with children who have special needs. Teaching assistants were required to be working at the time of the study with at least one, and no more than three students with special needs, in a full-time capacity. Teaching assistants were required to have some direct responsibility, under the supervision of a teacher or principal, for implementing IEP goals of at least one student with special needs.

The Parent group included parents of special needs students who have been involved with the school system for a minimum of one year. Where more than one parent of a student had participated in past consultation, both parents were asked to complete the questionnaire together. Only two questionnaires were known to have been completed conjointly by both parents, and while it is possible that others were also completed in this manner demographic information indicated that most parent questionnaires were completed by the mother.

Nineteen school districts within British Columbia were randomly selected for participation in this study, representing a variety of district sizes, population distributions, and geographic areas. Once school districts were selected, district superintendents were contacted via a letter requesting permission to conduct the study in their district (copies of all letters are provided in Appendix A). Fifteen districts approved the request while four declined participation.

Upon receipt of permission to conduct the study, one person in each district was identified as a contact person. In most districts this contact person was the superintendent,

or someone designated by the superintendent. The contact person in the majority of districts was sent a brief letter by mail or fax detailing the goals of the investigation. In addition the contact person was sent a response form on which to indicate the number of questionnaire packages for each respondent group to be distributed in that district. The requested number of questionnaire packages were then sent to the contact person for distribution. Questionnaire packages included the questionnaire (*see* Appendix B), a letter of introduction explaining the goals of the research, a more detailed letter outlining the origin of the questionnaire, and a stamped, self-addressed envelope in which to return the questionnaire. Follow-up telephone calls to contact people were made approximately three weeks after the initial mail-out to request that respondents be reminded to return their questionnaires.

The total number of questionnaire packages sent to each district included 55 consultant packages, 75 teacher packages, 75 teaching assistant packages, and 75 parent packages. The total return rate was less than 25%. As a result of the low returns by the parent group, additional questionnaire packages were distributed to a sample of convenience. These were distributed to parents fitting the original participation requirements by a colleague of the researcher. Another four parent questionnaires were obtained from this exercise.

Respondents willing to participate in the follow-up telephone interview were asked to include their name and phone number on the questionnaire. Three such respondents were randomly selected from each participant group and contacted by telephone to set up a time for a telephone interview (see Appendix C for Interview format). A total of two

Consultant participants, three teachers, three teaching assistants, and three parents were interviewed by the researcher subsequent to receiving returned questionnaires. All interviews were audiotaped then transcribed.

## Instrument

A two part questionnaire was used to gather the data for this study. The first part focused on collecting relevant demographic information: age, gender, role (e.g., teacher, teaching assistant, parent, or consultant), teaching level, years in present role, level and area of formal training, school district, nature of past consultation experience (e.g., behavioural, academic, psychological), and additional relevant experience (e.g., a teaching assistant may have past experience working with children with special needs in a different setting, such as community group home).

A modified version of the Consultant Effectiveness Scale (Knoff et al., 1991) was used to survey the sample regarding their perceptions of the skills and characteristics important to the effectiveness of special education consultation. This is a 75 item instrument that uses a five point Likert-type scale to measure the perceptions of respondents from "Not at all important" to "Extremely important". Two modifications were made to the existing questionnaire. First, the instructions were changed from "Please consider those school psychologists with whom you have worked in the past. Please rate these school psychologists together on the degree to which they exhibited the characteristics below" to "Please rate the following skills and characteristics on the basis of their importance to the effectiveness of special education consultation." Second, a final

open-ended question was included as follows: "Please comment on the extent to which the consultants you have worked with in the past have exhibited the skills and characteristics you rated as most reflective of effective special education consultants."

## Pilot Study

A pilot study was conducted in two phases, one for the questionnaire and one for the telephone interview. The purpose of the first phase was to ensure the directions and items on the questionnaire were understandable to respondents as intended and to receive feedback regarding the appropriateness of the questionnaire. Two elementary school teachers, two parents, and two consultants all meeting the requirements of the participant groups were selected purposively to pretest the questionnaire. Participants in the first phase of the pilot study were contacted through a local school district not included in the sample for the main study. Pilot study participants were asked to complete the questionnaire and include comments pertaining to the wording or other aspects of each item. The only change made to the questionnaire was to exclude the sentence "Please consider those consultants with whom you have worked in the past" from the instructions in order to clarify and simplify them. Due to issues of validity and reliability, no changes were made to the wording of the items, although several pilot respondents commented on the lack of clarity in the wording of some of the items.

Questions for the follow-up telephone interviews were derived from the initial analysis of the questionnaire data. The format and clarity of these questions was then

confirmed by piloting the interview with two consultants known to the researcher who were not part of the main study.

# CHAPTER 4

# RESULTS

Examination of the data began with exploring the responses obtained from the questionnaire followed by an analysis of the interview data. Initial details reported for the questionnaire survey include rate of return and demographic characteristics of the sample. Questionnaire results are presented by research question as posed earlier in this report. For conducted statistical analyses, levels of significance were set at .05. Results are examined by group or with groups collapsed as dictated by the nature of the research question. Also reported are comments in response to a final open-ended question regarding respondents' perceptions of how well past consultants had actually met the ideal as rated on the questionnaire. Finally, interview results are presented in the context of the critical information-gathering questions.

## Questionnaire Results

### Rate of Return

A total of 75 questionnaire packages in each of the three consultee groups were mailed out and 55 questionnaire packages were sent to consultants. Response rates for all three groups was low: Teachers (31%), Teaching Assistants (23%), Consultants (33%), Parents (21%). As a result of the low returns by the parent group, additional questionnaire packages were distributed to a convenience sample. Final sample sizes by constituent group were as follows: Consultants (n=18), Teachers (n=23), Teaching Assistants (n=17), and Parents (n=17).

## Demographic Characteristics

The demographic variables reported most consistently in the literature are gender, age, level of education and years in present role (e.g., as a consultant or teacher) (Knoff et al., 1991; Knoff, Sullivan, & Liu, 1995; Knoff, Hines, & Kromrey, 1995). These demographic variables were examined with respect to their impact on questionnaire results. The demographic characteristics of the sample are summarized in Table 1. Gender was highly skewed, with 56 of all respondents (74.7%) being female. Similar female to male ratios were evident across all respondent groups.

With respect to age, the majority of the 75 respondents were between the ages of 36 and 55 years (N=59, 78.7%), with an almost even distribution between the 36 to 45 year age group (N=29) and the 46 to 55 year age group (N=30).

The level of education most frequently reported by all respondents (n=34, 45.3%) was an undergraduate level university degree. In each group, the predominant level of education was commensurate with position held. That is, the majority of consultants had graduate degrees either completed or pending (n=12, 70.6%); most teachers (n=18, 78.3%) and parents (n=8, 53.3%) held bachelor degrees; and the greatest number of teaching assistants had a one or two year certificate or diploma, or some university or college (n=12, 66.7%).

Years experience in present role was distributed relatively evenly within each group. Overall, 32.9% (N=24) of respondents had six to ten years experience in their present role. The range for all groups was from "less than one year" to "over 20 years."

TABLE 1

Demographic characteristics of sample

| Characteristic | Number | Percent |
|---|---|---|
| ***Gender*** | | |
| Female | 56 | 74.7 |
| Male | 14 | 18.7 |
| Unspecified | 5 | 6.7 |
| ***Age group*** | | |
| under 25 | 1 | 1.3 |
| 25 - 35 | 10 | 13.3 |
| 35 - 45 | 29 | 38.7 |
| 45 - 55 | 30 | 40.0 |
| over 55 | 3 | 4.0 |
| unspecified | 2 | 2.7 |
| ***Education*** | | |
| Grade 12 | 4 | 5.3 |
| College/some university | 15 | 20.0 |
| Bachelor's degree | 34 | 45.3 |
| Graduate degree (completed or pending) | 19 | 25.3 |
| unspecified | 3 | 4.0 |
| ***Years in role*** | | |
| less than 1 year | 2 | 2.7 |
| 1 - 5 years | 21 | 28.0 |
| 6 - 10 years | 24 | 32.0 |
| 10 - 20 years | 20 | 26.7 |
| over 20 years | 6 | 8.0 |
| unspecified | 2 | 2.7 |

## Question #1: Important Skills and Characteristics

*What do consultants and consultees identify as the skills and characteristics important to the effectiveness of special education consultation in public elementary schools in British Columbia?*

An initial analysis of the data began with exploring the results for each group individually. Descriptive statistics were computed for all 75 items for each group separately, including mean ratings and the standard deviations. Typically, the top six to ten ranked items have been reported (Knoff et al., 1991; Knoff, Sullivan, & Liu, 1995; Knoff, Hines, & Kromrey, 1995). However, in order to present meaningful comparisons across groups the top 15 skill items ranked with respect to importance are reported here (see Table 2).

Five items were consistently found in the top fifteen for all respondent groups: *Maintained confidentiality*, *Practiced in an ethical manner, Showed respect for consultee, Trustworthy,* and *Approachable*. These five items were also found in the top fifteen rated items in the study by Knoff, Hines, and Kromrey (1995).

TABLE 2

Fifteen highest rated items per group

| Items | Mean | SD |
|---|---|---|
| ***Consultant group*** | | |
| #61 - Maintained confidentiality | 5.00 | .00 |
| #60 - Practices in an ethical manner | 4.94 | .24 |
| #20 - Showed respect for consultee | 4.94 | .24 |
| # 9 - Trustworthy | 4.78 | .55 |
| #28 - Expressive (good communicator) | 4.78 | .43 |
| #59 - Positive attitude | 4.78 | .43 |
| #54 - Good facilitator | 4.76 | .44 |
| #30 - Interpersonally competent (competency) | 4.76 | .44 |
| # 4 - Objective | 4.72 | .46 |
| #58 - Good at problem-solving | 4.72 | .46 |
| #55 - Approachable | 4.71 | .47 |
| #19 - Accepting (non-judgmental) | 4.69 | .60 |
| #39 - Effective at establishing rapport | 4.67 | .49 |
| #71 - Identified clear goals | 4.61 | .50 |
| #27 - Gave clear, understandable directions | 4.61 | .50 |
| ***Teacher group*** | | |
| #20 - Showed respect for consultee | 4.78 | .42 |
| #61 - Maintained confidentiality | 4.70 | .56 |
| #55 - Approachable | 4.65 | .49 |
| # 9 - Trustworthy | 4.61 | .50 |
| #67 - Able to confront without personal attacks | 4.59 | .50 |
| #60 - Practiced in an ethical manner | 4.57 | .59 |
| #12 - Able to overcome resistance | 4.57 | .51 |
| #58 - Good at problem-solving | 4.57 | .59 |

*(table continues)*

TABLE 2. (*continued*)

| Items | Mean | SD |
|---|---|---|
| #14 - Tolerant | 4.52 | .51 |
| # 8 - Interested (concerned) | 4.52 | .59 |
| # 6 - Empathetic | 4.52 | .59 |
| #75 - Pursued issues, followed through | 4.52 | .59 |
| #57 - Skilled at conflict resolution | 4.52 | .67 |
| #56 - Understood school system | 4.52 | .51 |
| #38 - Astute observer (perceptive) | 4.52 | .59 |
| ***Teaching Assistant group*** | | |
| #61 - Maintained confidentiality | 4.82 | .53 |
| # 1 - Knowledgeable | 4.76 | .44 |
| #20 - Showed respect for consultee | 4.65 | .61 |
| #28 - Expressive (good communicator) | 4.63 | .62 |
| #59 - Positive attitude | 4.59 | .62 |
| #71 - Identified clear goals | 4.59 | .71 |
| #27 - Gave clear, understandable directions | 4.56 | .63 |
| #60 - Practiced in an ethical manner | 4.53 | .72 |
| #13 - Open-minded | 4.53 | .72 |
| # 9 - Trustworthy | 4.53 | .87 |
| #55 - Approachable | 4.47 | .72 |
| #67 - Able to confront without personal attacks | 4.47 | .80 |
| #38 - Astute observer (perceptive) | 4.47 | .62 |
| # 2 - Skillful | 4.41 | .71 |
| #30 - Interpersonally competent (Competency) | 4.41 | .71 |

*(table continues)*

TABLE 2. (*continued*)

| Items | Mean | SD |
|---|---|---|
| ***Parent group*** | | |
| #13 - Open-minded | 4.71 | .47 |
| #19 - Accepting (non-judgmental) | 4.53 | .62 |
| # 1 - Knowledgeable | 4.44 | .73 |
| # 8 - Interested (concerned) | 4.41 | .71 |
| # 9 - Trustworthy | 4.41 | .62 |
| # 4 - Objective | 4.41 | .80 |
| #28 - Expressive (good communicator) | 4.41 | .71 |
| #61 - Maintained confidentiality | 4.41 | .87 |
| #39 - Effective at establishing rapport | 4.41 | .71 |
| #20 - Showed respect for consultee | 4.41 | .62 |
| #38 - Astute observer (perceptive) | 4.35 | .70 |
| #27 - Gave clear, understandable directions | 4.35 | .61 |
| #55 - Approachable | 4.35 | .61 |
| #75 - Pursued issues, followed through | 4.29 | .59 |
| #60 - Practiced in an ethical manner | 4.29 | .77 |

## Question #2: Respondent Ratings

*What differences and/or similarities can be observed between the respondent groups in rating the importance of these skills and characteristics?*

A series of one-way Analyses of Variance was conducted on all 75 items by group to determine if any significant differences could be detected. Significant differences were found in 20 of the items and, therefore, *post hoc* Scheffé tests were completed. Fourteen items were found to differ significantly between identified groups, with the Consultant and/or Teacher group rating the items higher on average than the Parent group in every instance except for two (see Table 3). The percentage of variability that can be attributed to group membership ( $\eta^2$) was similar for all 14 items ranging from 11.7% to 18.5%.

## Question #3: Comparison to Previous Factor Structure

*How well does the factor structure generated in the study conducted by Knoff, Hines, and Kromrey (1995) fit with the results of the present study?*

In the Knoff, Hines, and Kromrey study (1995) four factors were generated consisting of 52 items (four items were double-loaded for a total of 56 items). In the present study, the internal consistency of these items within each of the four factors was calculated using Cronbach's alpha. The alpha levels for the respective factors were as follows: Factor 1 (Interpersonal skills - 24 items): .93; Factor 2 (Problem Solving skills - 14 items): .89; Factor 3 (Consultation process and application skills - 11 items): .86; and Factor 4 (Ethical and professional practice skills - 7 items): .81. These results indicate a high level

TABLE 3

One-way Analysis of Variance for individual items between groups

| Item | *F* | df | Signif.[1] | Scheffé[2] |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| #11 - *Skilled in questioning* | 5.37 | (3,71) | $p < .003$ | C,T>P[3] |
| #12 - *Able to overcome resistance* | 3.13 | (3,71) | $p < .04$ | T>P |
| #20 - *Showed respect for consultee* | 3.78 | (3,71) | $p < .02$ | C>P |
| #22 - *Tactful* | 4.36 | (3,71) | $p < .008$ | C,T>P |
| #25 - *Efficient user of time (efficiency)* | 4.21 | (3,71) | $p < .009$ | C,TA>P |
| #30 - *Interpersonally competent* | 3.39 | (3,70) | $p < .03$ | C>P |
| #31 - *Clear sense of identity* | 4.60 | (3,70) | $p < .006$ | C>P |
| #46 - *Active* | 3.82 | (3,70) | $p < .02$ | T>P |
| #54 - *Good facilitator* | 3.13 | (3,70) | $p < .04$ | T>P |
| #58 - *Good at problem-solving* | 4.43 | (3,71) | $p < .007$ | C>P |
| #60 - *Practiced in an ethical manner* | 3.43 | (3,71) | $p < .03$ | C>TA |
| #61 - *Maintained confidentiality* | 3.24 | (3,71) | $p < .03$ | C>P |
| #65 - *Summarized* | 3.69 | (3,70) | $p < .02$ | C>P |
| #69 - *Employed appropriate personal distance* | 4.11 | (3,71) | $p < .01$ | C>P |

[1] Level of Significance
[2] Groups significantly different at the $p<.05$ level in a *post hoc* Scheffé analysis of paired comparisons.
[3] C=Consultant group; T=Teacher group; TA=Teaching Assistant group; P=Parent group

of internal consistency within the factors as determined in the Knoff, Hines, and Kromrey study. A total of 49.1% of the variance was accounted for with the four factors.

Given the sample size in the present study it was not possible to carry out a factor analysis for the obtained results. However, it was of interest to examine the present results as per the four factors generated by Knoff, Hines, and Kromrey (1995). A principal axis factor analysis was completed using the 52 items present in the four factors. On the first factor (Interpersonal skills), 17 of the 24 items were consistent with the original study. For the second factor (Problem Solving skills), eight of 13 items corresponded, while four of nine items were the same in the third factor (Consultation process and application skills). There were only four items obtained in the fourth factor (Ethical and professional practice skills) and none was consistent with the same factor in the Knoff, Hines, and Kromrey study. Of the seven items obtained in the fourth factor of the original study, four loaded in the first factor of the present study, while three loaded in the second factor.

The overall consistency of the items to the original factor structure was sufficient to permit further analysis. As a result, a one-way Analysis of Variance was conducted on the four factors to revisit the second research question and to determine if any significant differences existed between the respondent groups. Significant differences were found on three of the four factors. For Factor 1 (Interpersonal Skills), no significant differences were observed between respondent groups. For the remaining three factors, *post hoc* Scheffé tests were calculated. The Consultant group was found to have rated the items in each of the three factors significantly higher than the Parent group ($p < .05$). The

magnitude of effect of these significant differences was calculated. For Factor 2 (Problem Solving Skills) 14.2% of the variability can be said to be due to group differences. The respective percentages of variability for Factors 3 (Consultation process and application skills) and Factor 4 (Ethical and professional practice skills) were 13% and 16.5%.

## Question #4: Impact of Demographic Variables

*How do demographic variables impact upon respondents' ratings of skills and characteristics?*

In order to explore the results of the current survey with respect to demographic variables a series of one-way Analyses of Variance were carried out on each factor by gender, age group, years in present role, and by level of education. No significant differences were found between any of the factors across each demographic variable.

## Questionnaire Comments

In addition to the rating scale, respondents of the questionnaire were asked to comment on the extent to which the consultants they had worked with in the past had exhibited the skills and characteristics they had rated as most important. Only 15 respondents (20%) responded to this question as intended. While many wrote lengthy comments, most were reiterations of the skills and characteristics they believed were important to the effectiveness of the consultation experience. In examining the 15 relevant comments, 13 were positive, indicating that consultants did meet the ideal. For example, one Teaching Assistant remarked, "All the skills I rated as extremely important

to very important were done so at all time [sic] superbly and professionally." Of the two negative comments, one suggested that there "needs to be much work done in this area," and the other respondent commented that he or she "received no effective help."

## Telephone Interviews

Follow-up telephone interviews were completed with two respondents from the Consultant group, and three each from the Teacher, Teaching Assistant, and Parent groups. The main purpose of the interviews was to explore which consultant skills were associated with positive perceptions of the consultation experience and identify any consistencies that would support questionnaire results. The groups were collapsed and all comments were categorized according to type (e.g., positive, negative) then grouped and tallied as they related to either interpersonal communication or relationship-building skills, content or technical skills, or characteristics.

The first four questions of the interview were meant to establish rapport between the interviewer and interviewee, as well as to initiate a question-response pattern and encourage the interviewee to reflect upon past consultation experiences. The focus of the interviews rested predominately on the question addressing what the consultant did that made the consultation experience positive or negative.

Question #5: Consultant Facilitation and Hindrance

*Thinking about both positive and less positive consultation experiences, describe what the consultant did or how he or she behaved that (a) helped make the process positive; (b) that hindered the process.*

When asked to comment on what the consultant did or what consultants should do to make the consultation experience positive, interviewees expressed a wide variety of responses. In total, 182 comments were culled from the interview transcripts in response to this question. Of these, a large majority of the comments (N=147; 81%) reflected interpersonal communication or relationship-building skills, such as "excellent communication skills," "close working relationship," " listened," and "respected." Thirty-three of the comments (18%) were related to content or technical skills; for example, "skilled," "knowledgeable," "followed through," and "offered a lot of different suggestions." In exploring those statements that reflected consultant characteristics, considerable overlap was found, particularly between characteristics and interpersonal communication or relationship-building skills. Ninety-one (50%) of the comments were indicative of consultant characteristics. Examples of comments related to characteristics included "friendly," "diplomatic," "flexible," "approachable," "warm," and "understanding." Some comments were not categorized due to concerns with subjective interpretation.

The content of many of the comments pertaining to interpersonal communication and relationship-building, including those describing consultant characteristics were consistent with items in the first factor (Interpersonal skills) of the Knoff, Hines, and

Kromrey study (1995). The comments relating to content or technical skills most closely reflected items found in the third factor (Consultation process and application skills). Few of the comments were consistent with Factor 2 (Problem Solving skills) and no comments were directly related to Factor 4 (Ethical and professional practice skills).

An additional interview question queried the interviewees on the behaviors or mannerisms of consultants that somehow made the consultation experience negative or frustrating. Ninety-five comments were made in this regard, of which 68 (72%) were related to interpersonal communication or relationship-building, such as "not clear," "not a team player," "very difficult to deal with," and "distant, clinical approach." There were 31 comments (33%) that reflected consultant characteristics, but again there was substantial overlap in this area, predominately with interpersonal communication or relationship-building skills. Examples of comments relating to consultant characteristics are "very set," "know-it-allish," "aren't upfront," and "lack of support." Eighteen (19%) "negative" comments were associated with content or technical skills, including "impractical ideas," "withholding information," "wasn't followed through on," and "mismatched goals." An additional 10 comments (11%) were recorded that indicated that the consultation experience was negative due to practical issues involving the consultant's lack of time for scheduling appointments. Interviewees made it clear in these instances that their frustration in this regard was not a reflection of the consultant's skill level or personal characteristics, but rather associated with problems inherent in the system. Again, the majority of comments were most consistent with Factor 1 (Interpersonal skills) and Factor 3 (Consultation process and application skills).

Question #6: Consultation Usefulness

*In considering the usefulness of consultation, tell me what you obtained from the experience (a) that was of most value to you; (b) that most benefitted the child.*

In addition to interview results directly related to the questionnaire, several other key points arose from the interview data that were of interest. When asked to comment upon what part of the consultation experience has been or could be of greatest value to the consultee, 52 statements were obtained. Of these, 25 (48%) were associated with interpersonal or relationship issues, such as "team support," "collaborative atmosphere," "different perspective," and "more respect." An almost equal number (N=23; 44%) of comments suggested that increases in content or technical skills or tangible results were of most value to the consultee. For example, many interviewees commented on the benefit of increased knowledge or information, the development of a program plan, or access to appropriate services. Fewer comments (N=5; 10%) were made with respect to changes in their own personal characteristics, such as "flexibility," "confidence," and "independence."

Another area of interest arising from the interview data was the response to the question "How do you think the child most benefits from a consultation experience (even if not involved directly)?" There were 36 responses to this question of which 26 (72%) referred to an increase in skill or knowledge on behalf of the consultee or child, or again, tangible results, such as a program plan or different strategies. Fourteen comments (39%) concerning the benefits to the child were related to changes in the consultee's

interpersonal skills or characteristics, such as increased empathy, flexibility and openness, and decreased frustration resulting in a "more relaxed setting."

# CHAPTER 5

# DISCUSSION

The purpose of the present study was to identify what consultants and consultees perceive to be the skills and characteristics of effective special education consultants in public elementary schools in British Columbia. In effect, this study replicated a similar one conducted by Knoff, Hines, and Kromrey (1995) in that the same questionnaire was used to survey consultants and teachers as did Knoff and his colleagues, although modifications to the questionnaire were made to suit the present situation. The present study extended the former by using two additional sample groups, teaching assistants and parents. The rationale for including teaching assistants and parents was to ascertain whether any significant differences exist between the perceptions of these respondent groups, the teacher group and the consultant group. Such differences are noted in the *Results* section and are discussed herein. Using the four factors as obtained in the Knoff, Hines, and Kromrey study, the results of the current study are further considered across the respondent groups. Differences across demographic variables are then explored. Written comments recorded on the questionnaire are discussed. The results of this survey are addressed in light of the findings in the extant literature. Finally, recommendations arising from this study are presented.

## Limitations

Several limitations require discussion when interpreting the results of this study. First, any findings must not be overgeneralized as the sample sizes are small and restricted to

sampled districts in British Columbia. Replication using larger numbers of respondents across a greater geographical field is recommended. In all three of the Knoff et al. studies (Knoff et al., 1991; Knoff, Sullivan, & Liu, 1995; Knoff, Hines, & Kromrey, 1995) samples consisted of several hundred respondents. Replication of this study using larger sample sizes would permit closer comparisons to be made with the original studies, further validating the scale.

Another limitation surrounds problems associated with surveying the perceptions of respondents. The data in the present study represented consultants' and consultees' *perceptions* of skills and effectiveness not actual objective measures of such. Thus, whereas perceptions of skills have been found to be consistently related to perceptions of consultation outcome, actual measures of consultant skills and of outcomes may contradict these findings. Nevertheless, if the final format of the CES represents an accurate reflection of the skills and characteristics believed to be important to the effectiveness of consultation, this scale may prove to be a valid list of items to be included in an objective measure.

A third limitation concerns the control of the selection of participants. While efforts were made to ensure the descriptions of the qualifications for participation were clear, actual distribution of questionnaire packages fell to the district contact person and his or her discretion and interpretation of these qualifications.

Fourth, the results of this study rest on the assumption that the scale used (Knoff et al., 1991) is both reliable and valid. While measures of internal consistency were high in the present study as well as in all three Knoff et al. studies (Knoff et al., 1991; Knoff,

Sullivan, & Liu, 1995; Knoff, Hines, & Kromrey, 1995), additional validation of the scale is required. For example, in all three original studies, factor analyses resulted in different factors being generated. Five factors were generated for each sample group in the 1991 study, while only two factors resulted from the Knoff, Sullivan, and Liu (1995) study, and four factors were produced in the Knoff, Hines, and Kromrey (1995) study. Without further research, the validity of the Consultant Effectiveness Scale cannot be taken for granted.

Finally, statistical limitations exist in the present study calling for cautious interpretation of the findings. As a consequence of the number of statistical calculations carried out, there is a likelihood that some of the statistical significances found were a result of chance rather than actual differences. While measures were taken to limit the number of type I alpha errors, the reader is nevertheless advised to use discretion in the interpretation of the present results.

## Rate of Return

A total of 75 usable questionnaires were returned across the four respondent groups rendering an overall return rate of 26.8%. However, this percentage could be misleading as it is not possible to know how many questionnaire packages were actually distributed by the district contact person. For example, in following up in one district to which a total of eight questionnaire packages in each respondent group had been sent, the researcher was notified of the failure of the contact person to distribute *any* of the questionnaire packages.

Two of the questionnaires that were returned had been completed by secondary level teachers (e.g., grade nine or above). However, the results obtained in previous research (e.g., Knoff, Sullivan, & Liu, 1995) suggest that teaching level does not significantly influence respondents ratings. Therefore, these questionnaires were included within the Teacher group.

## Question #1: Important Skills and Characteristics

The lists of top fifteen ranked items (Table 2) allow the reader to make cursory observations of the diversity in the ratings across groups. Of the five items that were found consistently across all groups as well as the Knoff, Hines, and Kromrey (1995) study, four loaded on the first factor (Interpersonal skills) in the present study: *Practiced in an ethical manner, Showed respect for consultee, Trustworthy*, and *Approachable*. In the Knoff, Hines, and Kromrey study, the latter three loaded in the first factor as well, while *Practiced in an ethical manner* loaded on the fourth factor. Respect and trust are also consistently reported by other researchers and authors as important in consultation (Bradley, 1994; Dustin & Ehly, 1984; Friend, 1984; Idol, 1990; Knoff et al., 1991; Knoff, Sullivan, & Liu, 1995; Knoff, Hines, & Kromrey, 1995; Luckner, 1991; Salend & Salend, 1984; West & Cannon, 1988). Confidentiality has also been cited as a critical component in the consultation process (Knoff et al., 1991; Knoff, Sullivan, & Liu, 1995; Knoff, Hines, & Kromrey, 1995; Silverman, 1974).

## Question #2: Respondent Ratings

Fourteen of 75 items were identified through analyses of variance with *post hoc* Scheffé tests as having significant differences between identified groups. With most of these items, the Consultant and/or Teacher groups rated the items as significantly more important than did the Parent group. However, it should be noted that the Parent group scored lower means overall on all 75 items in comparison to the other three respondent groups. Thus, while it may appear that parent respondents sought different skills and characteristics in the consultation experience than the consultants and/or teachers, there were no corresponding items that the parent group rated as significantly higher than the other groups. Nevertheless, differences in the ratings of items across groups may be of casual interest to consultants working with different constituent groups. Unfortunately, no other research could be located in which parent respondents could be compared with other respondent groups. It would be of value to explore the existence of possible differences in future research as any differences could potentially influence consultant training at both the preservice and inservice levels.

## Question #3: Comparison to Previous Factor Structure

Significant differences were found to exist between groups on three of the four factors as generated in the Knoff, Hines, and Kromrey (1995) study. The fact that no significant differences were found on Factor 1 (Interpersonal skills) suggests that such skills are equally deemed important by all respondents whether consultant or consultee, whether teacher, teaching assistant, or parent. This finding is supported by claims in the literature

that while technical skills are critical, they are of little value if an effective working relationship is not established or if ideas and directions are poorly communicated (Daniels & DeWine, 1991; Dinkmeyer & Carlson, 1973; Dustin & Ehly, 1984; Fine et al., 1979; Idol, 1990; Idol-Maestas & Ritter, 1985; Idol & West, 1987; Parsons & Meyers, 1984; Randolf & D'Ilio, 1990; Salend & Salend, 1984; Silverman, 1974; Wade et al., 1994; Weissenburger et al., 1982).

The differences found on Factors 2 through 4 follow with the results of the analysis of variance carried out on the ratings of all 75 items. That is, the Consultant group was found to have rated the factors higher than the Parent group. The overall lower ratings of the Parent group may be an artifact of the small sample size or of characteristics unique to this sample. It is important to remember that the number of statistical calculations carried out in this study elevate the possibility of obtaining significant results when in fact none exist. Nevertheless, these differences warrant consideration given their magnitude of effect (range: 13% and 16.5%). Noting such differences may be of value in preservice and inservice consultation training programs, particularly with the increase in parent involvement in special education consultation (Fine & Gardner, 1994; Handleman, 1990).

## Question #4: Impact of Demographic Variables

The failure to find any significant differences on any of the factors by demographic variable is difficult to discuss in comparison to the results of previous studies using this scale (Knoff et al., 1991; Knoff, Sullivan, & Liu, 1995; Knoff, Hines, & Kromrey, 1995). Demographic variables were not reported in two of the previous studies (Knoff et al.,

1991; Knoff, Hines, & Kromrey, 1995), and while demographic variable were reported in the Knoff, Sullivan, and Liu (1995) study, the differences in sample composition (e.g., teachers versus teachers, teaching assistants, and parents) render any comparisons tentative at best. Furthermore, in the Knoff, Sullivan, and Liu study, only two factors were generated. No other study could be located that examined the impact demographic variables had on ratings of consultation skills.

## Questionnaire Comments

The high rate of misinterpretation of the final open-ended question on the questionnaire is unfortunate. The lack of clarity regarding the intention of the question was not picked up during the pilot study. Nevertheless, 15 comments were recorded allowing for a brief, if tentative insight into respondents' perceptions of how well their past consultation experiences met with their ideal expectations. With 13 of 15 comments indicating that past consultants met respondents' ideal expectation, this suggests that respondents were satisfied with the skills of their consultants. Gutkin (1986), in surveying teachers' perceptions of consultation, found that the teachers' perceptions of consultant skills were consistently related to perceptions of consultation outcomes. Randolf and D'Ilio (1990) similarly found a relationship between a consultant's skill in developing a facilitative relationship and in generating appropriate program plans and consultees' perceptions of consultant effectiveness.

## Telephone Interviews

The purpose of the telephone interviews was to further explore respondents' perceptions of consultant effectiveness. Interviewees were asked to comment upon consultants' behaviors that contributed to feelings of a positive or negative consultation experience. The large majority (81%) of positive comments relating to interpersonal communication or relationship-building skills support the findings of the questionnaire that process skills, more than content skills are critical in consultees' perceptions of effectiveness. This confirms what many (DeBoer, 1986; Dinkmeyer & Carlson, 1973; Fine et al., 1979; Gutkin, 1986; Idol, 1990; Idol-Maestas & Ritter, 1985; Parsons & Meyers, 1984; Salend & Salend, 1984; Silverman, 1974; Wade et al., 1994; Weissenburger et al., 1982) have purported, that "while some of the considerations seem skill-based, . . . the consultant's way of acting out these skills either enhances or detracts from his or her effectiveness" (Randolf & D'Ilio, 1990, p.534). This is further corroborated by the percentage of comments (72%) related to the absence of interpersonal communication or relationship-building skills that interviewees reported as resulting in a negative consultation experience.

The value of consultant process skills was supported by responses to interview questions probing the benefits of the consultation experience for both the consultee and the child (who may or may not be an active participant in the consultation process). Comments regarding benefits to both consultee and child referred consistently to elements of interpersonal communication or relationships. Many commented on the support given by others in a collaborative relationship of greatest benefit, although

increases in consultee skill level and development of a program plan were also reported to be of value. This trend was reversed in responses regarding the benefit of consultation to the child, with 39% of comments related to increases in consultee interpersonal skills and 72% related to increased skills or a program plan.

## Recommendations

Clearly, further research in this area is warranted. While the CES provides the most comprehensive list of skills important to the effectiveness of consultation, concerns remain regarding its factor structure. In all three of the Knoff et al. studies (Knoff et al., 1991; Knoff, Sullivan, & Liu, 1995; Knoff, Hines, & Kromrey, 1995) different factor structures were generated, suggesting that the factor structure of this instrument is a function of the respondent group. The high level of internal consistency reported in all three studies by Knoff and his colleagues, as well that reported here, lend support for the individual items within the CES. All of the 52 items maintained in the final scale were rated highly by all respondent groups in all the studies. However, whether the final factor structure proposed in the study by Knoff, Hines, and Kromrey is tenable remains to be validated in future research involving large samples of all four respondent groups (i.e., consultants, teachers, teaching assistants, and parents).

With respect to its practical use, the CES appears to have value. The CES could provide consultants with a basis for self-evaluation. Simply by referring to an available list of skills deemed important by several different groups, consultants and consultees alike, consultants are likely to develop increased sensitivity to those skills and

characteristics and thus make a greater effort to display them. The differences between respondent groups in rating items as most important, while as yet unsubstantiated, are worth noting. At the very least these differences suggest that what is important to the effectiveness of consultation in the eyes of teachers may not necessarily be the same as those for parents. Again, being sensitive to the possibility of such differences increases the likelihood that consultants will be effective regardless of with whom they are consulting.

Perhaps the greatest value of the CES may be to serve as a vehicle for the development of curricula for preservice and inservice training programs for consultants. With a reference list of skills and characteristics consistently identified as important to the effectiveness of consultation, educators may concentrate on developing these skills and characteristics in their trainees. When used in conjunction with similar or parallel scales, such as that developed by West and Cannon (1988), the CES highlights for consultants and educators alike the skills and characteristics which, when mastered, are significantly related to effectiveness in consultation.

## Summary

In summary, the results of this study, while limited due to the small sample size, suggest that differences do exist between the perceptions of different consultee groups with respect to the consultant skills deemed important to the effectiveness of special education consultation. Further investigation of such differences needs to be pursued to determine if the differences found are actual or simply a reflection of the limited size of

the respondent groups. The implications of any differences between groups lie most critically in the area of preservice and inservice training for consultants. Given the increasing trend in special education to include parents and paraprofessionals in the consultation process (Fine & Gardner, 1994; Handleman, 1990), consultants must remain aware of and sensitive to the varying needs and working styles of consultees in differing roles. Furthermore, the importance of consultation process skills, involving interpersonal communication and relationship-building cannot be understated. Regardless of group membership, all consultees in the present study emphasized the importance of process skills in contributing to positive perceptions of the consultation experience. And consultee perceptions, while not objective measures, nevertheless remain pivotal in determining the effectiveness of consultation (Gutkin, 1986).

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# APPENDIX A

# LETTERS

Letter Requesting Permission

Dear District Superintendent: April 9, 1996

As a part of the thesis requirements of my Master's of Arts degree in Special Education, I am currently seeking to conduct a survey in your district. The intent of my research is to obtain information on the perceptions of the skills and characteristics associated with the effectiveness of consultation in special education. I plan to survey special education consultants, teachers, teaching assistants and parents of children with special needs. It is not my intention to evaluate the skills of individual consultants but rather to reflect upon the skills and characteristics the respondents believe are critical to the effectiveness of the consultation process. I will be following up the questionnaire survey with telephone interviews with a random sample of respondents who volunteer for this component. This research does not involve any intervention or direct contact with students, and has been approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of Victoria.

I have randomly selected 19 districts in British Columbia in which to distribute my questionnaire and would like to request your district's participation in this study. Once permission has been granted, I will be contacting one individual in each district who will either be the person responsible for special education or a personal contact. This contact person will be asked to distribute questionnaire packages to potential respondents or submit to me a list of potential respondents to whom I will mail a questionnaire package. The respondents I am seeking for this research are:

(1) school-based, government- or agency-based, and/or private consultants (not therapists); with a minimum of one year experience in special education consultation;

(2) regular classroom teachers with a minimum of two years teaching experience, and who currently have in their classroom a special needs student;

(3) teaching assistants with a minimum of one year experience working with children who have special needs, who currently have some direct responsibility, under the supervision of a teacher or principal, for implementing IEP goals of at least one student with special needs; and

(4) parents of special needs students who have been involved with the school system for a minimum of one year.

I would also like to know if permission to conduct such a study is required of your Board of Trustees. If there is an application which must be completed I would appreciate it if you could forward said application to me. If permission to conduct my study is granted would you please fax me a letter indicating this. My fax number is (604) 721-7767. I have enclosed a copy of the questionnaire for your perusal. A summary of study results will be sent to all participating districts.

Thank you very much for considering my proposal. If you have any questions regarding my request please contact me at (604) 658-1599, or my supervisor, Dr. Dan Bachor, at (604) 721-7788.

Heather K. Strong,

Graduate Student,

Faculty of Education,

University of Victoria.

Contact Letter

To Whom it May Concern: April 29, 1996

As a part of the requirements for my Master's of Arts degree in Special Education at the University of Victoria, I am conducting a survey to investigate the consultant skills and characteristics critical to the effectiveness of special education consultation in elementary schools in British Columbia.

I am using a questionnaire to survey special education consultants, teachers, teaching assistants, and parents on their perceptions of the consultant skills and characteristics that are critical to effective consultation. Following the questionnaire, two participants from each group will be selected randomly to take part in an interview intended to confirm and expand upon responses. *It is not my intention to evaluate the skills of individual consultants.*

I am looking for four types of participants:

(1) school- or district-based, government- or agency-based, and/or private consultants (not therapists) with a minimum of one year experience in special education consultation, whose *primary* role is to provide consultation services to individuals working with students with special needs;

(2) regular classroom teachers with a minimum of two years teaching experience, and who currently have in their classroom a special needs student;

(3) teaching assistants with a minimum of one year experience working with children who have special needs, who currently have some direct responsibility, under the supervision of a teacher or principal, for implementing IEP goals of at least one student with special needs; and

(4) parents of special needs students who have been involved with the school system for a minimum of one year.

All respondents of the consultee group (i.e., teachers, teaching assistants, and parents) must have had at least one previous special education consultation experience within the past two academic years.

I would ask that you please either distribute questionnaire packages to potential participants or send me a list of up to eight potential participants from each group. If you choose the former, please indicate this on the enclosed response form and fax it to me at the Faculty of Education office at (604) 721-7767, attn: Dr. Dan Bachor. If you prefer the latter, please fax me a list of potential participants and their addresses.

I assure you that information obtained in this study will be kept strictly confidential. Participants will not need to identify themselves or anyone else when responding. While results of the study will be available upon request, there will be no information included in the results by which any one participant, child, school, or district could be identified. For those districts that participate, a summary of results will be provided following the conclusion of the study.

Thank you in advance for your cooperation in this matter.

Sincerely,

Heather K. Strong,

Graduate Student, University of Victoria

(604) 658-1599

Letter of Introduction: Consultees

Dear Prospective Participant:

I would like to invite you to participate in a survey I am conducting as a part of the requirements for my Master's of Arts degree in Special Education at the University of Victoria. I am interested in identifying the consultant skills and characteristics critical to the effectiveness of special education consultation in elementary schools in British Columbia.

Using a previously developed questionnaire I hope to identify consultant skills and characteristics that you believe contributed to the effectiveness of the consultation experience (the consultant will remain anonymous). *Individual consultants will not be identified nor will their skills be evaluated.*

To assist me in my research, I am surveying teachers who currently have in their classroom a student designated as having special needs, teaching assistants with direct responsibility for implementing IEP goals of at least one student with special needs, parents of students with special needs, and special education consultants. As a consultee participant, you must have previously participated in special education consultation on at least one occasion. As a parent participant, if you and your spouse have both been involved in previous consultations, please complete the questionnaire together.

If you meet the requirements outlined above and agree to participate in this study, please complete the questionnaire and return it to me in the self-addressed, stamped envelope enclosed. If the questionnaire is completed and returned, it will be assumed that your consent has been given to participate in this study. The questionnaire should require no more than 20-30 minutes to complete.

In addition, I would like to interview by phone two volunteers from each participant group in order to confirm and expand upon questionnaire responses. The telephone interview will be approximately one hour in length and will take place in late June, early July. If you are willing to

be interviewed please indicate this on the questionnaire and include your name and telephone number. As I am only able to interview a limited number of people, not everyone who volunteers will be interviewed. In order to assist me in understanding the information obtained in the interview, it will be recorded by audio cassette then transcribed onto paper. *All information you provide will be kept in the strictest of confidence and held in a locked room.* While results of the study will be available upon request, there will be no information included in the results by which any one participant, child, school, or district could be identified.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. If, for any reason, you do not wish to participate in this study, or if you choose to withdraw your participation at any time during the study, you may do so without explanation. There will be no consequences to your current position or services currently received.

If you would like any further information regarding this study please call me collect at (604) 658-1599.

Thank you very much for taking the time to consider my proposal.

Sincerely,

Heather K. Strong,

Graduate Student, University of Victoria.

Letter of Introduction: Consultants

Dear Prospective Participant:

I would like to invite you to participate in a survey I am conducting as a part of the requirements for my Master's Degree in Special Education at the University of Victoria. I am interested in identifying the consultant skills and characteristics critical to the effectiveness of special education consultation in elementary schools in British Columbia.

To assist me in my research I am surveying teachers who currently have in their classroom a student designated as having special needs, teaching assistants, parents of students with special needs, and special education consultants. Consultant participants will include school- or district-based, government- or agency-based, and/or private consultants (not therapists) with a minimum of one year experience in special education consultation, and whose *primary* role is to provide consultation services to individuals working with students with special needs. Using a previously developed questionnaire I hope to identify consultant skills and characteristics that you believe contribute to the effectiveness of the consultation experience. *Individual consultants will not be identified nor will their skills be evaluated.*

If you meet the requirements outlined above and agree to participate in this study please complete the questionnaire and return it to me in the self-addressed, stamped envelope enclosed. If the questionnaire is completed and returned, it will be assumed that your consent has been given to participate in this study. The questionnaire should require no more than 20-30 minutes to complete.

In addition, I would like to interview by phone two volunteers from each participant group in order to confirm and expand upon questionnaire responses. The telephone interview will be approximately one hour in length, and will take place in late June, early July. If you are willing to be interviewed please indicate this on the questionnaire and include your name and telephone number. As I am only able to interview a limited number of people, not everyone who volunteers

will be interviewed. In order to assist me in understanding the information obtained in the interview, it will be recorded by audio cassette then transcribed onto paper. *All information you provide will be kept in the strictest of confidence and held in a locked room.* While results of the study will be available upon request, there will be no information included in the results by which any one participant, child, school, or district could be identified.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. If, for any reason, you do not wish to participate in this study, or if you choose to withdraw your participation at any time during the study, you may do so without explanation. There will be no consequences to your current position or services currently received.

If you would like any further information regarding this study please call me collect at (604) 658-1599.

Thank you very much for taking the time to consider my proposal.

Sincerely,

Heather K. Strong,

Graduate Student, University of Victoria

Letter of Explanation

Dear Respondent:

Thank you for taking the time to consider participating in my study "*Consultant and consultee perceptions of the skills and characteristics important to the effectiveness of special education consultation.*" The following are further details regarding this study.

The purpose of the study is to determine what consultants and consultees perceive to be the skills and characteristics that are critical to the effectiveness of special education consultation in elementary schools in British Columbia. I will be comparing the results of respondents in the consultant group with those of respondents in the three consultee groups (teachers, teaching assistants, and parents) to look for similarities and differences. I will also be examining the results in relation to other demographic information, such as age, experience, district size, etc.

The questionnaire was originally developed by Dr. H.M. Knoff and his colleagues[1] and administered to school psychologists and teachers. My purpose is to expand upon the previous research by surveying a variety of special education consultants as well as including teaching assistants and parents.

Your participation in this study will require approximately 20-30 minutes to complete the questionnaire. If you would also like to volunteer to participate in the follow-up telephone interview, you may include your name and phone number with your questionnaire. The telephone interview will take approximately one to one and a half hours and will serve as an opportunity to further explore the responses you gave on your questionnaire.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You do not need to answer any question you do not wish to. If at any time you decide to withdraw from the study you may do so without explanation and without any jeopardy to your current position or services received. Your

completion and return of the questionnaire will be considered your consent to participate in the study.

All the information gathered in this study will be kept strictly confidential. Only my advisor and I will have access to the data. Your name will not be attached to any published results, and your anonymity and that of your child/student/client(s) will be protected by using code numbers to identify the results obtained. All data will be kept in a secure cabinet in a locked room. Tape recorded telephone interviews will be transferred into written form and the tapes erased. All questionnaires will be destroyed upon completion of the study.

Thank you again for assisting me in this study. Please do not hesitate to call me collect if you have any further questions (604) 658-1599.

Yours sincerely,

Heather K. Strong,

Graduate Student, University of Victoria

[1] Knoff, H.M., McKenna, A.F., & Riser, K. (1991). Toward a consultant effectiveness scale: Investigating the characteristics of effective consultants. *School Psychology Review, 20*(1), 81-96.

Knoff, Howard M., Sullivan, Pamela, and Liu, Danxia. (1995). Teachers' ratings of effective school psychology consultants: An exploratory factor analysis study. *Journal of School Psychology, 33*(1), 39-57.

Knoff, Howard M., Hines, Constance V., & Kromrey, Jeffrey D. (1995). Finalizing the consultant effectiveness scale: An analysis and validation of the characteristics of effective consultants. *School Psychology Review, 24*(3), 480-496.

# APPENDIX B

# QUESTIONNAIRE

Demographic Information

Role: _____ teacher
_____ teaching assistant
_____ parent
_____ consultant

Years in this role:
_____ less than 1 year
_____ 1 - 5 years
_____ 6-10 years
_____ 10 - 20 years
_____ over 20 years

Age: _____ under 25 years
_____ 25 - 35
_____ 35 - 45
_____ 45 - 55
_____ over 55

Teaching level:
_____ primary (K-3)
_____ intermediate (4-7)

Sex: _____ female
_____ male

School District #: _____

Level and area of Formal Education: _____

_____

Nature of (additional) training in special education (e.g., workshops, inservices): _____

_____

_____

Nature of past experiences in special education consultation (e.g., behavioural, academic):

_____

_____

Additional relevant information (e.g., related past job, such as in a group home):

_____

_____

I am willing to participate in the follow-up telephone interview: _____ yes _____ no

If yes, please give name and home telephone number: _____

Please rate the following consultant skills and characteristics on the basis of their importance to the effectiveness of the consultation process.

Extremely Important E

Very Important D

Moderately Important C

Slightly Important B

Not at all Important A

| Please circle the appropriate letter. | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Knowledgeable | A | B | C | D | E |
| 2. Skillful | A | B | C | D | E |
| 3. Confident | A | B | C | D | E |
| 4. Objective | A | B | C | D | E |
| 5. Deferent | A | B | C | D | E |
| 6. Empathetic | A | B | C | D | E |
| 7. Expressed affection (supportive) | A | B | C | D | E |
| 8. Interested (concerned) | A | B | C | D | E |
| 9. Trustworthy | A | B | C | D | E |
| 10. Encouraged ventilation | A | B | C | D | E |
| 11. Skilled in questioning | A | B | C | D | E |
| 12. Able to overcome resistance | A | B | C | D | E |
| 13. Open-minded | A | B | C | D | E |
| 14. Tolerant | A | B | C | D | E |
| 15. Authoritarian | A | B | C | D | E |
| 16. Aggressive | A | B | C | D | E |
| 17. Attentive | A | B | C | D | E |
| 18. Challenging | A | B | C | D | E |
| 19. Accepting (non-judgmental) | A | B | C | D | E |

| Please circle the appropriate letter. | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 20. Showed respect for consultee | A | B | C | D | E |
| 21. Pleasant | A | B | C | D | E |
| 22. Tactful | A | B | C | D | E |
| 23. Warm | A | B | C | D | E |
| 24. Active-listener | A | B | C | D | E |
| 25. Efficient user of time (efficiency) | A | B | C | D | E |
| 26. Prompt with feedback | A | B | C | D | E |
| 27. Gave clear, understandable directions | A | B | C | D | E |
| 28. Expressive (good communicator) | A | B | C | D | E |
| 29. Demonstrated diagnostic ability | A | B | C | D | E |
| 30. Interpersonally competent (competency) | A | B | C | D | E |
| 31. Clear sense of identity | A | B | C | D | E |
| 32. Emotionally well-adjusted, stable | A | B | C | D | E |
| 33. Collaborative (Shared responsibility) | A | B | C | D | E |
| 34. Encouraging | A | B | C | D | E |
| 35. Gave and received feedback | A | B | C | D | E |
| 36. Team player | A | B | C | D | E |
| 37. Documented for clear communication | A | B | C | D | E |
| 38. Astute observer (perceptive) | A | B | C | D | E |
| 39. Effective at establishing rapport | A | B | C | D | E |
| 40. Good public relations skills | A | B | C | D | E |
| 41. Willing to get involved | A | B | C | D | E |
| 42. Clarified roles | A | B | C | D | E |
| 43. Reviewed client records | A | B | C | D | E |
| 44. Used group as problem-solving unit | A | B | C | D | E |
| 45. Was specific | A | B | C | D | E |
| 46. Active | A | B | C | D | E |
| 47. Responded appropriately | A | B | C | D | E |

| Please circle the appropriate letter. | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 48. Maintained an "I'm OK -- You're OK" position | A | B | C | D | E |
| 49. Colorful | A | B | C | D | E |
| 50. Funny | A | B | C | D | E |
| 51. Flexible | A | B | C | D | E |
| 52. Made eye contact | A | B | C | D | E |
| 53. Intelligent | A | B | C | D | E |
| 54. Good facilitator | A | B | C | D | E |
| 55. Approachable | A | B | C | D | E |
| 56. Understood school system | A | B | C | D | E |
| 57. Skilled at conflict resolution | A | B | C | D | E |
| 58. Good at problem-solving | A | B | C | D | E |
| 59. Positive attitude | A | B | C | D | E |
| 60. Practiced in an ethical manner | A | B | C | D | E |
| 61. Maintained confidentiality | A | B | C | D | E |
| 62. Feelings and behaviors were consistent | A | B | C | D | E |
| 63. Self-disclosed | A | B | C | D | E |
| 64. Dealt with stress and emotional issues | A | B | C | D | E |
| 65. Summarized | A | B | C | D | E |
| 66. Resilient | A | B | C | D | E |
| 67. Able to confront without personal attacks | A | B | C | D | E |
| 68. Anticipated possible consequences | A | B | C | D | E |
| 69. Employed appropriate personal distance | A | B | C | D | E |
| 70. Took risks (willing to experiment) | A | B | C | D | E |
| 71. Identified clear goals | A | B | C | D | E |
| 72. Evaluated, focused ideas | A | B | C | D | E |
| 73. Specified the contract | A | B | C | D | E |
| 74. Aware of relationship issues (dependency, authority, power, competence) | A | B | C | D | E |
| 75. Pursued issues, followed through | A | B | C | D | E |

Please comment on the extent to which the consultants you have worked with in the past have exhibited the skills and characteristics you rated as most reflective of effective special education consultants. (Use reverse of page as necessary.)

_____

_____

_____

*Thank you so much for taking the time to complete and return this questionnaire.*

# APPENDIX C

## INTERVIEW FORMAT

Interview format for all consultee respondents

1. (Parent question) Have you had any experience with a consultant in helping your child in school or other situations? What circumstances lead to your contacting or being contacted by a consultant? Please describe your experience.

or (Teachers and Teaching Assistant question) What kinds of consultation experiences have you had with respect to children/adolescents with special needs (e.g. behavioral, medical, psychological, academic/curricular, other)?

2. Briefly describe the procedures followed in each of the different types of consultation experiences you have had.
3. Were there any marked differences in the experience of each type of consultation?
4. What kind of role(s) did you play in the consultation (e.g. full participation - giving and receiving information; primarily receiver of information; primarily giver of information; other)?
5. Thinking about both positive and less positive consultation experiences, describe what the consultant did or how he or she behaved that helped make the process positive; that hindered the process.
6. In considering the usefulness of consultation, tell me what you obtained from the experience that was of most value to you; that most benefitted the child.
7. Is there anything else with respect to special education consultation that you would like to comment upon?
8. Any other comments or questions?

Interview format for consultant respondents

1. What have been the main types of referrals(e.g. behavioral, psychological, academic/curricular, other) where you have been the primary consultant?
2. Please describe briefly the process/steps you follow during consultation.
3. How do you perceive your role in relation to others with whom you consult (e.g., teachers, teaching assistants, parents, etc.)?
4. What are some of the things you believe consultants should do or ways in which they should behave that (a) are most conducive to the effectiveness of the consultation process; (b) that may hinder the process?
5. What aspect of consultation do you believe is of most value to (a) the consultee(s); (b) to the child?
6. Is there anything else with respect to special education consultation that you would like to comment upon?
7. Any other comments or questions?

# VITA

Surname: Strong Given Names: Heather Kristine

Place of Birth: Nanaimo, British Columbia, Canada

Educational Institutions Attended:

| | |
|---|---|
| University of Victoria | 1994 to 1996 |
| University of Victoria | 1986 to 1988 |
| Capilano Community College | 1985 to 1986 |
| Langara Community College | 1984 to 1985 |
| Capilano Community College | 1982 to 1983 |

Degrees Awarded:

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| B.A. (Child and Youth Care) | University of Victoria | 1988 |

Honours and Awards

| | |
|---|---|
| University of Victoria Graduate Teaching Fellowship | 1994 to 1996 |

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Title of Thesis:

Consultants' and Consultees' Perceptions of the Skills and Characteristics Important to the Effectiveness of Special Education Consultation in British Columbia

Author 

Heather Kristine Strong

September 30, 1996