Building bridges between universities and middle schools: A teacher–centred collaboration

Jean E. Rhodes and Paul M. Camic

Abstract

This paper describes the process involved in a five-year longitudinal study concerning five North American suburban schools where university researchers partnered with middle-school teachers, as co-researchers, studied school climate. Over 2,600 students and 180 teachers participated over the course of the study. If school reform efforts are to change the culture and climate of schools, they must be undertaken with sensitivity to the specific setting of each school and must fully engage the constituents in the process. In order to foster a mutually beneficial and trusting relationship between school staff and university researchers, both teachers and professors assisted in the design and implementation of this research. The research design utilised multiple quantitative and qualitative methodologies that included an overarching longitudinal design with matched comparison groups, as well as ethnographic and participatory action research. This paper will focus not on the results of the research per se *but it will discuss practical implications for using a community psychology paradigm in state-supported schools. Information regarding how a community psychology approach was used to engage school principals, local school boards, teachers and students will be described. We will connect this research to overarching community psychology approaches to engagement and empowerment. Strengths, challenges and resistances within each school, and on the part of university researchers, will also be addressed.*

CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS spend a large proportion of their time in academic settings, so schools represent a natural and efficient site for facilitating positive developmental outcomes. Nonetheless a meta-analysis of primary prevention programs for children and adolescents (Durlak & Wells, 1997) revealed that, although schools are the site of nearly 75 per cent of the interventions, such interventions tend to be somewhat disjointed efforts that are added on to classroom activities rather than integrated into the schools' existing structures. Indeed, school reform efforts are often piecemeal, characterised by Pianta and Walsh (2001) as, 'pullout, add-on, short-term programs that are conducted by someone other than the classroom teacher'. Since community psychologists have both the conceptual frameworks and research tools to advocate more systemic school-based efforts they are ideally situated to assist in develop-

ing school-based innovations. Yet, despite the call by Sarason (1974) thirty years ago to take seriously the school culture for child development, community psychologists' interest in classrooms and schools as the target for social change has not been particularly strong.

This article presents a study in which we attempted to create contextually appropriate ways to bring about more sustained, normative changes in school by engaging school staff, teachers, parents and students in the process. Teachers working with community psychologists became both the innovators and implementers of school change through teacher working groups. It is important to note that unlike in schools in Britain, where classroom assistants and learning support assistants are important members of the school staff, there were no teacher aides in any of the participating schools; not many schools in the United States employ such support staff.

Background

Early adolescence is a pivotal life stage, involving profound biological, cognitive and social-emotional changes (Youniss & Smollar, 1985). Adolescents' developmental success during this period of upheaval and vulnerability is influenced, in part, by the quality of opportunities they are afforded in their school settings and the extent to which schools meet their implicit psychological needs for competence, autonomy and quality of relationships with others (Eccles & Midgely, 1989). Students' perceptions of competence, valuing of school and emotional well-being are enhanced when they are provided with opportunities to develop their academic and social skills, exercise some independence over their learning and feel cared for and supported (Roeser & Eccles, 1998). These psychological resources, in turn, promote positive achievement, conduct, and peer relationships (see Eccles *et al.*, 1998). Despite such findings, many middle and junior high schools (that is, schools that serve young adolescents between the ages of 10 and 14) fail to provide an optimal 'fit' with adolescents' developmental needs (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Roeser & Eccles, 1998).

In the classic publication, *Turning points: Preparing American youth for the 21st century*, the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development noted that 'a volatile mismatch exists between the organization and curriculum of middle grade schools and the intellectual, emotional, and interpersonal needs of adolescents'. The Council argued that this mismatch hindered learning and preparation for adult life and heightened adolescents' vulnerability to a wide range of social, emotional and behavioural problems. This and a more recent *Turning points 2000* report (Jackson & Davis, 2000) suggest that middle schools undergo structural change based on a series of well-documented practices, such as creating smaller groupings of students, assigning advisors, promoting critical thinking, integrating subject matter across disciplines and creating opportunities for cooperative learning and cross-age tutoring.

These recommendations for reform are consistent with other research findings, as well as theories of adolescent development (for example, Eccles *et al.*, 1993; Erikson, 1977). In recent years, variations on these practices have been implemented in many schools across the United States and Britain. Although they have met with some success (for example, Felner *et al.*, 1993) there appears to be considerable variation in the extent to which schools are willing to fully integrate them. In some cases school administrators have failed to include teachers in decision making and have advocated changes that have undermined the teachers' sense of autonomy over classroom practices (Oakes, 2000; van den Berg and Ros, 1999). This administrative style runs counter to the Carnegie Council's suggestion to provide teachers with greater authority to make decisions and increased control over curricular goals. In addition many parents appear wary of reform efforts and are disengaged from school practices, including the logic and sequence of reform measures (Eccles & Harold, 1993).

More generally, there is mounting concern that adherence to lists of 'best practices' may actually impede more meaningful change in schools (Phillips, 1997). Indeed, Oakes and her colleagues (2000) have argued that

> *watered down wisdom makes its way into packaged materials and prescribed trainings. Such assistance nearly always blocks the deep inquiry and learning that fundamental shifts in norms and practices require.*

She refers to current reform efforts as failing to create climates in which teachers can critically examine the shortcoming and strengths of their settings and the underpinnings of their ideas regarding children, learning and intelligence in shaping their practice. As she and others (see Anderson, 1992) have observed, every school setting has a set of psychological and institutional attributes that give it a distinctive 'personality' or interpersonal climate. Psychological attributes include levels of trust, cooperation and open-

ness among staff and between students and staff, while institutional attributes range from leadership and teaching practices, to collaboration and expectations (Bulach & Malone, 1994). Although improved school climates are associated with better outcomes, most efforts by psychologists in the United States are more focused on technical fixes, as opposed to the broader context of the school. Indeed, Roeser (2000) has argued that many schools have focused on the 'wine bottles' – specific structural arrangements through which curriculum and instruction is delivered – without considering the 'wine' of effective middle-school culture or climate. This requires continued commitment among researchers and administrators to involving stakeholders in the change process – that is, keeping students and teachers at the centre of the reform efforts (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001; Roeser, 2000).

The challenge for community psychology in state-supported schools

Community psychologists have long argued for stakeholder involvement in the change process, through empowerment (Gruber & Trickett, 1987) and citizen participation, 'a process in which individuals take part in decision making in the institutions, programs, and environments that affect them' (Heller *et al.*, 1984, p.339). Rappaport (1981) advanced the concept of empowerment as a means of affording individuals control over their lives and, although it can be defined in numerous ways, empowerment essentially implies the sharing of power. This notion of participation in the process of change and the shifting power relations has special meaning for teachers, upon whom school interventions are often thrust with few opportunities for input. Top-down interventions, combined with growing emphasis on high-stakes standardised testing and dense curricular demands, have constrained teachers and left little room for the sorts of innovation and activity that might produce genuine change. Sadly, many adults who were initially drawn to the teaching profes-

sion out of desire to establish meaningful connections with their schools and students have become increasingly disillusioned by the structural impediments to autonomy and authentic connection with their students. A major challenge for schools is to create settings that can increase and facilitate the caring potential of teachers and other staff, while maintaining academic rigour and teacher autonomy. This critical issue has particular relevance in Britain and the United States where teacher retention, morale and professional satisfaction have declined over the last decade.

This review underscores the importance of finding ways to enlist the participation of teachers, parents and students in a change process grounded in reflective practice (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988). As Oakes concluded, 'if the *ends* of reform are schools that are educative, socially just, caring and participatory, then the *means* of achieving those ends must be so as well'. Meaningful, appropriate change keeps students and teachers collaborating with the researcher and at the centre of all reform efforts (McLaughlin & Talbert, 1995). In community research this often begins by jointly defining the problems, developing approaches to redressing them, discussing ways to evaluate these approaches and planning for the continuation of efforts that prove useful and important (Bogat & Jason, 1997). Because, as mentioned above, the field of community psychology values the opinions and expertise of stakeholders, it advocates active collaboration with stakeholders from the onset of a project (Cafasso *et al.*, 2003; Kelly *et al.*, 1988).

In subsequent sections of this article we describe the successes and challenges of an ongoing collaboration between university researchers and teachers, administrators, and students aimed at improving the climate of three middle schools. As we will describe, this project was guided by several of the foundational principles of community psychology, particularly the notions of collaboration, empowerment and systems-level analysis and intervention.

The school and community climate project

This five-year project has involved 180 teachers and 2,600 students at five Midwestern American schools – three intervention schools and two matched comparison schools – and uses a longitudinal design over five years involving quasi-experimental, ethnographic and case study methodologies (Camic & Rhodes, 2003). Rather than focus on economically impoverished school settings, where school climate and low morale are often deeply influenced by more systemic racism and inequality and, thus, less amenable to more localised school-based intervention, we chose to concentrate our efforts on a middle-class sample of schools. We selected similar schools, matched in terms of their average household income, size, age, racial/ethnic composition of students and academic achievement. All schools were cited by the US Department of Education as 'academically excelling schools' and were ranked by the State of Illinois Department of Education in the top 10 per cent of middle schools. The interventions centred around the implementation and support of teacher working groups (TWGs), which were constituted in response to teacher-identified issues relating to school climate. Based on teachers' efforts, interest and involvement, individualised plans of change were developed that resulted in the formation of TWGs. TWGs varied in size between 4 and 22 teachers.

Within the first month of the study, through roundtable discussions and larger all-faculty meetings, teachers at each of the three intervention schools identified issues and problems affecting school climate at their respective schools. Teachers at each intervention school then prioritised their respective lists and subsequently voted on which interventions to include in an overall school climate enhancement plan. After teachers had agreed on specific interventions, and had joined one or more TWGs, they presented their proposals to local school administration (that is, head of school/school principal) for discussion. Administrators met teachers to review and discuss each proposed intervention. Across the five years of the study, out of 31 TWG proposals, only 2 were not found acceptable to administrators.

After administrators had approved the TWG proposals, teachers began meeting university researchers to develop an implementation plan for each proposal. This process lasted between three and five months across intervention schools. Each TWG was provided with the necessary resources to implement their plans. Resources were provided to TWGs as needed. Resource allocation was determined jointly by teachers and the university researchers and consisted of a range of support including financial stipends to teachers as co-researchers, access to expert content consultants, training workshops, research design consultation, supplies and materials.

Teacher working groups, working with local school administration, were given responsibility, authority, and resources to develop, organise and implement interventions. The role of university researchers (URs) varied across the project. At the beginning of the project teachers sought out URs more frequently, wanting their opinion and sometimes their permission to pursue a particular idea or intervention. At other times URs were the 'go-betweens', contacting outside consultants to provide content expertise for specific TWG interventions. On three occasions they were asked to intervene when a dispute occurred within a TWG or between a TWG and administration. In several situations, URs provided encouragement and support when unanticipated problems arose. In addition to the development of the overarching research design for this study, URs provided specific research design recommendations to each TWG to facilitate accurate and useful data collection. Within the three intervention schools, a total of 31 TWGs formed over the course of five years. Selected examples of these groups follow.

Examples of TWGs across intervention schools

- Teacher-led mentoring for new teachers working group: the goal here was to enhance cohesion and support among new and veteran teachers, provide assistance in curricula and student support, and reduce teacher attrition.
- Arts integration working group: this involved integrating the arts into the curriculum of social studies, foreign language, literature and the sciences. Working with the teachers in these subjects, the TWG developed strategies to afford greater linkages with their academic curriculum and personal development.
- Respecting differences working group (bullying and teasing project): this group was established in response to student and teacher concerns about aggressive student behaviour and was based on a survey developed and administered by teachers to students and teachers.
- Board and district relations working group: this group stemmed from teachers' general dissatisfaction with their relationship with the school board and a desire to improve relations between the board and teachers, as well as between teachers and the district office.
- Middle-step classroom working group: this developed a middle-step classroom programme between home-based and full inclusion classes. A significant problem, cited by a majority of teachers, concerned students with special needs. These students have a variety of specific emotional and learning needs that cannot always be met in home-base or full inclusion classes.
- Internal communication working group: our initial qualitative findings showed a high degree of dissatisfaction with the level of communication between teachers. In order to address this issue this group engaged in a range of activities, including a website, developed and managed by teachers, designed to facilitate communication among all teachers in the school.
- Academic connections working group: this group met in response to what they saw as a growing need to integrate in-school and after-school involvement in students' lives. After-school represents a largely untapped opportunity to meet and attend to the needs of students who are sometimes finding it difficult to fit in during the school day.
- Student-led conferences working group: the goal of this group was to change parent–teacher conferences to ones led by students. The decision to form this group reflected some teachers' concerns about the lack of responsibility and autonomy middle-school students had for their own learning.
- Technology training working group: this was formed to examine how best to use technology in the classroom to optimise learning and to develop a more creative and engaging learning climate.
- Integrating the curriculum working group: this group sought to explore ways to integrate the arts into the curriculum in ways that would enhance creativity across subject areas, with particular emphasis on the arts and social studies.
- School environment working group: this group was developed to achieve the goals of increasing respectful behaviour among students, honouring student service to each other and the school, and encouraging a school-wide ethos of respecting others, the physical plant and the community.
- Transition to middle school working group: this group was developed in response to survey of fifth-grade teachers, in which they pointed out a large number of fifth-grader concerns about middle school.
- Parent education and community outreach working group: this group was established with the goal of creating productive dialogue with parents. Teachers thought that if parents and teachers

could communicate their expectations of each other, discuss how to resolve differences in a respectful manner, and so on, that better relations could be achieved.

- Student-led conferences working group: the goal of this group was to change current parent–teacher conferences to ones led by students. Rather than introduce the student-led conferences by grade, as was done at school two, this programme was introduced school-wide (Camic & Cafasso, 2003).
- Wellness working group: this group developed a wellness programme for teachers that included yoga, tai chi and a reading group on wellness interventions.

Community psychology in action

A community psychology perspective influenced our approach in several ways. Rather than focus directly on individual-level intervention (for example, teaching students skills to cope), we attempted to facilitate second-order change in the school settings in which students and teachers were embedded (for example, creating a more positive climate). The TWGs were established to essentially modify relationships between administrators, teachers, parents and students. Importantly, we established mechanisms for continual change in schools, such as new channels of communication among smaller groups of teachers and closer relationships between homeroom teachers and students. In doing so, our intervention sought to disrupt, rather than reinforce the status quo or 'social regularities' of the school. Seidman (1988) defined social regularities as the frequency and pattern of transactions between social entities (for example, teachers and administrators, students and teachers, parents and teachers), and often referred to them as the 'rules of the game'. Sarason (1982) argued that interventions should 'involve changing an existing regularity, eliminating one or more of them, or producing new ones'. In contrast to traditional interventions, which can inadvertently reinforce the status quo, our approach

encouraged teachers to question the status quo and collaborate in their efforts to find valid points for intervention.

One example was the parent education and community outreach working group. As described above, this group was established with the goal of creating productive dialogue with parents. To improve communication, regular, relatively informal, open, teacher-hosted sessions were held, during which teachers opened channels of communication relating to current issues, communication, safety, the school philosophy and how parents could get involved in various activities. In doing so teachers were able to facilitate positive processes of increased contact and quality of interaction. In essence they shifted the social regularities from one in which parents reflexively lodged complaints with the school's upper administration to one in which teachers and parents resolved issues and planned for students needs more directly.

A community psychology perspective also led to a more collaborative approach. In particular, rather than enter the schools with preconceptions, as researchers we made efforts to gain a deeper understanding of each school setting while engaging teachers, parents and students in developing site-specific strategies for enhancing the schools' interpersonal, instructional and organisational climate. In doing so we privileged the opinions and perspectives of teachers, with the assumption that their experience and engagement were crucial ingredients in the process (Kelly *et al.*, 1988). This ultimately resulted in the implementation of different set of interventions at each school. A more standardised approach might have limited opportunities to promote multiple adaptive pathways across the diverse groups and school contexts (see also Yoshikawa & Shinn, 2002). Within this context, we supported interventions that not only redressed certain problems, but also those that sought to promote well-being and health among the teachers. Theorists such as Cowen (1994) and Seidman (1988) have advocated promo-

tion goals that extend beyond prevention of negative outcomes to the promotion of positive outcomes and well-being. Within this context we emphasise flexibility so that diverse adaptive strategies for different settings find room for expression. A prime example of this was the teacher wellness working group at one school, where teachers participated in yoga, tai chi and a reading group on wellness interventions, and went hiking and rock climbing during out of school hours. Although this group was initially supported by the intervention, the teachers and school saw its value in promoting stress management and health among teachers and assumed full financial responsibility. Taken together, the TWGs were built on our notion of empowerment, as they involved a process of teachers gaining greater access to and control over resources and regularities in their settings.

A third example utilising community psychology concepts of participatory collaboration and systems-wide analysis and intervention was seen in the teacher-led mentoring for new teachers working group. The goal of this group was to enhance cohesion and support among new and veteran teachers, provide assistance in curricula and student support and reduce attrition. Prior to launching this TWG many teachers described this school as 'a good place to get your start but not a good place to stay'. This was supported by the number of teachers who left of their own accord before being granted tenure, as compared to neighbouring schools and state-wide averages. Teachers, in an amazing show of commitment and determination, developed a year-long mentoring programme for recently hired teachers. Rather than wait for the district administration to form a committee to study the problem, this TWG researched the concept of teacher mentoring and formulated an intervention within two months. This included a plan that involved pairing a veteran teacher with a new teacher for support and advice throughout the year, organising three teacher-wide social events to welcome

new teachers to the school, and developing a monthly workshop series running from September to May which addressed eight primary concerns of new teachers. URs provided consultation about action research methodology and hired a consultant to work with the TWG for the first 18 months of the programme. System-wide analysis has shown that teachers, school and district administration and the school board are all satisfied with the new programme. In addition to the overall satisfaction reported by these three constituent groups, new teacher retention rates have increased by 23 per cent over the previous three-year period.

Evaluation

Data collection at the three intervention schools has involved annual teacher and student surveys, focus group interviews with students and teachers, individual interviews with teachers, administrators and parents, participant-observation, archival materials (for example, student handbooks, school newsletters, student academic and art work, teacher union materials, school board minutes). We have also readministered questionnaires to students and teachers at the two comparison schools.

In addition to looking at group differences over time between the intervention and comparison schools (Grey *et al.*, 2003), we have used embedded case study methods (Yin, 1994), where each of the five schools in the study is treated as a case and each teacher-developed innovation is seen as a smaller embedded case. Hence, each project is but one innovative practice, or smaller embedded case, in each school. This research design allows us to examine the totality (interaction) of all interventions within the context of the entire school, as well as assess each intervention separately.

Although the fifth wave of data is still being collected, analysis of the data over three waves provides evidence for the effectiveness of the teacher-led interventions. In particular, whereas comparison schools demonstrated stable or decreased school

health over time, significant improvements in school health were found in all three of the intervention schools (as indexed by a global measure of school health (Hoy, 1998)). In particular, our analyses of change scores indicated there were significant improvements in teachers' perceptions of interpersonal climate and the subscale on principal openness (supportive, directive and restrictive behaviour) (Cafasso *et al.*, 2002; Rhodes *et al.*, 2005). Additionally, both qualitative and quantitative measures suggest that the TWGs made a positive impact upon problematic issues in the school, which decreased the need for the principals to intervene (or solve problems in a directive manner). Although preliminary, these data may suggest that the process of the study and the TWGs working in the school increased the salience of climate issues for principals and their role in the climate of the school.

Conclusions

In this article we have described an empowerment intervention that successfully engaged teachers in the change process. Across the three intervention schools, teachers were active collaborators in identifying problems and then articulating and implementing customised interventions to redress those problems.

Although initial results provide promising evidence that the intervention has affected teachers' perceptions of school health, additional analyses are needed to understand better the effects of the intervention on student indices, and to identify patterns of change over time. Nonetheless it is useful to take stock of our experiences, reflecting on the implementation process and offering some preliminary recommendations for psychologists who seek to utilise community psychology concepts to engage in collaborative work with state-supported schools.

We have learned several important lessons in our efforts to establish school-based partnerships (Nelson *et al.*, 2001). First, our experiences have brought home the impor-

tance of building strong connections with the constituents in the setting. An authentic partnership is vital to participatory research and requires patience, understanding and persistence. Teachers and school staff are often suspicious and cynical about school-based interventions that are introduced by university researchers – and rightly so. Too often the interventions represent little more than the latest 'technical fix' imposed from the outside with scant teacher input and insufficient understanding of the social ecologies into which they are being introduced.

We made efforts to build strong relationships based on appreciation and respect for the diverse agendas, strengths and, importantly, the input of all parties. Teachers often bear the burden of school-based interventions, and yet the lack of compensation for their efforts carries the implicit assumption that they can and should freely invest their time and energy. Community psychologists must recognise the real and symbolic importance of compensating teachers for their additional work. Grant proposals should build in provisions for teacher compensation and funding agencies should not balk at such requests.

Along with respect, recognition and compensation, URs must learn to relinquish a certain amount of control. This is often the most difficult step for them to take, more accustomed as they are to an expert role, often being concerned with the integrity of research designs and ultimately accountable to funding agencies. The same holds true for teachers, many of whom have witnessed unsuccessful, top-down interventions and are reluctant to take control and responsibility over the research agenda and interventions within their schools. One important means of shifting the power balance, and of preventing misunderstandings, is to establish norms and ground rules for the collaborative process. Written partnership agreements for each TWG served as a means of measuring milestones and ensuring accountability of teachers to the researchers and vice versa.

Establishing a true partnership in which teachers were empowered to make programme and spending decisions, and helping to shape the intervention and evaluation over five years, involved a risk. At many turns both the researchers and teachers were faced with ambiguity, roadblocks and short-term setbacks. This risk has been richly rewarded, however, both in terms of the remarkable process and the promising outcomes that continue to unfold. Our preliminary findings suggest that strategies to engage and empower teachers can positively affect teachers' and students' experiences of the middle-school environment and, we contend, the high-school environment as well. Innovative interventions that focus on engaging in a truly collaborative process with teachers, and that are aimed at creating supportive environments, stand in refreshing contrast to the overwhelming focus on top-down, deficit-oriented interventions.

Address for correspondence

Professor Jean E. Rhodes, Department of Psychology, University of Massachusetts-Boston, 100 Morrissey Blvd., Boston, Massachusetts 02125
E-mail: jean.rhodes@umb.edu
Dr Paul M. Camic, Salomons Centre, Canterbury Christ Church University, Broomhill Road, Tunbridge Wells, Kent TN3 0TG
E-mail: p.camic@canterbury.ac.uk.

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Using an empowerment model in developing the service delivery of community projects

Vanessa Wood

Abstract

Recent British government legislation, applying to England, has emphasised the importance of capacity building, quality and infrastructure development in partnership working between local authorities and voluntary agencies. Much can be learnt from effective existing partnership models currently being forged by the Children's Fund. Educational psychologists have been cited as being well placed to contribute to the partnership agenda with their adoption of community psychology approaches, training in research methods and ability to account for contextual factors. This paper describes the contribution of an educational psychologist seconded to the Children's Fund to support self-referring community groups delivering interventions. The psychologist's focus was to facilitate empowerment evaluation using a process consultation model. This work demonstrates an adherence to the philosophy of community psychology. Post-consultation questionnaires were administered to gather feedback from voluntary agencies and the Children's Fund regarding the perceived outcomes and the value of the process. Staff in voluntary groups and the Children's Fund report that working with the educational psychologist gave weight and clarity to the aims and objectives of all participating projects. The value of the psychologist's sensitivity to contextual factors was also noted. Individual outcomes for each project were also reported. It may be inferred therefore that educational psychologists could have a significant role in supporting the development of the infrastructure of community projects.

THE CONTRIBUTIONS of voluntary and community organisations have been recognised in Britain as playing an increasingly significant role in improving outcomes for children. The Department for Education and Skills (DfES, 2004) has, as an element of its response to the Children Act 2004, published a strategy for England that advocates services based in children's centres. Part of this focuses on the development of partnerships between the statutory and community sectors at both a national and a local level. It is envisaged that such partnerships would contribute to the building of voluntary and community group capacity and infrastructure to ensure that services provided to children are of a high quality. One initiative recognised as forging such relationships is the Children's Fund, which, through coherent local preventative strategies, forms part of the British government's

agenda to support disadvantaged children and young people within the 5–13 age range.

Stringer and Powell (2004) assert the importance of educational psychologists (EPs) working as applied psychologists with a community focus, seeking to meet the needs of all children within the communities in which they live. They advocate this as an effective model of service delivery. They lament a largely unrealised call for the profession to adopt the community educational psychology approach during the reconstruction movement in the profession during the 1970s (Bender, 1976). Orford (1992) also called for community psychology principles across applied psychology disciplines, reducing artificial boundaries as the practice of psychology moves out of institutions and into the community.

Baxter (2002) supported government assertions that voluntary projects are increas-

ingly working in partnership with statutory bodies. These highlight the trend of voluntary bodies toward increasing their collaborations with schools to meet children's needs. Such services need to be of high quality, sustainable and effectively evaluated (Ackerlund, 2000; Baxter, 2002). Baxter (2002) and MacKay (2002) suggest that EPs, with their training in child development and research, are well placed to contribute to government policy, particularly in the area of design, implementation and reporting on evaluation of community interventions. Stringer and Powell (2004) also emphasise the research role of the EP, and assert that this is where the origins of educational psychology practice lie.

Orford (1992) points to the frequency of involvement of psychologists in external evaluation of community projects. There are, however, limitations in the practice of external evaluation. Fetterman (1996) and Schein (1999) suggest that external evaluation often promotes dependency. This leaves the client with no knowledge or experience to evaluate his or her own project in the future. Schein (1999) considers that project staff will be less likely to implement the solution unless they have ownership of the problem both at the diagnostic and intervention stage.

Empowerment, with its emphasis on control and decision-making remaining with the project staff themselves, seems to be a crucial element of any partnership working. Zimmerman (2000) points to empowerment as being a fundamental value orientation for community psychology. Zimmerman (2000) and Orford (1992) urge community psychologists to involve participants in evaluation. Working in a way that seeks to empower, the professional's role becomes facilitative and focuses on capacity building. Fetterman (1996) thought the role of psychologist should be that of a facilitator of the development of skills for self-evaluation.

A number of studies have pointed to the need to include certain elements in Fetterman's (1996) empowerment evaluation model. First, an initial exploratory meeting enables the consultant and client to determine the exact nature of the proposed task and to jointly form an action plan (Dickinson 2000; Schein 1999). Not surprisingly, studies have found differing levels of expertise and support needs in community groups, linked to the size and complexity of the evaluation procedure, and requiring flexibility in the number of consultation sessions offered (Fetterman, 1996; Stevenson *et al.*, 1996). Second, clear aims and objectives should be established as part of the evaluation process (DfES, 2004; Orford, 1992). Third, there is a need to identify the information that the relevant funding bodies require and to link evaluation measures to this (Boland, 2000). Finally, tools and strategies need to be developed for measuring the extent to which aims and objectives are met, and how the members of the organisation will be involved (Fetterman, 1996).

Many British EP services are developing consultation as a model for service delivery to schools and find it effective when used within community contexts (Bender 1976; Orford, 1992; Stringer & Powell, 2004; Wagner, 2000; Watkins, 2000). One particular approach to consultation that would appear to fit the ethos of empowerment evaluation is the 'process consultation' model. This emphasises development of the skills of analysing contexts and processes to ensure that clients are able to maintain the ownership and responsibility to develop their organisation in the future (Schein, 1999; Turner *et al.*, 1996). Using and enhancing the clients' existing skills and resources are seen as being central to the process. Clients can be encouraged to work more with other agencies since the systemic element of the consultation model seeks to improve the client's awareness of, and ability to, work in partnership with others. By using a consultative approach the EP encourages partnership working, in this case between the local authority and the voluntary sector, in a way that follows the DfES (2004) guidance on such relationships.

Context of this present study

In 2003 West Sussex Children's Fund commissioned three EPs to work within the initiative. All funded projects work with children in the 5–13 age range and are monitored by the Children's Fund coordinator. Each EP was attached to a specific geographical area within the county. The brief for the psychologists was open ended. As one of the EPs the author sought to offer applied psychology to community groups by distributing a menu of possible services. There was considerable interest in support to develop evaluation frameworks. Three project teams in particular were keen to develop evaluation frameworks for interventions that were to be carried out in partnership with local schools. This paper focuses on the reported experience of those who engaged in the small-scale intervention and outcomes to date. The aims of the study were:

● to employ an empowering approach to facilitate community project teams to develop their own evaluation frameworks and skills;

● to use a process consultation model to facilitate the empowering approach.

Participating projects

As noted above, three projects were selected for the research. All projects were based in West Sussex and received funding from a number of sources in addition to the Children's Fund.

Procedure

Managers of the voluntary projects were asked to clarify in advance what they wanted to achieve from the consultation. This also enabled the EP to decide whether the request was appropriate. A key member of the project was then contacted for an initial consultation to further clarify the parameters and nature of the work. A number of consultation sessions were agreed. At the end of the agreed piece of work the project staff were given the option to request further EP involvement if necessary. The pace and degree of support from the EP were tailored to individual project needs. The number of sessions used with the projects ranged from two to eight. Project staff were encouraged to develop their own evaluation frameworks with support from the EP. Table 1 includes pre-intervention evaluation frameworks.

The consultation framework was as follows:

● A single set of clear, succinct aims, objectives and outcomes was agreed.

● The evaluation framework was created using the following questions as an aide memoire:
Who is the evaluation for?
What is the purpose of the evaluation?
What will be evaluated?
How are you going to evaluate?
Who will conduct and coordinate the evaluation?

● The evaluation frameworks were reviewed.

Project staff and the Children's Fund coordinators were asked to complete questionnaires to comment on their experience of the process and views on outcomes. They were asked to rate (on a scale of 0–5) the extent to which their original aims for the work with the EP were met.

Extent to which the aims set by community groups were met

Workers in projects two and three reported that their aims had been completely met. Workers in project one rated the extent to be 4 on the 0–5 scale. For project one, the respondent wanted to use the six-month review to fully evaluate the extent to which aims and objectives had been met.

Evaluation frameworks created as an outcome of the consultation process

Table 2 shows the range of evaluation frameworks developed by staff in the community projects. Evaluation frameworks demonstrated some similarity in terms of method of data collection, with pre- and post-measure questionnaires featuring heavily, however, there was diversity in terms of participants chosen to complete the questionnaire. All

	Project one	Project two	Project three
Number of schools involved with the project	20 primary schools 2 secondary schools	2 secondary and 1 feeder primary	1 primary
Year groups targeted	Whole school/year 4-6 for mediation programme	Year 6 and 7	Year 3-6
Project focus	Peer mediation programme/whole school training in conflict management	Transition programme for children identified as being at risk during primary/secondary transition phase	Breakfast club for children identified by school as being socially and enotionally vulnerable
Original framework evaluation	Open letters from head teachers. Pupil questionnaire measuring enjoyment of programme	No evaluation procedures in place	No evaluation procedures in place
Number of consultation sessions used	8	4	2

Table 1: The voluntary projects

Project one	Pre- and post-programme questionnaires to pupils and teachers. Pre- and post- head teacher interview Measurement of reported conflict incidents within the playground
Project two	Pre- and post-programme semi-structured interview with parent. Pre- and post-measurement of self-reported rating of young person's self-perception against given constructs
Project three	Staff questionnaire Child questionnaire

Table 2: Evaluation frameworks created

projects extended the range of stakeholders canvassed.

Reported perspectives on outcomes of the initiative

All respondents, including the Children's Fund coordinator, reported that projects now had more effective evaluation frameworks and tools, for example:

● I have developed clearer criteria for which children we work with.
● We now have a planned two-year programme for our work with the young people.
● We now have an achievable method of recording their outcomes.
● I feel that I have got an evaluation structure that I can now take forward myself.

● All participating community project staff reported having 'sharper' and 'more accurate' aims and objectives.

The Children's Fund coordinator reported that the outcomes of the intervention were evidenced in recently submitted funding proposals from these projects, which showed 'greater clarity, relevance and weight'. She reported that the projects involved with the EP now were 'more structured and have a clearer vision for their work'.

Reported perspectives on the experience of working with an EP

Questionnaire feedback about the experience of working with an EP in this initiative showed that there was a range of benefits. The EP was seen to have offered opportunities for supported reflection, demonstrated a perceived sensitivity to contextual factors and brought an invaluable knowledge base regarding evaluation of such areas as social and emotional development to the relationship. Generally, the EP helped the project workers to understand the need for clarity in their thinking and supported the workers so that they could understand the process of evaluation framework development. Comments included:

● It has been very beneficial to go through the way we do things.
● It was good to introduce thinking from different professional disciplines into our project to shape our own planning.
● She engaged constructively with where we are at as a programme and organisation.
● The experience has been very helpful and positive.
● The services of EPs are vital in the provision of soft skills programmes.
● One project team reported that they would have appreciated more initial support in establishing an overview of the framework development process:
● We found the process confusing and we would have appreciated having a clearer outline of the process before we embarked.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to explore the effectiveness of an empowerment evaluation model facilitated by the use of process consultation. Several themes that emerge from the feedback provide insight into the usefulness of the empowerment evaluation and process consultation approaches.

Those taking part agreed that empowerment evaluation had an impact on the development of the infrastructure of community projects. Across projects, practical outcomes such as refining aims and objectives, developing long-term planning and valuing the formalisation of programme content were beneficial in that they enabled participants to reflect on the nature of their respective project. This resulted in a sharper, more clearly articulated awareness of their mission. Such reported benefits would be consistent with previous findings regarding quality and sustainability, and capacity building (Akerland, 2000; Fetterman, 1996; Orford, 1992).

Evaluation showed that project workers were clearer in their thinking, created better structures to support their work and demonstrated broader vision in their planning. Their critical awareness developed, perhaps because they were given ownership of the process. This accords with the consistent findings from the research into consultation and empowerment evaluation (Swift & Levine 1987; Turner *et al.*, 1996; Wagner, 2000; Zimmerman, 2000).

The improved evaluation frameworks may increase collaboration between community groups and those with whom they work, and give greater empowerment to clients. Such outcomes reflect the philosophy of community psychology. Feedback from community groups also indicated that the process facilitated awareness of and sensitivity to context, reflecting its emphasis on 'situation specificity' (Zimmerman, 2000).

The reported difficulty in maintaining an overview of the empowerment evaluation process was consistent with other studies, indicating the differing levels of expertise

and support required for the range of evaluation encountered (Fetterman, 1996; Stevenson *et al.*, 1996). Certainly, the project with the largest, most complex system required the most consultation sessions to develop their evaluation framework. It may be that being clearer about the purpose, the specific actions required and the outcomes expected for the project with participants at the outset would be effective in avoiding confusion in the future (Dickinson, 2000; Kerslake & Roller, 2000). Additionally, a training element could be incorporated in empowerment evaluation that would enable the facilitator to 'map out the evaluation territory' (Fetterman 1996). Preliminary workshops could be offered to enable participants to fully explore the theory and practice of evaluation. Such a structure also allows for the development of peer support networks (Gomez & Goldstein, 1996), develop project workers' awareness of their work, and possibly increase project capacity.

It would be interesting to use focus groups either in addition to or instead of questionnaires to evaluate such an initiative in the future. This would enable the psychologist to explore the outcomes of the work in a way that was sensitive to the construction and expression of participant views (Barbour & Kitzinger, 1998).

This paper considers only the short-term reported outcomes of empowerment evaluation work with community groups. It would, therefore, be important to assess the impact of the initiative over a longer time span in order to ascertain whether it could contribute both to enhanced skill development and also to the increased sustainability of projects.

Implications for the EP
Stringer and Powell (2004) see EPs as making a unique contribution in working as applied psychologists with a community focus, using psychology to empower a variety of clients in meeting agreed goals. They outline what their team recognise as the characteristics of community educational psychology. These characteristics are shared by EPs in West Sussex, where EPs are being commissioned to apply psychology knowledge and skills in a wide variety of community-based contexts. The outcomes of this study would appear to confirm the value of this work. Project workers reported that they valued the EP's knowledge and understanding of the theory underpinning evaluation. This would demonstrate the significant contribution that the profession can bring to the implementation of the DfES (2004) strategy to facilitate high quality community-based services to children.

Conclusion
Applied community educational psychology has a significant contribution to make to the British government's intention to increase the development of capacity and sustainability of community groups. The EP can work as an applied community psychologist. With knowledge and insights drawn from psychology, and skills in research and consultation, EPs can implement empowerment evaluation models to enable community projects and groups to evaluate and develop their own work, and increase capacity and sustainability. To this extent, this article has argued, EPs can play a significant role, unique in a local authority.

Acknowledgements

Address for correspondence
Vanessa Wood, West Sussex Educational Psychology Service, Centenary House, Durrington Lane, Worthing, BN13 2QB
E-mail: vanessa.wood@westsussex.gov.uk.

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