

## FACILITATORS AND PITFALLS OF CONSULTATION STRATEGIES

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#### **Facilitators and Pitfalls in the Use of Consultation Strategies:**

#### **Prospective Special Educators' Self-Reflections on Audio-recorded Consultation Sessions**

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## FACILITATORS AND PITFALLS OF CONSULTATION STRATEGIES

### Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore how prospective special educators (PSEs) used and experienced different types of consultation skills in consultation sessions they held with general educators. The participants were 17 PSEs in Finland attending a course in which problem-solving stages and communication skills were trained. The PSEs' self-reflections on the audio-recorded consultation sessions were analyzed using an interpretative hermeneutical approach with qualitative content analysis. The strategies they used can be described as creating frames and clarity, applying reflective listening, offering keys and lifelines, and supporting the change. The results concerning facilitators indicated that the PSEs found both problem-solving stages and communication skills useful. Several pitfalls indicated that although the PSEs were aware of the consultation skills, they were still unable to apply them flexibly. The results indicated that self-reflection can be used as a tool in PSEs' consultation training, but as a complement, there is also a need for more supervised consultation training.

## Introduction

Along with the advancement of inclusive education, the special educator's role in pre-schools and schools is expected to change. The need for developing the role from that of a teacher for children with special educational needs to that of a consultant for general educators has been discussed in research since the late 1960s (Cook & Friend, 2010; Dettmer, Knackendoffel, & Thurston, 2013). Idol (2006) defined the consulting teacher model as a form of indirect special education service delivery where special education children receiving special education services are taught by the classroom teacher. The consultant works indirectly with the targeted students by working directly with the classroom teacher.

In Finland, the consulting teacher role has also received attention in research (Sundqvist, Ahlefeldt Nisser, & Ström, 2014; Sundqvist & Ström, 2015; Takala, Pirttimaa, & Törmänen, 2009). However, Finnish special educators are usually expected to function as consultants for their colleagues *alongside* their role as teachers. Thus, they have a complex role that not only involves teaching children, but also completing administrative tasks, as well as functioning as consultants for general educators (Sundqvist et al., 2014; Takala et al., 2009). In practice, few Finnish special educators have applied the consulting role, and consultation is mostly applied as a “quick-fix meeting,” for example, during breaks (Sundqvist, 2012).

Special education support in Finland is provided to children in the compulsory pre-primary education (age 6) and comprehensive school<sup>1</sup> (age 7–16); this is organized through a three-tiered frame called *Learning and Schooling Support*. The administrative support system is comparable to the US *Response to Intervention* (RtI) framework (see Björn, Aho, Koponen, Fuchs, & Fuchs, 2015), and it emphasizes children's right to receive special education support in

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<sup>1</sup> Comprehensive school (also called basic education) in Finland consists of primary education (age 7–12) and lower secondary education (age 13–16).

general education settings through differentiation. The general educator has a major responsibility for meeting diverse learning needs in the group in the first two tiers of support. Meanwhile, the special educator is expected to be actively involved in planning different types of support for students in the first and second tier, but mainly, to support students in the third tier of support (Björn et al. 2015; Finnish National Board of Education, 2016a; 2016b).

The importance of consultation between special educators and general educators for the success at all tiers of support has been clarified in research and policy documents in Finland, as well as the United States (Björn et al., 2015; Finnish National Board of Education, 2016a, 2016b; Sundqvist & Ström, 2015). However, special educators in Finland have expressed uncertainty concerning how to carry out consultation appropriately (Sundqvist, 2012; Sundqvist & Ström, 2015). Training in consultation skills is a minimal part of education for special educators (Sundqvist et al., 2014). The lack of in-depth education in consultation skills seems to be a common problem for professionals, who are expected to function as internal consultants in schools. In recent years, researchers in the field of school consultation have highlighted this shortcoming (Gerich, Trittel, & Schmiz, 2015; Gravois, 2012; Newell, 2012; Newman, Barrett, & Hazel, 2015; Rosenfield, 2013). Research has also indicated that training in consultation skills influences how school consultants enact their roles (Hatzichristou, Lampropoulou, Georgouleas, & Mihou, 2017; Newman, 2012a; Newman et al., 2015; Rosenfield, 2013).

### **The Complexity of Consultation in Special Education**

What should be the focus and content of courses in consultation in education programs for PSEs? This question is closely connected with the issue of what special educators are expected to do in their role as consultants. Should they function as special education experts offering general educators instructions, or should they help them to develop inclusive practice through reflective discussions? In international research concerning school consultation different

consultation approaches and models have been discussed. The expert-driven client-centered and the process-driven consultee-centered approach have often been posed against each other (Gravois, 2012; Gutkin, 1999; Hylander, 2012; Sundqvist et al., 2014). Researchers often describe consultation as a continuum where the consultation can be relatively expert or process driven, depending on the nature of the case (Erchul & Martens, 2010; Gutkin, 1999; Hylander, 2012; Sundqvist, 2012; Tysinger, Tysinger, & Diamenduros, 2009).

In Nordic research concerning consultation in special education the process-driven approach has gained popularity (Sundqvist, et al.,2014). However, Cook and Friend (2010) pointed out that consultation between special educators and general educators, who have a common responsibility to educate the child, operates differently than consultation offered by school psychologist. They discuss the phrase collaborative consultation, which appeared in the 1980s (see Idol, Nevin & Paolucci-Whitcomb,1986), as well as the possibility to use a collaborative style in consultation between peer teachers. This collaborative style is based on mutual goals, shared responsibility and resources, as well as the development of trust, respect, and sense of community.

In harmony with this, Sundqvist and Ström (2015) described how consultation meetings between special- and general educators can be fulfilled as concrete advisory, deep reflective, or mutual collaborative conversations. The chosen set-up depends on the amount of time the actors have at their disposal, the actors' consultation knowledge, and the nature of the case. The authors identified reflective and collaborative conversations driven from a process-driven approach as being important in the development of inclusive education. This indicates that special educators need training in multiple consultation skills.

### **Problem-solving and Communication Skills in Consultation**

There is a lack of research focusing on consultation skills and consultation training in the field of special education. In recent years, school psychologist consultation training has been highlighted in research (Barrett, Hazel, & Newman, 2016; Burkhouse, 2012; Guiney & Zibulsky, 2017; Hatzichristou et al., 2017; Ingraham, 2017; Newman, 2012a; Newman et al., 2015; Rosenfield, 2012). Research from this field can shed some light on PSEs' consultation training since special educators in the Finnish schools as well as school psychologists in US schools are expected to work with teachers to improve the situation for children within the RtI framework (Björn et al, 2017; Newman et al.,2014).

Interactive communication skills, as well as interdisciplinary problem-solving skills, are often mentioned as central competencies for consultants (Guiney & Zibulsky, 2017; Hylander, 2012; Kratochwill, Altschaeffl, & Bice-Urbach, 2014; Newman, 2012a; Newman, Salmon Cavanaugh, & Schnieder, 2014; Rosenfield, 2012). Communication skills used in consultation have their roots in psychotherapy and Carl Rogers' (1965) communication theory. Rogers (1965) emphasized every individual's ability to cope with problems, take responsibility, and constructively change. The communication skills Rogers identified as necessary for the therapist, which can be applied by consultants, are active listening, open questions, paraphrasing and mirroring (reflecting the consultee's emotional state). These strategies have become a central part of process-oriented consultee-centered consultation (CCC) (Hatzichristou et al., 2017; Hylander, 2012; Lambert, 2004; Ingraham, 2017; Newman, 2012a; Rosenfield, 2012).

Problem-solving skills in consultation are often viewed as an ability to structure the consultation process through a series of stages (Hylander, 2012). Bergan and Kratochwill (1990) described a four-stage problem-solving process that includes the following components: (a) problem identification, (b) problem analysis and goal setting, (c) intervention planning and implementation, and (d) evaluation. The consultant's ability to remain goal and solution focused,

and the collection and analysis of relevant data are emphasized. The problem-solving framework can be similarly applied in most school consultation models (Kratochwill et al., 2014), including CCC.

Research has shown that consultants who are trained gain better competence in the domain of problem solving than in that of process-related skills, such as communication skills (Hatzichristou et al., 2017, Newell, 2012; Newman et al., 2015; Rosenfield, 2013). This may be because process-oriented skills are complex and require more time and training to develop (Guiney & Zibulsky, 2017; Newell, 2012, Rosenfield, 2013). However, Guiney and Zibulsky (2017) investigated the development of self-efficacy among prospective consultants trained in both problem-solving and process-oriented skills (including communication skills). The researchers stated that the trainees' self-efficacy increased in both domains. Thus, it seems possible to support consultant trainees' skills in both domains if sufficient time is spent on training communication skills.

This background highlights the importance of gaining a deeper understanding of how different types of consultation skills can be successfully developed in consultation offered as special education service delivery. Furthermore, it indicates a need for the development of courses in consultation for PSEs. Without sufficient education in consultation skills, special educators will be unlikely to carry out the consulting role in an appropriate way.

### **Self-reflection on Audio-recorded Consultation Sessions**

Consultant trainees require opportunities to practice the skills; at the same time, they need supervised consultation practicums in real settings and opportunities to reflect on the session with a supervisor. To do this, case notes, self-reflection reports, and recorded sessions can be used (Burkhouse, 2012; Hatzichristou et al., 2017; Newman, 2012a, Rosenfield, 2012). The value of self-reflection (or simply "reflection") in teacher education has been highlighted since Schön

(1983) outlined his ideas about reflective practice (Watts & Lawson, 2009). Students' practical experience alone does not necessarily lead to skill development; thus, it is essential for students to recall, reflect on, and assess or evaluate experiences. Central to this process is that reflection should lead to consequences for future action (Lougrahn, 2002; Schön, 1983; Watts & Lawson, 2009).

One strategy for fostering self-reflection that has been widely used in teacher education is classroom recording (Bergman, 2015). Although current research has focused more on video recording, Bergman (2015) pointed out that audio recording can also support self-reflection and increase student learning. Recording consultation sessions is also considered to be the best practice in school psychologist consultation training (Burkhouse, 2012; Hatzichristou et al., 2017; Newman, 2012a; Rosenfield, 2012). One benefit of the use of recording in consultation training is that the student can review and self-reflect without necessarily relying on a supervisor (Orlova, 2009; VanDerWege, 2011). In contrast, several researchers have raised concerns about the lack of supervision occurring when trainees are encouraged to record consultation sessions. This issue is identified as a major shortcoming in consultation training (Barrett et al., 2016; Hatzichristou et al., 2017; Newman, 2012a; Newman et al., 2015; Rosenfield, 2013).

For practical reasons, it can be almost impossible for supervisors responsible for large student groups to review trainees' audio recordings (Newman, 2012b). In these circumstances, self-reflection could be an alternative with support in research. In a qualitative study focusing on counselor trainees' experiences in reflecting on their video-recorded sessions, self-reflection seemed to be useful, irrespective of the trainees analyzed the recordings independently or with their supervisors (VanDerWege, 2011).

### **Purpose and Research Questions**

This study focuses on PSEs' reflections on audio-recorded consultation sessions. The



PSEs' reflections have a double function. First, the self-reflections from audio-recorded sessions are used with the aim of helping PSEs to reflect on and develop their consultation skills (educational function). Second, they are employed as a basis for gathering knowledge about which facilitators and pitfalls PSEs experienced in the use of consultation strategies (research function), with the further aim of developing consultation courses as well as the knowledge base in this field. The purpose of the study is to deepen the knowledge concerning how, after a course focusing on multiple consultation strategies, PSEs experience different types of consultation skills in consultation sessions with general educators. To this end, the following research questions have been formulated:

- 1) How do PSEs use and experience different consultation strategies in consultation sessions with educators?
- 2) What types of facilitators and pitfalls do PSEs experience in the use of different consultation strategies?

### **Method**

The study has a qualitative focus, and the research process adopts an interpretive hermeneutical approach, which is suitable when the aim is to gain a deeper understanding of how people experience a phenomenon (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009). In hermeneutical research, the researcher's pre-understanding (earlier knowledge, theoretical understanding, experiences) of the phenomenon is central (Gadamer, 2004; Kvale & Brinkman, 2009; Ödman, 2007). The aim is not to present an objective and absolute truth, but rather to produce a deeper understanding of a phenomenon by letting the researcher's pre-understanding of the phenomenon function as a platform for the interpretation. Furthermore, the empirical data material should also shed new light on the pre-understanding and generate new knowledge (Gadamer, 2004; Ödman, 2007).

The empirical material in this study consists of PSEs' written self-reflections on audio-recorded consultation sessions. I used qualitative content analysis of these reflection journals as the method to address the research questions. Research and literature in the field of school consultation functioned as a frame for the interpretive analysis.

### **Participants**

The participants ( $N = 17$ ) included eight preschool educators and nine basic-education teachers attending a 2 year part-time postgraduate course in special education at a university in Finland. This is a common model for receiving a special educator degree<sup>2</sup> in this country (Takala & Haustätter, 2010). The participants were all females, and the length of their working experience in preschools or schools was 4–21 years. None had previously attended a course in consultation. The participants' levels of experience in functioning as consultant or communication leader in different types of meetings varied. All participants had some experience with leading meetings with parents, while seven mentioned experience with leading different types of discussion with teachers. None had offered consultations to their colleagues, other than in the form of "quick advice."

### **The Consultation Course**

The last course in the participants' education program was a course in consultation, which all participants attended. The course was planned and structured by me (the author) and conducted over 3 months in autumn 2016. During this period, I and the group of students met regularly in sessions for a total of 30 hours of instruction. Some sessions (12 hours) consisted of theory.

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<sup>2</sup> Special educators working in comprehensive schools in Finland must obtain a master's degree in special education (5-year education). In addition, qualified general teachers who already have a master degree can become qualified special educators via postgraduate studies in special education (60 credits). The situation is different for preschool educators. General educators working in preschools first obtain a bachelor's degree in preschool education; following this, it is possible to become a special preschool educator via postgraduate studies in special education.

Different consultation approaches were shortly presented. The CCC-model and its foundation in Caplan's (1970) mental health consultation was emphasized in the course as applied through a four-step problem-solving consultation framework. The major focus (18 hours) was on developing PSEs' problem-solving skills and overall communication skills by engaging them in pair exercises, roleplay, and case discussions. In the initial pair exercises, the participants practiced active listening, paraphrasing, mirroring, and posing different types of questions. The participants were encouraged to use cases and problems from their work experiences when they were taking the role of consultee in the exercises.

At the end of the course, the participants practiced functioning as consultants for each other in groups of three participants in the roles of a consultant, consultee, and observer; the roles were frequently switched. In this group work, the participants followed the four problem-solving stages and used the earlier trained communication skills. The trainees had the opportunity to reflect on the use of skills and obtain feedback from peers. The course also included self-studies in the form of reading literature and by discussing the literature with peer students.

As an examination task, the participants held at least two but preferably three audio-recorded consultation sessions with educators in a preschool or school setting. The consultees(s) the PSEs chose to offer consultation to could be a colleague or a person from another preschool or school. After holding their sessions, the PSEs had the opportunity to briefly share their experiences during small group discussions. During consultation sessions, the PSEs did not receive formal supervised support.

### **Audio-recorded Consultation Sessions and Written Reflection Journals**

The empirical material for this study consisted of PSEs' written reports on the audio-recorded consultation sessions held with educators in preschools or schools. The characteristics of the cases in the consultation varied; most of the consultees wanted to discuss a certain child

with behavioral difficulties or learning disabilities, but some wanted to consider the atmosphere in a whole group or working methods, as well as differentiation in a certain subject. Thirteen PSEs held consultation sessions with colleagues working in the same school or pre-school. One consulted with a previous colleague and three a familiar educator working in another school or pre-school. Fifteen PSEs held sessions with one consultee, while two PSEs held the consultation sessions as group consultations with two or three consultees, who worked together in a pre-school group. The consultees thus shared the problem discussed during the consultation process. All PSEs and consultees were females. The PSEs' prior teaching experience (in years) as well as the consultees' workplaces (preschool or comprehensive school)<sup>3</sup> and experience are presented in Table 1. In addition, the relationship between the consultant and consultee, and the characteristics of the consultation cases are presented.

The PSEs were encouraged to apply the communication skills and the four-stage problem-solving framework instructed in their coursework. The PSEs were also encouraged to briefly reflect in a written journal on the consultation session without listening to the recording initially, followed by reflection on the audio-recorded sessions. This was done because of my interest to gain information about whether the PSEs experienced a change in perceptions of use of skills when listening to the tape. The participants received clear instructions concerning what they should focus on in the reflection journals: description of the discussion theme; description of the use of different types of communication skills as well as problem-solving skills and their usefulness; and reflections on the experienced successes and pitfalls.

Even though the self-reflections were part of an obligatory consultation course, the participants were informed of their rights to not be part of the research project. They were also informed that the reflection reports not would be rated with grades. The shortest reflection journal

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<sup>3</sup> One PSE held a consultation with an assistant working in vocational education.

consisted of 2,178 words and the longest 4,891 words. On average, the reflection journals were 3,366 words.

### **Analysis**

The analysis was permeated by the hermeneutical approach described by Gadamer (2004) and Ödman (2007). The hermeneutic analysis is performed through systematic interpretation processes. The use of the questions *what* and *how* are important in the analysis. (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2007, Ödman, 2007). Furthermore, the hermeneutical circle method is central in the analysis, which means the small details in the analysis (as codes or separate reflection reports) should be understood in the light of the whole data, and vice versa (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Rennie, 2006; Ödman, 2007).

In the systematic analysis processes, I addressed Graneheim and Lundman's (2004) description of qualitative content analysis: First, the researcher reads the data several times to become familiar with the content. Initial reflections and memos can be written; these can be useful in the later interpretation. After this, the data are organized by open coding; notes and words are written in the margins. The codes are finally collected on coding sheets and grouped into manifest categories. The question *what* is important in this phase. Finally, the categories are formulated as general interpreted themes that describe the latent content of the data and answer the question *how*. During this phase, there is an ongoing refining of each theme until they capture the essence of the data in whole. Earlier theories and research can be of help in defining themes, but the researcher should also be open for aspects not fitting into the earlier knowledge base (Braun & Clarke, 2016; Rennie, 2012, Ödman 2007).

Initially, I read through all the reflection journals twice with the aim of reaching a sense of the whole and identifying common patterns and differences. Small memo notes were made; I went back to these during the analysis process, and thus, the memos functioned as guidance for

further analysis. The memos consisted for example of initial thoughts about pitfalls. In the next phase, all reports were read in more detail. Words or sentences were marked and coded. The codes were sampled in three separate lists with the titles “strategies,” “facilitators,” and “pitfalls.” Words used in these phases were close to the words the participants used in their reflection journals. The words describing strategies and facilitators were shown to be closely connected to each other, and codes in these lists were often even identical. Following this, codes with similar meanings were pooled together into categories. At this stage, I considered the PSEs’ descriptions carefully, with a focus on the manifest content and *what* the PSEs described. The intention was to follow the participants’ descriptions closely and use as little earlier knowledge and interpretation as possible. This phase ended with the identification of several *manifest categories* describing the use of strategies, as well as experiences of facilitators and pitfalls connected to them. Thus, the categories were derived from the data.

In the next phase, I aimed to move beyond the descriptions and identify implicit and latent content, or *themes*, in the material. The question *how* was the guide in this phase. The objective was to find higher-level themes; to succeed in this, my theoretical knowledge base concerning consultation was used. This means that this phase was characterized by an interpretative approach, where the participants’ descriptions and experiences, as well as my pre-understanding, were used. When the latent themes appeared, I also went back to the reflection journals and memos several times to check that the themes covered all the content.

My pre-understanding, colored by research describing different consultation approaches, CCC and consultation skills, as well as current research in consultation training, was of help in the identification of the themes. An example of this is the interpretation concerning the strategy flexibility as a facilitator (Table 2). In this interpretation, earlier research describing consultation as a continuum where consultation can be relatively expert- or process-driven depending on

demands, was of help (Erchul & Martens, 2010; Gutkin, 1999, Hylander, 2012, Sundqvist & Ström, 2015; Tysinger et al., 2009). However, the PSEs' descriptions also widened my pre-understanding. An example of this is the PSEs' reflections on how the use of open questions in some cases made the consultee unsure. This led me into the understanding of how questioning, if used with a certain intention, also can be a pitfall in the consultation (Table 2).

During this interpretative phase, the themes were refined and modified several times. In the end, the analysis identified four main themes that described how the PSEs used consultation strategies, as well as 10 sub themes describing facilitators and pitfalls in the use of consultation strategies.

### **Trustworthiness**

To reach trustworthiness, a qualitative researcher can use different methods to verify the creditability of categories and themes. One common method to do this is using member checking (Graneheim, & Lundman, 2004; Morrow, 2005; Steinke, 2004). In this study, member checking was conducted by discussing the initial understanding of the results with the participants. During the analytical process, I met all participants in groups for about 3 hours per group. Approximately half of this time was used to discuss each PSE's consultation sessions with focus of how they could have handled moments they found difficult, but also discussing moments they were satisfied with. After this, I discussed the initial manifest categories with the participants, and I thus had the opportunity to check details. The PSEs stated that the categories reflected their experiences, and their comments helped me to understand some of the categories describing the facilitators and pitfalls better. For example, it became even more apparent how difficult the PSEs experienced silent moments, as well as how unsure some of them were concerning the use of open suggestions (Table 2). The participants expressed gratefulness for the opportunity to discuss issues that emerged and learn that peer students had experienced the same pitfalls. As the

interpretation in qualitative interpretative research is subjective, participant recognition should be considered confirmation rather than verification (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004).

### **Researcher Reflexivity**

The most important method of achieving trustworthiness in an interpretative study is to present the research process as transparently and carefully as possible (Steinke, 2009). For example, Morrow (2005) mentioned the importance of researcher reflexivity in qualitative counseling research. As a hermeneutic researcher, I am conscious of my pre-understanding concerning the research themes, and the results should be understood in the light of this pre-understanding. In my case, this means that my theoretical knowledge is mainly colored by CCC. I also have experience functioning as a consultant in different kinds of consultation sessions, and these experiences form part of my pre-understanding. I have viewed myself as a consultant leaning towards a nonprescriptive and participant-driven approach, but I also recognize the importance of collaborative knowledge sharing. My ambivalence concerning the use of expert suggestions and consultee reflections in special education consultation probably influenced the PSEs during the consultation course, as well as my interpretation during the analysis. However, throughout the research, I have been mindful of this, and I aimed to understand the PSEs' experiences and reflections. I tried to stick to the PSEs' descriptions when the manifest categories were formulated, without trying to fit the categories into my pre-understanding. By the rich use of quotations in the result section, I have tried to increase trustworthiness of the analysis.

### **Results**

The analysis resulted in four interpretative themes describing the PSEs' use of consultation strategies. These were *creating frames and clarity*, *applying reflective listening*, *offering keys and lifelines*, and *supporting change*. In these themes, both problem-solving skills and communication skills can be discerned. The PSEs expressed mostly positive experiences



concerning the use of learned skills, but many also expressed uncertainty and personal shortcomings in the use of skills. In all, five facilitators and five pitfalls connected to the strategy themes emerged. The strategies, facilitators, and pitfalls are presented in Table 2.

### **Creating Frames and Clarity**

The first interpreted theme concerning strategies was *to create frames and clarity*. The use of this strategy appeared in all PSEs' reflections. This strategy was partly about making sure the sessions became structured discussions and partly about helping the consultee identify the core of the problem and stick to the topic. The interpretation was that the PSEs found this strategy important, and most experienced that they managed well in using this strategy. The facilitators in the use of this strategy were *structuring the process* and *sampling information and clarifying concerns*. One pitfall was identified, which was *weak preparation and guidance*.

**Facilitators.** All PSEs described how they tried to *structure the consultation process*, generally by using the four-stage problem-solving framework presented in the course. Although the stages were not always clear and sometimes not possible to follow completely, the PSEs reflected on how helpful their awareness of the four-stage problem-solving framework was. This type of structuring helped them to move through the process without dwelling on specific elements of it. One of the PSEs reflected on the stages' structuring as follows:

I was well prepared and conscious of the four-stage model we discussed in the course. Without the stage thinking, the conversation would probably have ended in complete chaos without orientation. The awareness of the stages made the conversation more professional, more structured, and more progressive. (Julia)

The second facilitator connected to creating frames and clarity was supporting the consultee by *sampling information and clarifying concerns*. The PSEs reflected on how they sampled relevant information using different types of visualization tools, such as keywords and

mind maps. Several PSEs reported that they wrote down keywords while the consultee talked, and this helped them to bring order. Some PSEs also mentioned how they used mind maps to sample central information about a child, group, or situation. Victoria, who held group consultations with preschool educators, used the whiteboard to help label the problem. For example, they wrote the term “indoor tickler” to refer to the chaos they experienced as a result of crowded floor space in combination with a large and lively group of children.

We were in a room with a whiteboard, so I decided to use it to get a better overview of the problem. I asked what they would like to call their problem, and they labelled it the “indoor tickler.” After that, we made a mind map on the whiteboard using the words the group members mentioned, such as *loud, crowded, stress, chaos, small spaces, cooperation, and many children*. We continued to talk about these words. (Victoria)

Some PSEs also chose to observe a lesson or two in the classroom or part of a day in the children’s preschool group. The observations were used to bring clarity and gather sufficient information about the situation. Gabriella expressed how the observation helped both her and the consultee:

I could not get the pieces together, did not understand the situations she [the consultee] described and how she worked with the boy’s boxes. So, I asked her if I could join her lesson before our next session. I thought the observation was necessary. After that, I understood what she was talking about better. In the second session, I explained to her what I had recognized, and it was easier to ask questions and analyze deeper. (Gabriella)

Another tool that helped the PSEs to sample information and clarify concerns was the use of summaries, sometimes in combination with clarifying questions, which helped the actors to keep on track and choose the focus. For example, Anna provided the following description:

When I listened to the recording, I noticed I used quite a lot of summaries, and I think it was good. For example, at the beginning, she [the consultee] talked about several situations that were difficult for the boy. I tried to make a holistic summary, and I would say I succeeded quite well. After the conclusion, I asked her [the consultee], “If you were to choose just one of these situations, and we continued to solve that, which would be the most important to change?” Finally, she said, “his self-confidence.” I think the summary, as well as the question about what was most important, helped us to focus. (Anna)

**Pitfall.** The pitfall that appeared regarding creating frames and clarity was *weak preparation and guidance*. A couple of PSEs reported that they had not had enough time to calm down and prepare the consultation meetings they held during the school day. Thus, they were stressed when they entered the consultation session, and they had not generated a clear vision of how to realize the consultation beforehand. In these cases, the sessions tended to become rather loose discussions without direction. Maria was one of the PSEs that observed this in her report:

There were some changes in the schedule before our second meeting, and I had to rush into the conversation feeling quite stressed. I should have given myself a few minutes beforehand to think through all we had learned in the course, the stages, and different types of possible questions. The conversation was quite unstructured. (Maria)

Some PSEs who seemed prepared beforehand still expressed difficulties in the guidance. This became apparent in their lack of ability to structure the process by filtering information. Many consultees talked a great deal, and they mentioned different concerns. It was not always easy for the PSE to control the flow; sometimes, in their attempt to be empathic, the PSEs just let the consultees continue to talk, even if it was difficult to understand the content. As a result, the sessions felt “chaotic.” Johanna described how she noticed the session slip out of her control:

She [the consultee] talked and talked and jumped from one thing to another. It was hard for me to follow her, it really was, but I did not want to hurry and cut her off. I imagined it to be unprofessional or unfriendly. But when I listened to the recording, I thought I should have. It was like the whole conversation slipped out of my hand when I just let her talk. (Johanna)

Although active and emphatic listening is the basis of consultation, the consultant must also help the consultee to keep on track by supporting him or her to restrain the flow and filter the information.

### **Applying Reflective Listening**

The second interpreted theme concerning strategies discerned in the analysis was *applying reflective listening*. Almost all the PSEs wrote about how they observed that active reflective listening functioned as an important support in the consultation. This became obvious when they listened to the audio recordings, but many PSEs also wrote about how grateful the consultee(s) were to have a listening ear. Although multiple PSEs reflected on how surprisingly exhausting it was to act in the role of listener, many still found that they were adept at doing this. A central facilitator connected to this strategy was expressing *genuine interest and affirmation*. *Skill uncertainty and hurry* was interpreted to be a common pitfall.

**Facilitator.** The facilitator connected to this strategy was *genuine interest and affirmation*. Genuine interest is connected to the ability to be mentally present, but at the same time, it involves having authentic curiosity. Julia, for example, noticed that this helped her not just in listening actively, but also in asking questions naturally:

I have been positively surprised by my ability to truly listen. I had thought this was one of my weaknesses, but maybe it is not. She [the consultee] talked a lot at the beginning, and I listened and sometimes asked a question. The case really interested me, and I think

that helped me to concentrate. Thanks to this, the questions also came quite naturally.

(Julia)

Almost all PSEs noticed that they used small confirming words, such as “yes,” “hmm,” or “I see” while listening; however, they were also eager to use paraphrasing to confirm. Although some PSEs expressed that they sounded clumsy in these attempts, many also reflected on how paraphrasing helped them to listen actively and show empathy. The paraphrasing also functioned as a tool to verify that they had understood the things the consultee(s) described. Therese reflected on paraphrasing as follows:

It is important to listen in an active and confirming way, and my consultee expressed how grateful she was to have a listening ear. I used a lot of paraphrasing, and I noticed it was a good way to show my engagement. It made the listening more empathic. I also found it easier to listen when I used paraphrasing. Somehow, I listened in a more focused manner when I knew I needed to confirm what she had told me. Sometimes, she [the consultee] corrected me, but often, she answered “exactly,” or simply “yes.” (Therese)

**Pitfalls.** The first pitfall connected to the use of reflective listening was *skill uncertainty and hurry*. Many of the PSEs mentioned how unsure they still were concerning their communication skills, which were not yet fully acquired or “automatized,” and they were nervous about messing up. Although this can be applied to all strategies, it became most obvious in connection to the ability to listen reflectively. Some PSEs recognized how difficult it was to listen actively, and at the same time, focus on how to formulate good questions. They found that it was important to be well prepared, but even more important to be mentally attendant and not think too much about certain skills in the moment. Sara described this as follows:

When the session was over, I felt that the conversation went too fast. I had planned a 45-minute session, but we talked for just 30 minutes. When I listened to the recording, I

asked myself, “Why were you in such a hurry?” It seemed like I was listening, but I still did not really hear what she [the consultee] said before I listened to the audio recording in peace and quiet. I think I was too busy thinking about what I should ask and how, that I should remember to paraphrase, and so on. (Sara)

The PSEs’ lack of certainty also appeared in silent moments. Almost all PSEs mentioned that they experienced breaks and silent moments as difficult, and they even avoided the silence. However, when they listened to the tapes, they became aware of how important silent moments can be for both the consultant and consultee(s). The consultant often poses complex questions, and the consultee needs time to think. At the same time, the PSE needs time to gather all the pieces together and come up with adequate questions. Therese described this as follows:

During the session, the silent breaks felt a bit difficult. I asked her [the consultee] a question, and she sat there in silence. I did not know what to do, so I quickly said something. When I listened to the tape, I noticed that the silent moments were important. Maybe we both needed time to think. All these questions require time to reflect. So, the most important thing I think I have learned is not to be afraid of silence. (Therese)

Some PSEs also reflected on how they sometimes sped up the tempo and rushed forward. The intention to advance in the process and retain control, instead of truly listening to the consultees’ needs, resulted in forced sessions in which they guided the consultee or the focus of the conversation too much or too quickly. For example, Amanda noticed this:

She [the consultee] gave me some examples of when the activities in the group did not work very well. It was in the context of storytelling and crafts. I picked up on storytelling immediately—I don’t know why, maybe because I think storytelling is so important, and therefore, would be easier to discuss. Of course, I should have slowed down and let her choose the problem. (Amanda)

### Offering Keys and Lifelines

A central stage in the consultation process was to help the consultee find solutions, which appeared in the third interpretative strategy theme of *offering keys and lifelines*. According to the PSEs' reflections, it was sometimes enough to offer the consultee(s) keys to hidden rooms by asking questions that helped the consultee reflect and find ideas, but in some cases they also found it important to provide concrete lifelines in the form of open suggestions to the consultee(s). The facilitator connected to this strategy can be described as *skill and strategy flexibility*, while the pitfalls were interpreted as *inadequate questioning* and *expert pressure and role ambivalence*.

**Facilitators.** The facilitator *skill and strategy flexibility* is related to being sensitive to the consultee(s) needs, as well as to the case demands, which could be accomplished by applying communication strategies that can be considered to be more expert-driven than process-driven. While the PSEs overall attempted to be nondirective by using communication skills, in some cases they also shared their special education knowledge by offering open suggestions to the consultee. This could be considered as a pitfall, but since the nature and demand of the case differed, I finally interpreted the strategy flexibility as a facilitator.

All the PSEs reflected on how they used communication skills, such as continue asking reflective questions, when it was time to help the consultee(s) in finding solutions. Although many PSEs mentioned how difficult it was to find good questions in the moment, almost all participants reported turning points when a question helped the consultee to look at the problem in a new way or to come up with an idea. Petra described how the consultee's attitude concerning a boy changed when she asked her a solution-focused question:

I asked her to think about situations when it works better [situations concerning Simon].

At first, she claimed that such situations were rare. But I continued asking her to find at

least one situation when it worked better . . . The questions helped her to change her attitude about Simon; she became aware of his need for fewer and simpler tasks, and suddenly, she was eager to come up with ideas about how she could handle this in the mathematics class. She was very happy afterward and said, “I did not know I had all these ideas!” (Petra)

However, the PSEs also mentioned how their attempts to pose questions did not always provide enough support; they sometimes felt they had to be more concrete in offering open suggestions to the consultee. They used their knowledge or experiences in a careful way, attempting to avoid governing, by asking, “Do you know what I used to do in these situations?” or “What would happen if you let the pupil concentrate on just one task?” A couple of PSEs reflected on how a stressed or resigned consultee relaxed and started to think independently after receiving an open suggestion from the PSE. For example, Tanja, who offered consultation to a newly qualified teacher, made the following comment:

I understood that she [the consultee] had no tools at all when it came to training on the pupils’ reading understanding. I tried to ask some questions, but she seemed to become even more frustrated. So, I gave her some suggestions from my own experiences in my class. She became more relaxed, picked up what I described, and started to think about it. Suddenly, her own ideas started to pop up. So, I would say I gave her suggestions, but in the end, it was more like brainstorming. (Tanja)

This example illustrates how, in certain cases, an open suggestion can function as a trigger for consultee reflections and lead to collaborative knowledge sharing.

**Pitfalls.** The first pitfall connected to offering keys and lifelines can be described as *inadequate questioning*. The PSEs were anxious to ask different types of questions, but many described the questioning as the most demanding aspect of the consultation. Some observed that



they were too fixated on asking questions. Sonja described the first session as a “ping-pong match” with too many questions, and even “too many closed-ended questions.” In addition, some PSEs mentioned that questioning can be used in an inappropriate way, even confusing the consultee. Maria described: “After the session, I asked her [the consultee] how she felt about the conversation. She laughed and said that all the questions made her unsure; it was like I was fishing for a correct answer.” (Maria)

Sometimes the PSEs seemed to ask questions instead of giving advice, with the hope that the consultee would answer in a certain way or come up with exactly the idea the PSE had in mind. This was brought up in Julia’s reflections:

I tried to lean on a nonprescriptive approach, and I can say that I asked a lot of questions and tried to help her in that way. But it was very tricky to hold back all the ideas that popped into my mind and instead find a question that would help her to come up with the idea herself. (Julia)

The examples above indicate how important the intention of a question is. Sometimes it may be better to use other communication skills or even give a suggestion in a collaborative way than to fish for a “right” answer. However, many PSEs seemed to be unsure of how and when they should use their knowledge and own experiences. Some described how they tried to tone down the expert role, although the consultee maybe would have been helped by some open suggestions. Others recognized how difficult it was to avoid giving advice when the consultee asked. Therefore, *expert pressure and role ambivalence* can be identified as the second pitfall. This is highly related to the consultees’ expectations in combination with the PSEs’ unsureness. Gabriella reflected on how her fear of governing made her hide her knowledge and avoid making suggestions, despite thinking the case was of a concrete nature and a suggestion could have been adequate in providing assistance:

She [the consultee] was asking for advice concerning the boy's boxes and how to work with the boxes, but I was aware of wanting to avoid consultation as a "tip bank."

Although several ideas popped into my head after the observation in the group, I tried to hold back and ask questions instead. I don't know if it was a clever choice—the problem was so concrete, the questions felt a bit stupid. (Gabriella)

Some PSEs who wanted to be nondirective and help the consultee without giving advice admitted how difficult it was to avoid providing advice when the consultee asked. The pressure appeared in terms of uncertain knowledge sharing. Johanna described it as follows:

When trying to widen her perspective, I asked her [the consultee] what a successful lesson would be like. I also asked her about what she could do differently to achieve the goal.

She answered that she didn't know and she needed tips from me. Since I had planned to help her come up with solutions independently, I was bewildered, and I think she noticed that. "You want a tip from me?" I faltered. "Yes, I have no more ideas," she answered. I asked her what would happen if she let the children stand in two circles, with those who had difficulty listening in the inner circle. She picked that up and seemed to be satisfied.

But I don't know if I did the right thing. (Johanna)

Although the suggestion was appreciated by the consultee, the PSE was ambivalent concerning her role as an advisor, and she did not know how to share her idea in a collaborative way.

### **Supporting Change**

The last interpreted theme was actively *supporting the change*. Several PSEs reflected on how important it is to ensure the consultee is not left alone with the implementation of an intervention or a new way of handling a situation. They observed how they tried to encourage the consultee(s) in different ways to realize the ideas in the classroom. The facilitators they

mentioned were *small-step thinking* and *active backup*. As a pitfall, they identified *weak acceptability of interventions*.

**Facilitators.** The facilitators connected to supporting change were *small-step thinking* and *active backup*. Several PSEs mentioned that they tried to encourage the consultee to split up a problem or goal and start with a small change. A couple of PSEs noticed how the consultees' attitudes changed when the session resulted in the identification of a small, concrete thing or task they could test in the class or group before the next consultation session. Often, this small task led to what one PSE called a "domino effect," giving the consultee energy to do even more for the group or the child. Therese described small-step thinking as follows:

She [the consultee] discussed several things she could do, like talking with the parents and giving the boy more individual support. But she also complained about the huge workload. I asked if there was anything we had discussed that she could try to do before our next meeting without feeling that it was too much. Finally, she answered, "I could try to notice positive things a bit more." It was not a big effort for her, but it was obvious how happy she was when she came to the next session. She had made a chart with all the good things the boy did and had shown it to him. She experienced a change in his behavior, and that motivated her to continue with some other things we had discussed. (Therese)

The PSEs reflected on how they had offered backup to the consultee(s) in different ways. Some described how they had encouraged the consultee(s) to bring about the change by asking about possibilities and their motivation, even helping the consultee(s) to decide when it was a good time to start: For example, Maria stated: "I used the scaling question<sup>4</sup> to check if she [the

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<sup>4</sup> Scaling questions is common type of questions used in solution focused consultation (O'Connell, Palmer & Williams, 2012).

consultee] found the idea practicable. I think the question worked out well, and maybe made her more motivated.” (Maria)

A couple of PSEs even offered more concrete backup and joined the consultee in the classroom when it was time to implement the intervention. This occurred in situations where the PSE worked in the same school as the consultee and they had a common responsibility for the pupils. This was the case for Johanna:

And together we decided that we would cooperate on a couple of lessons. I am not sure that she would have been able to complete this intervention without my help. This is also something I want to do in the future as a consulting teacher. I think it is a central aspect of consultation. (Johanna)

**Pitfall.** The pitfall connected to supporting change was *weak acceptability of interventions*. Some PSEs mentioned that they were unsure of whether the consultee(s) would ultimately do the things they had discussed. Furthermore, a few PSEs were frustrated when the consultee came to a session and admitted that she had not carried out the action they had discussed in the previous session. Such a lack of implementation can occur if the intervention or change is too demanding or forced. In some cases, the PSEs’ reflections indicate that the interventions were mainly the consultant’s ideas; they were not always authorized by the consultee, and thus, they were left undone. Sara reflected on how she neglected to verify the consultee’s motivation:

I started the second session by summarizing what we had discussed in the first session and asking how the action had worked. She [the consultee] was a little bit abashed when she admitted that she hadn’t done it. First, the pupil had been sick for a couple of days, and then there were many other programs to attend to. But when I listened to the

recording, I started to wonder about her motivation. I was likely more anxious than her and completely forgot to consider her motivation. (Sara)

This pitfall indicates the importance to be responsive to the consultee in the planning of interventions.

### **Discussion and Conclusions**

In this study, PSEs' reflections on audio-recorded consultation sessions were analyzed with the aim of investigating how, after completing a basic course in consultation, PSEs used and experienced different types of consultation strategies in consultation sessions with general educators. The results indicated that, in the PSEs' experiences, they managed to use and combine problem-solving skills and communication skills to a certain extent. This finding can be compared with results reported by Guiney and Zibulsky (2017), who found that school psychologists in consultation training developed self-efficacy in both problem-solving and process-oriented skills. However, although the PSEs were aware of the skills, they could not yet use them flexibly, which is natural for trainees when they are first developing consultation skills (Ingraham, 2017; Rosenfield, 2012). Furthermore, as noticed in earlier research, the results indicate the communication skills were more difficult to apply than problem-solving stages (Hatzichristou et al., 2017, Newell, 2012; Newman et al., 2015; Rosenfield, 2013). In the following sections the PSEs' experiences concerning the use of different skills, as well as implications for their consultation training are more closely discussed.

#### **The Use of Problem-solving Skills: Lessons Learned**

All PSEs reported that they used the four-stage problem-solving framework that they practiced during the course. This was a central part of the strategy *creating frames and clarity*. However, all the themes concerning strategies that emerged in the analysis could possibly also be understood in the context of the problem-solving framework. For example, *creating frames and*

*clarity* as well as *applying reflective listening* are strategies that can be compared with problem identification and problem analysis, while *offering keys and lifelines* can be understood as strategies used in the intervention planning. Finally, *supporting the change* has features that are central in the intervention implementation. However, strategies such as *creating frames and clarity* as well as *applying reflective listening* are strategies needed throughout the consultation process, rather than one isolated problem-solving stage.

The PSEs reported that their awareness of the problem-stages helped them to advance in the process. However, some pitfalls connected to the use of the problem-solving stages were also discerned. The most obvious pitfalls can be understood as caused by a too rapid advancement in the process. It happened that the PSEs gave quick and ungrounded advice to consultees early in the problem-solving process. This pitfall has also been described in research concerning school psychologists in consultation training. For example, Newman (2012a) and Henning-Stout (1999) mentioned how consultants in training tend to rush through the stages in their ambition to come to a solution. Newman (2012a) pointed out the importance of support from a supervisor to avoid misleading guidance in the consultation process. The results concerning the competence to move through the problem-solving stages in the present study indicated that self-reflections can help the PSEs to be aware of pitfalls, but more supervised support is also needed to allow them to develop the ability to master the problem-solving stages.

### **The Use of Communication Skills: Lessons Learned**

The PSEs gave rich descriptions of how they tried to act in accordance with a nondirective and consultee-centered approach, while using process-oriented communication skills. Although several PSEs reported experiences of success, these skills seemed to be more difficult to apply in practice than the problem-solving skills were. These results are consistent with earlier research stating that process-oriented skills, such as communication and relationship

building, require more training than problem-solving ones (Hatzichrisou et al., 2017; Newell, 2012; Newman et al., 2015; Rosenfield, 2013).

One frequent shortcoming, according to the PSEs' self-reflections, seemed to be a failure in affirmative and reflective listening. Skills such as paraphrasing and open questions were not yet automatized, and the PSEs expressed uncertainty and anxiety concerning them. Hatzichristou et al. (2017) described how the awareness of communication skills often gives consultants in training anxiety. The trainees are aware of the importance of reflective questions, but they do not know what to ask, and when. This could also be discerned in the present study. In the consultations, the PSEs also tried to help the consultees widen their perspectives through "offering keys" in the form of open questioning. Even though much time was offered to practice questioning during the course, the PSEs expressed unsureness and misunderstandings concerning the use of questioning. For example, questions were sometimes used as a latent tool to lead the consultee to a solution the consultant thought would be the best.

Difficulties in posing reflective questions have been highlighted by researchers in the field of school psychologist consultation training as typical shortcomings among trainees (Hatzichristou et al., 2017; Newman, 2012b; Rosenfield, 2012). The results of this study indicated that PSEs needed more supervised training in how to ask questions with genuine curiosity, as well as more training in how they could also use other communication skills in a fruitful way throughout the process. However, beyond this, the results indicate they need opportunities to share and process their uncertainty, not only through self-reflections, but also through supervised group discussions.

### **The Complexity of the Special Education Teacher's Consulting Role: Lessons Learned**

The PSEs had to deal with different types of case demands, which is usual when special educators function as consultants (Ström & Sundqvist, 2015), and they expressed several pitfalls

in the use of the *offering keys and lifelines* strategy. Although they tried to be consultee-centered, many of the PSEs seemed to have applied a more client-centered approach in intervention planning. The results showed that they felt pressure to act as experts and share their knowledge with the consultees, who had experienced shortcomings in teaching children in need of support.

The PSEs' expert pressure indicates the importance of discussing consultation expectations with the consultee before the process, perhaps through a contracting process (see Newman et al., 2014). Overall, however, the role ambivalence raises the question of whether models from the field of school psychology consultation (e.g., CCC), can be applied when special educators offer consultation to colleagues. The school psychologists' and special educators' consulting roles differ since special educators first of all function as teachers for the target children. Furthermore, most Finnish special educators do not have deep insight in mental health consultation, which is the foundation of CCC.

Although it is beyond the scope of this article to give recommendations concerning the use of consultation models in the special education field, the results still trigger consideration of this issue. According to the PSEs' descriptions, the CCC model seems to offer a solid and valuable ground when it comes to communication skills. However, in its pure form, the model is perceived as nonprescriptive, and it is preferable for the consultant not to imagine the problem before seeing the consultee (Hylander, 2012). The Finnish special educators' consulting service cannot be considered a completely indirect service, since also the special educators in schools teach the target child a couple of lessons a week outside the general classroom, or as the general educator's co-teacher in the classroom. In addition, they are expected (in collaboration with other teachers) to ensure that appropriate methods are provided to students who have a right to special education support (Björn et al., 2017; Sundqvist & Ström, 2015). Thus, their authority to function as consultants primarily springs from their experiences to teach students in need of special



education support. In these circumstances, it can be difficult to not focus on the child and apply a pure consultee-centered approach in the consultation. This should be highlighted and discussed during PSEs' consultation training. If the education and training in consultation were expanded, it would be possible to offer a deeper view of other consultation models and deepen the collaborative approach overall, which is considered useful in the field of special education consultation (Cook & Friend, 2010; Dettmer et al., 2012; Sundqvist, 2012; Sundqvist & Ström, 2015; Thomson, 2013).

### **Implications of PSEs' Consultation Training**

A final conclusion is that although the PSEs could describe and use both problem-solving skills and communication skills to some extent, they still lacked the ability to use the newly learned skills flexibly in real consultation sessions, which represents a higher level of consultation competence (Ingraham, 2017; Rosenfield, 2012). Courses focusing on consultation skills represent a minimal part of the special educator training programs in Finland (Sundqvist, 2012). Since the three-tier support system has increased the expectations concerning special educators as consultants, special educator programs in Finland should expand the possibility for PSEs to attend courses in consultation, including at an advanced level.

The results also indicated that self-reflections on audio-recorded consultation sessions can be used as a tool in consultation training; however, such self-reflections might best be combined with feedback from a supervisor. The PSEs' reflections showed how they became aware of their strengths and weaknesses as consultants when listening to the recordings. Sometimes the PSEs' experience of the session changed when listening to the recording. This was obvious when they described the silent moments and became aware of the importance of these. They also observed several pitfalls during the listening and even tried to do "better" in the next session; however, they did not always know how to advance in the process, use their communication skills, or share

their knowledge in a collaborative way.

The shortcomings should not just be understood as a natural result of a lack of experience; rather, they should also be considered in light of the lack of clear supervision during the PSEs' consultation practice. Several researchers have questioned the lack of supervision in consultation courses and pointed out the importance of a supervisor who uses recordings as part of the supervision process (Barrett et al., 2016; Burkhouse, 2012; Newman, 2012a; Newman et al., 2015; Rosenfield, 2013). For practical reasons, it is not always possible for PSEs to share audio-recorded sessions with their supervisors or peer students. When this is the case, PSEs' self-reflections on audio-recorded sessions—as suggested in earlier research (Bergman, 2015; Orlova, 2009; VanDerWefe, 2011)—can be considered as a possibility in consultation training, but this should not be the only measure implemented. As a complement, trainees should have the opportunity to at least discuss their experiences in supervised group discussion, not just after the process, but also during it. For example, Newman (2012b) highlighted the possibility of using group supervision when one-on-one supervision is not an option for practical reasons. The PSEs in this study had the opportunity to briefly reflect on their experiences after the consultation sessions. However, group supervision should be extended and ongoing during the process. This result broadened my understanding of self-reflections as part of consultation training offered to PSEs. If the PSEs are left alone with feelings of failure or questions about how they can succeed in their role as consulting teachers, they may be reticent to take on the consultant role in future.

### **Limitations**

The study involved several limitations, and the findings should be understood in this light. The first limitation that should be taken into consideration is my dual role as researcher and course instructor. Courses in consultation are rare in Finnish special educator training. Since I have an ambition to contribute to the development of courses in consultation, I chose to perform

the study in my own institution that has provided consultation training for years. In assuming dual roles, my consultation knowledge was used as a knowledge base in the course, and it was also a factor in the interpretative analysis. I tried to achieve trustworthiness through careful documentation of my pre-understandings, research process, and findings.

Since the results were based on the PSEs' subjective experiences it is unclear whether the PSEs really applied the skills in the way many of them reported. Thus, the results should be understood in the light of self-report rather than direct observation. Furthermore, even though it was pointed out that the reflection reports were not rated with grades, the fact that the sessions also functioned as an examination task may have influenced the PSEs' eagerness to show success in their use of skills and in the long run also impacted the results. In addition, some of the PSEs had difficulties in finding a consultee. Although the PSEs were encouraged to offer consultation to colleagues in need of this service, the sessions were probably not completely authentic since some of the PSEs may have chosen consultees that did not need consultation at the time, but still assumed the consultee function. Finally, it is important to point out that since the study was a small-scale, qualitative study the results should not be generalized uncritically. The rich description of the research context is intended to help the reader consider transferability to their own settings.

### **Future Research**

Future research might expand on the findings of this research. In this study, the PSEs' self-reflections were analyzed; as a complement, there is also a need for research analyzing observed or audio-recorded consultation sessions. Research combining trainees' self-reflections and objective analyses of consultation sessions would contribute to the understanding of how trainees use consultations skills, and also to the understanding of how valid and useful self-reflections on recordings actually are in consultation training. Future research focusing on

consultees' experiences of consultation and its influence on the three-tier support system are also recommended. Additional questions for investigation include how do consultees experience different types of consultation models and skills? And how do the consultations influence their daily work and competence in meeting children's different needs in the classroom?

There is a lack of research focusing on outcomes of consultation in a special education consultation context. Given the limited amount of research focusing on special educators' consulting role more transnational research in the field would be welcome. For example, special educators' consulting role in the special education support systems in different countries, as well as PSEs' consultation training, could be compared, and future studies could expand the knowledge on how special educators' consulting role can be taught and developed. Without a scientific knowledge base concerning how consultation as a type of special education service delivery can be successfully developed, the consulting role risks being diluted and drained.

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