

**A Realistic Evaluation of the Use of Group  
Consultation to Deliver Educational  
Psychology Services**

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## Abstract

The central aim of this thesis is to examine whether group consultation is an effective way for Educational Psychologists (EPs) to deliver their services to Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators (SENCOs). To contribute towards current understandings of this issue, I interviewed SENCOs and EPs who had been involved in Additional Needs Partnerships (ANPs). ANPs involved EPs facilitating solution-focused consultations with groups of SENCOs. EP work within ANP schools was allocated via the ANP meetings.

I aimed to identify positive and negative outcomes of the ANPs, and how and why the ANPs produced these outcomes. The purpose of this was to answer the research questions **do ANPs deliver effective service delivery, and if so, when, why and how?** And **are there ways in which the ANPs could be improved?** I hoped that my findings would provide a unique contribution to EP practice knowledge.

I chose to conduct a piece of qualitative research as this provided the opportunity to explore participants' experiences of the ANPs. I adopted a realistic evaluation framework as my methodological approach. This enabled me to analyse how the ANPs worked, rather than focussing solely upon outcomes of the ANPs.

Findings appeared to suggest that the ANPs enabled SENCOs to feel supported, gain new perspectives, understandings and ideas, develop professional skills and to feel that they were meeting children's needs and working effectively with parents. The

structured group discussion, meeting preparation, follow-up and EP contributions helped bring about these positive outcomes. If the group included professionals with a range of expertise and experience, who trusted and supported one another, this was also conducive to effective ANP working.

Participants reported several limitations to the ANPs. During initial meetings, some SENCos were unacquainted, the process was unclear and EP follow-up work did not always occur. The discussion at some ANP meetings was limited due to time constraints or low SENCo confidence or commitment.

The findings suggest that clear contracting between group members should occur before group consultations commence, and as an on-going process. One avenue for future research could be to obtain parental/carers' views of the ANPs and to collect information regarding outcomes for children within ANP schools.



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## **List of Abbreviations**

<b><u>Abbreviation</u></b>	<b><u>Extended</u></b>
<b>ANP</b>	Additional Needs Partnership
<b>C(s)</b>	Context(s)
<b>CoA</b>	Circle of Adults
<b>EBD</b>	Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties
<b>EP</b>	Educational Psychologist
<b>EPS</b>	Educational Psychology Service
<b>FSW</b>	Family Support Worker
<b>IPS</b>	Initial Programme Specification
<b>LA</b>	Local Authority
<b>M(s)</b>	Mechanism(s)
<b>O(s)</b>	Outcome(s)
<b>PEP</b>	Principal Educational Psychologist
<b>PT</b>	Programme Theory
<b>SA</b>	School Action
<b>SA+</b>	School Action Plus
<b>SaLT</b>	Speech and Language Therapist
<b>SC</b>	Solution Circle
<b>SEP</b>	Senior Educational Psychologist
<b>SEN</b>	Special Educational Needs
<b>SENCo</b>	Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator
<b>SENCoP</b>	SEN Code of Practice
<b>SFA</b>	Solution-Focused Approach
<b>TEP</b>	Trainee Educational Psychologist
<b>TSTs</b>	Teacher Support Teams





# **1     Introduction**

## **1.1   Introduction**

This thesis reports a qualitative evaluation of a service delivery pilot that was conducted within an Educational Psychology Service (EPS) in the North of England. During 2012 to 2013, several schools received their EPS via 'Additional Needs Partnerships' (ANPs). The ANPs involved Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators (SENCOs) meeting regularly with Educational Psychologists (EPs) for solution-focused group consultations. EP work was agreed and allocated via the group consultations. There were five ANPs operating within the Local Authority (LA) during 2012/2013. I worked within two of those ANPs, so had a particular interest in their functioning.

I undertook this research as I believed it would help me gain a deeper understanding of my professional practice and therefore improve the quality of the services I deliver. My approach to research could therefore be described as 'pragmatic'. I wanted to examine if, and how, the ANPs were an effective way for EPs to work with teachers. I wanted to explore outcomes of the ANPs. I was interested in whether SENCOs had positive experiences of the ANPs and whether the ANPs could be improved.

This research project involved looking into the problems of EPS delivery whilst being immersed within an EPS. My observations, and information provided by members of the EPS, suggest that every ANP group and meeting differed. Furthermore, I was not just evaluating what happened during the ANP meetings, but the process of change

that SENCOs experienced. This was 'real world research' (Robson, 2011). Its focus was not to develop and extend academic discipline, but to investigate and understand the issues involved with changing EPS delivery and the impact change had upon service users.

This research is underpinned by a critical realist view of epistemology and ontology, influenced by the writings of Roy Bhaskar (1978). This viewpoint accepts that whilst there is a reality independent of humans, social practices and language mediate our understandings of that reality. Reality informs the language we use to describe what exists, and at the same time individuals' capacities to act within and think about reality are constrained by physical and discursive forces. A critical realist viewpoint implies that there are multiple and changing perspectives of reality; our understandings and explanations of the social world are 'theories,' rather than incontrovertible 'truths'.

As this research is underpinned by a critical realist epistemology and ontology, it does not claim to report 'facts', but instead aims to provide perspectives of the ANPs. I have attempted to highlight similarities and differences within the accounts of those involved in the ANP pilots and within wider research relating to group consultation.

I adopted a realistic evaluation framework (Pawson and Tilley, 1997) as my methodological approach. A realistic evaluation attempts to present explanations about how a 'programme' (in this case the ANPs) works. These explanations are historically, geographically and culturally located 'theories' about the ANPs. To develop these theories I analysed interview accounts provided by EPs and SENCOs

involved in the ANPs. The research findings only claim to be partial or incomplete understandings about how the ANPs work. I believe they are a good starting place for myself and other members of my EPS to consider how we may improve the ANPs. The assumptions and ideas underpinning realistic evaluation will be presented in the methodology chapter, and details regarding the methods chosen to collect and analyse data in the procedures chapter.

This thesis was written with members of my EPS as well as other EP practitioners and researchers in mind. I hope to provide information that might be useful to those who are thinking of setting up, or researching, a similar model of service delivery within their own EPS. I have grounded the writing within existing bodies of knowledge relating to group consultation. In the literature review I will provide description of other researchers' findings about group consultation, and the findings and discussion section will link others' findings to my own. The purpose of this is to provide real-world practical theory that will develop the reader's understandings of group consultation. I hope to have produced a piece of writing that other practitioners might find of interest and which contains theory they may find transferrable to their own situation.

In this introductory chapter, in order to increase the accessibility of the thesis, I will outline the historical context within which the ANPs were trialled. I will explain my role within the EPS and describe the existing model of EPS delivery. I will also explain how the ANPs operated.

## **1.2 Trainee Educational Psychologist (TEP)**

As part of my doctoral training, I was placed for two years within the EPS during the academic years 2012-13 and 2013-14. Several of my allocated schools in 2012-13 had agreed to take part in ANP pilots. During the academic year 2012-13, I facilitated two ANPs, working jointly with a more experienced EP in each case. In September 2012 I met with the Principal Educational Psychologist (PEP) to discuss the topic for my doctoral research. Upon discussion, it appeared that the ANPs would be a worthy candidate for a piece of evaluative research. The PEP had decided to trial the use of ANPs as, in her words, she believed it could be a 'better way of working'. 30 schools had volunteered to participate in the pilots. The PEP felt that my research could help clarify whether the ANPs were an effective way of working with SENCos. The PEP hoped that the pilot ANPs would continue and new ANPs would form, in future years, if the pilots proved successful.

A research timeline can be found in appendix one. I completed a literature review during September to December 2012, which helped provide me with a deeper understanding of the psychological theory and practical knowledge that had influenced the ANPs. I designed the evaluation and submitted my research proposal for ethical approval in March 2013. I carried out data collection from May to July 2013.

### **1.3 The role of the EP**

One purpose of this chapter is to explain the context into which the ANPs were introduced. An important aspect of this context is the role of the EP. In this section I will attempt to outline the services EPs have historically provided. This should help outline the type of services the EPS hoped to deliver during ANP trials.

#### **1.3.1 The history and development of the EP role**

Love (2009) recalls that in the 1950s the main role of the EP was to administer and present the findings of IQ tests to assist decisions regarding school placement. In the 1960s, EPs continued to test children, however the purpose of testing widened. Results were also used to inform the administration of intervention programmes. The EP role widened further in the 1970s from 'testing' to 'assessment'. EPs 'summarised educational, medical and psychological reports, and recommended a course of action to be taken.' (Love, 2009, p.6). The EP role therefore shifted over time from the categorisation of children to identifying how educational provision could meet a child's needs.

The assessment role of the EP was emphasised in the 1981 Education Act when EP advice became a formal requirement in the statutory assessment process. Love (2009) describes the EP role as expanding through the 1980s to encompass curriculum development and supportive work with teachers and parents. Fallon *et al.* (2010)

report that the due to legislation and LA statutory assessment processes, in the 1990s psychological assessment predominated in many EPs' work. Statutory assessment processes restricted the expansion of the EP role and limited EP involvement in activities such as intervention and research. Sharp *et al.* (2000) report that some EPs became demoralised with the 'constraining culture' caused by the 'treadmill of report writing and resource gate-keeping' (p. 99). In response to this, through the 2000s, new modes of service delivery, such as consultation (discussed in the literature review) were implemented within many EPSs and this served to widen the range of EP activities. Fallon *et al.* provide a current explanation of what EPs do:

*'EPs are fundamentally scientist-practitioners who utilise, for the benefit of children and young people, psychological skills, knowledge and understanding through the functions of consultation, assessment, intervention, research and training, at organisational, group or individual level across educational, community and care settings, with a variety of role partners.'* (p.4)

Cameron (2006) argues that EPs, within the functions described above, provide five distinctive contributions:

- applying a psychological perspective to problems;
- uncovering mediating variables that may help to explain events;
- using models to disentangle problem dimensions;
- providing recommendations influenced by research and theory;
- promoting 'big ideas' that can support clients to make positive changes.

The literature would therefore seem to suggest that the UK EP role developed considerably from the 1950s to the present day and now encompasses a variety of activities and is not limited to the assessment of individual children.

### **1.3.2 Time allocation**

Within my placement EPS, the activities of EPs have been delivered via a time allocation model since the early 2000s. Schools still operating within this model, in the academic year 2012-13, were allocated a link EP with a specified number of 'sessions' (half days) per year to carry out work within the school. The number of sessions a school received was calculated according to the level of socio-economic deprivation within the school's locality and number of pupils on role. The work an EP carried out within this time was varied and included consultations, assessments, attending meetings, administration, phone calls, writing reports and home visits. (All of these activities, for the purpose of clarity, are understood to encompass 'casework'.) Whole school or group training needs could also occur as part of the time allocation. The EP met regularly, usually once per term, with the school's SENCo to negotiate and plan EP work within the time available. These meetings were called 'planning meetings.' It was the SENCo's responsibility to prioritise individual children to discuss with the EP at the planning meeting and negotiate EP involvement.

Since the economic downturn in 2008, there has been a reduction in the LA budget, which has impacted upon levels of staffing within my placement EPS. There are fewer EPs however the number of schools and children has not reduced. This meant that, in

the 2012-13 academic year, EPs had specified 'core' (priority) casework: statutory assessment and advice writing; assessment and report writing for annual reviews where there were significant concerns or expected changes in provision; and work with children who were looked after or at risk of permanent exclusion. Casework with children at school action plus, whole-school development work and training could only occur in schools where allocated time had not been taken up by 'core' activities. These developments meant that some EPs felt that their role had become increasingly limited and restricted, they were unable to carry out training, early intervention or research, due to time constraints.

Imich (1999) attributes many benefits to the time-allocation system: accountability to stakeholders, clarification of the EP role, definition and protection of EP time available for specific schools, a means for monitoring and evaluation of EP work, a feeling of fairness for recipients of the EPS, protection for EPs from excessive demands and criticism and a consistency of service delivery across an LA. Imich notes, however, that there may be some disadvantages to the time allocation system, for example, the system may not be flexible enough to respond to unexpected events. Also, it is difficult to keep precise and accurate accounts of how all EP time has been used and some EPs may find that time allocation limits their professional autonomy.

Lindsay (1995) reported that when Sheffield EPS implemented a time allocation model in 1993, they sent out information to each school about the amount of EP time they would receive as well the time every other school would receive. Following this, Sheffield EPS distributed an annual survey to Head Teachers, asking about their level of



satisfaction with psychological services. One of the questions related to the quantity of service delivery and Head Teachers rated their satisfaction on a scale of one to five. In 1993, a greater percentage of Head Teachers (72%) reported that they were satisfied (rated 3 or above) with the amount of time they had received from the EPS. In the previous year, Lindsey reports that only 54% reported satisfaction. In the 1993 survey, 28 per cent of Head Teachers, however, still did not feel they had received enough EP time. Lindsay suggests that whichever system is used to share EP time between schools, there may still be some school staff who feel they have not received enough. Although Lindsay's findings only relate to Sheffield EPS, and therefore may not represent how the time-allocation was received when implemented in other EPSs, they do suggest that a greater number of school staff are satisfied with the amount of EP time they receive when this is made clear and transparent.

### **1.3.3 Recent changes**

My placement EPS also became 'traded' in 2012-13 meaning that some schools bought in additional EP time if they felt they required more than their time allocation. It has been predicted by the PEP that the level of funding to the EPS from the LA will continue to decrease over the coming years as the target for traded services increases.

In 2012-13, the PEP was aware that the government were planning to release a draft Special Educational Needs Code of Practice (SENCoP) to replace previous versions of the SENCoP. The draft SENCoP (2013) outlines plans to replace statements with 0 to 25 education, health and care plans (EHC plans) in September 2014. This created some

feelings of uncertainty regarding the future of the EPS. One of our core functions was statutory assessment - what would our function be relating to the new EHC plans?

As a reaction to uncertainty regarding the future of the EPS (due to changes in legislation, high workload and a move towards traded services) the PEP decided to trial a new model of service delivery, the ANPs. The ANPs were trialled in the academic year 2012-13 and involved 30 schools. The PEP hoped that the ANPs would offer a preferable way of working to the time allocation model. In section 1.4, I will describe how the ANPs work. The current research involved interviewing EPs and SENCOs who had participated in ANPs in the 2012-13 academic year.

#### **1.3.4 The child as client**

Baxter and Frederickson (2005) discuss an on-going debate within educational psychology: who is the EP client? Is it school staff, or children? They suggest a resolution to this issue. Baxter and Frederickson describe EPs as being in the 'service business' (p. 95). A service business provides services such as trouble-shooting, advice or support, rather than products. A service business enables the recipient of its services (e.g. schools) to meet the needs of a shared client (e.g. children). Children are the shared client for both schools and EPs but teachers are often the direct recipient of the EPS. Baxter and Frederickson advise that in order to meet children's needs, EPs should clearly ask school staff 'what they are trying to achieve for the children and identifying/negotiating ways in which we can use our particular skills to contribute to and enhance these achievements' (p.96). Consultation allows EPs to ask these

questions, and the ANPs were therefore a method through which my EPS hoped to use consultation to deliver a child-focussed service.

#### **1.4 The Additional Needs Partnerships (ANPs)**

ANPs were formed from 'clusters' of schools - a mixture of Junior (Key Stage two), Infant (Key Stage one), Primary (Key Stage one and two) or Middle (Upper Key Stage two and lower Key Stage three) Schools located within close geographical proximity. Often the schools within one ANP were all 'feeders' to the same local High School. ANPs were of differing sizes ranging from three to ten schools (please see table 1.1 below).

I interviewed SENCos who had participated in ANPs that operated during the 2012/2013 academic year. Several ANPs ran throughout the year (from September), however two ANPs commenced in January 2013. ATown had also held two ANP meetings in May and July 2012. Each ANP was facilitated by two EPs who were the link EPs to schools within that ANP. EP facilitators were able to provide me with the information presented in Table 1.1 below. There was considerable variation between ANPs in terms of numbers of SENCos, meetings and cases discussed at meetings. There were different EP facilitators for each ANP. Each meeting lasted one session, which is approximately three hours. I asked the EP facilitators about the number of cases they discussed at each meeting. They were able to give me an approximate number, as there were variations between meetings. There was not a specific amount of time assigned to the discussion of each case. The EP facilitator prioritised cases for

discussion based upon information provided prior to the meeting by the SENCos. This meant that some cases were discussed for longer than others. There were up to 11 cases discussed per session, meaning that some cases were only discussed for five minutes whereas other cases could be discussed for up to half an hour.

<b>ANP group</b>	<b>Atown ANP</b>	<b>Btown ANP</b>	<b>Ctown ANP</b>	<b>Dtown ANP</b>	<b>Etown ANP</b>
Date of first meeting	October 2012	October 2012	October 2012	January 2013	January 2013
EP Facilitator	Me, EP1*	Me, EP2*	EP3, EP4	EP5, EP6	EP7, EP8
Dates of subsequent meetings in the academic year 2012/13	February 2013 April 2013 July 2013	November 2013 March 2013 April 2013 June 2013	November 2012 January 2013 February 2013 April 2013 June 2013	April 2013	February 2013 April 2013 May 2013
Number of schools	6	3	4	7	10
Number of SENCos interviewed in June/July 2013	4	2	1	1	3
Approximate number of cases discussed per meeting	5 to 6	6 to 11	4 to 6	3 to 4	5 to 10

Table 1.1: Composition of the different ANPs. \*EPs that were interviewed in phase one of the research.

The idea for the ANPs came from a group consultation model of service delivery that was operating within Oldshire EPS. (The PEP at Oldshire EPS had previously worked within my placement EPS and the two PEPs were still in regular communication.)

SENCOs in Oldshire had to complete preparatory paperwork outlining the case they wished to bring for discussion prior to group consultation meetings. They also had to gain consent from parents prior to the meeting and fill in an action plan following the meeting. Oldshire had produced a summary sheet outlining the group consultation meeting format. The PEP had obtained a pack containing this paperwork from Oldshire, and edited it, replacing the headings and logo with that of my placement LA. The paperwork was distributed to EP facilitators once it had been decided that their schools would be participating in pilot ANPs. EP1 and EP2 also visited Oldshire in summer term 2012 to observe a group consultation meeting.

Prior to ANP initiation, the PEP had attended Head Teacher cluster events. Head Teachers within the LA usually meet, on a termly basis, with other Head Teachers from their geographical region. The PEP attended cluster events that included the Head Teachers from ATown, in Spring term 2012, and Btown and Ctown in June 2012. She attended cluster meetings which included the Head Teachers from DTown and ETown in October 2012. At these meetings she presented the concept of ANPs to the Head Teachers. At each meeting, several Head Teachers agreed to participate in a pilot. The pilot schools were closely located geographically.

Once a group of schools had agreed to participate in a pilot, the PEP arranged a meeting with the Head Teachers and SENCOs from the group to explain how the ANPs would work, give out paperwork and organise a date for the first ANP. The PEP reported that not all the Head Teachers and SENCOs attended this explanatory meeting. Some schools sent neither their Head Teacher nor SENCO to the meeting.

Once the meeting with the PEP had occurred and a date for the first meeting had been agreed, SENCOs began to meet, as a group with the EP facilitators, for ANP meetings. At initial and on-going ANP meetings the EP facilitators discussed the format of the meetings, and how the ANPs would work in terms of EP time allocation, with the SENCOs. The way the ANPs were explained once the ANPs commenced depended upon the EP facilitator. In my opinion, the EPs who facilitated the ANPs may have all held different understandings of the process themselves. I asked each one how they had gained an understanding of the ANPs and they explained that this had been through informal discussions with colleagues at the EPS base and by looking through the paperwork.

In my opinion, this was not a straightforward, technical piece of research working on 'clean abstract ideas' but one carried out in the 'swampy lowland' (McNiff and Whitehead, 2001, p.95). Each ANP was different, in terms of composition, and also in terms of the amount of explanation SENCOs had received, the way the meetings were run and EP facilitation style. I was therefore not evaluating a clearly defined phenomenon, but a new mode of service delivery that was evolving and in the very early stages of development. This influenced my methodological choices. It was clear that a comparative piece of research, for example comparing outcomes within ANP schools to outcomes within time-allocation schools would not be appropriate, as the ANPs were not a consistent entity. I decided that a research methodology that would allow me to identify similarities and differences between the experiences of those who had participated in the ANPs would be more suitable to the research context.

I attended the ATown and BTown ANP meetings in October 2012. I had misgivings about the meetings (please see appendix 33 for details of my reflections upon the ANPs 2012-13). At this point I had begun my literature review and had read several articles describing the format of group consultation meetings (for example Bozic & Carter, 2002; Stinger *et al.* 1992). I had also read the meeting format produced by Oldshire EPS. The ANPs I had attended resembled neither. There seemed to be a lack of clarity regarding the meeting format and how the EP time would be used for casework within the ANP schools. EP1 and EP2 also appeared to have already agreed 'core' work within some of the schools prior to the ANP meeting.

I discussed my reservations about the ATown meeting with EP1, and she agreed that there seemed to be a lack of clarity regarding the ANP mode of service delivery. We arranged to meet with EP2 and the PEP to help clarify issues such as anonymity at the meetings, how core work would be agreed and the meeting format. We met in October 2012, November 2012, December 2012 and January 2013 and clarified many details about the ANPs (please see appendix 33). We produced a revised version of the ANP paperwork (appendix two) which was distributed to all the EP facilitators in February 2013. In phase one of the research I decided to interview EP1, EP2 and the PEP as they had been involved, with myself, in designing and refining the ANPs.

During our October 2012-January 2013 meetings we had confirmed several details. All ANPs were to follow similar format (see appendix two, pages six to ten). Prior to each meeting, SENCos should plan which children they would bring to discuss (see appendix

two, pages 12 to 14, for an example of the preparatory paperwork). Meetings would then involve group discussion of each case. If the group felt that an EP should become involved in working on a case, this could be one outcome of the group discussion. Other outcomes included novel strategies the SENCo might try or referrals to other professional agencies. Following the meeting SENCos were expected to draw up an action plan and feedback to parents (this was not monitored by the EPS). EP time was 'pooled' between schools. EP work still occurred within the ANP schools as it had done under the time allocation model. The difference was that EP work was allocated at the ANP meetings and EP time was shared between schools. 'Core' work was prioritised (as with the time allocation model), followed by cases perceived by the group as having the highest level of need. Sometimes ANP meetings would involve discussion of 'any other business' brought by group members or issue-focussed consultation about specific SEN issues. Meetings would take place once per half term or once per term. Two EPs would be present at each meeting. Meetings would occur on school premises. The meeting format is described as 'solution-focused group consultation'. The theoretical underpinnings of this approach to consultation will be described in the literature review.

It was also agreed that in September 2013, EPs would meet with each SENCo to arrange 'core' work that did not require discussion at an ANP meeting, for example priority annual reviews. This had not occurred in September 2012, as this aspect of the model had not been clarified. Some EPs therefore arranged casework informally with SENCos outside of the ANP meetings during the academic year 2012 - 13. In my



opinion, some of the SENCOs may have perceived this as unfair as the way EP time was being used across their ANP was not transparent.

## **1.5 Summary**

This introductory chapter has described the context within which the ANPs operated. It has also provided information upon the practical workings of the ANPs and my role as a researcher and Trainee Educational Psychologist (TEP). The next chapter, the literature review, will discuss theoretical and practical literature relating to group consultation in order to ground the ANPs within a theoretical context.



## **2      Literature Review**

### **2.1    Introduction**

The purpose of this literature review is to ground the thesis within existing understandings of group consultation. I will provide description of other researchers' claims relating to group consultation. I will report their research findings as well as gaps I perceive in the information they have been able to provide. The purpose of this is to provide a theoretical context that will develop the reader's understandings of group consultation. This will provide the reader with an informed position from which they are able to view and contextualise the 'theory' I present in the findings and discussion chapter.

In order to provide a theoretical context to my research, I will attempt to address several issues: how is consultation conceptualised and what are the assumptions underpinning this approach? How has the use of consultation been evaluated within EP practice? How has consultation been applied to work with groups and how has this work been evaluated? What factors are reported to impact upon the functioning of consultation groups? How have solution-focused approaches been applied and evaluated within educational settings? Finally, I will provide a conclusion and introduce the research questions.

## **2.2 Consultation**

Consultation is an approach to working with clients that many EPSs, including the EPS within which I am placed, have adopted. The model of service delivery under examination (ANPs) is a novel approach to consultation being trialled by the EPS. It is therefore relevant, as part of this literature review, to explain the theoretical assumptions underpinning consultation and to describe how consultation can be conceptualised and practised. I will now discuss several papers providing practice guidance written during the period when consultation was gaining credence as a mode of service delivery.

Turner *et al.* (1996) describe consultation as conversations which help the consultee (an individual, group or organisation who approaches an EP with a work related problem) to develop thinking around the problem and start to 'see' the problem differently. An assumption is made that this reframing of the problem will enable the consultee to think and behave differently. Wagner (2000), an influential writer and trainer within the field of consultation, describes consultation as a 'voluntary, collaborative, non-supervisory approach, established to aid the functioning of a system and its inter-related systems' (p. 11). Wagner conceptualises consultation as a way of working, during which problems are discussed, and through collaboration the EP and consultee explore the situation, assess, intervene and review progress. Consultation can be used to make a difference at the level of the individual child, the group or class or the organisational/whole-school level. These approaches to consultation contribute to a conceptualisation of consultation central to the current research: Consultation

involves conversations that explore problems and the perceptions, beliefs, ideas and patterns of interactions within the system (e.g. class, school, education system) that contribute to the understanding of the problem. Consultation additionally allows the solutions and differences that members of the system could make to be explored.

### **2.2.1 The theoretical assumptions underpinning consultation**

Macready (1997) explains how the assumptions of social constructionism provide validation for the use of consultation. Macready describes social constructionism as an alternative to the viewpoint that there is an objective reality (about the social world and other people) that can be identified and discovered by an independent observer. Instead a social constructionist stance is that there are 'meanings' (about ourselves in the social world) which are continually emerging through interaction and communication. Macready explains 'meanings' as the stories we build up and tell ourselves and argues that meanings provide a framework through which we interpret our experiences. Meanings influence our actions; what we say and do. Conversations therefore shape individuals' ideas and beliefs and influence their subsequent conversations and actions.

A social constructionist contention would be that individuals are continually engaged in a process of trying to generate, communicate and interpret meanings and therefore hold 'working definitions' of identities and relationships rather than incontrovertible social truths (Macready, 1997). Through interactions and the language professionals use, meanings can be built, maintained or challenged. Professional conversations can

therefore either serve to maintain status quo or bring about change. This provides justification for consultation: a conversation about a problem, through the exploration of different perspectives, explanations, influences, and language, impacts upon subsequent actions and understandings relating to the problem. It is the role of the EP, during consultation, to guide talk about a problem in a way that constructs meanings which enable change rather than perpetuating difficulty.

Turner *et al.* (1996) cite Schein's model of process consultation as influential in their conceptualisation of consultation. This model rests upon the underlying assumption that only the consultee knows what kind of action will work in dealing with a problem and self-diagnosis and coping are the most important things to learn from consultation. A further assumption is that the EP is not an expert regarding the problem and presenting problems are a construct of the problem-owner rather than 'objective' truths. The purpose of consultation is to work with the consultee to uncover thinking around the problem and enable decisions which will bring about change. Turner *et al.* also cite solution-focused brief therapy (discussed in further detail later in this review) as influential in their development of consultation.

Three additional theoretical models are cited by Wagner (2000) as supporting EP thinking during consultations: 1) Hargreave's symbolic interactionism which posits that meanings are negotiated and conveyed through social interaction, particularly the meaning a person constructs of themselves and others. Understandings of children and their behaviour are therefore shaped by the cultural and social situation. Conversations which uncover how the cultural and social climate of the organisation is

impacting upon the individual can present possibilities for change. 2) Burnham's systems thinking from the family therapy field, which views problems as occurring between groups and communities of people, rather than within individuals. Individuals are located within systems (e.g. classes, schools, family, professional groups) and changes in the system affect everybody within the system. This presents greater opportunities for positive change. 3) Ravenette's Personal Construct Psychology (PCP), the study of how individuals construct their own understanding of themselves and situations. EPs contemplate how others are construing a situation during consultation and consider how they can elicit these constructs.

### **2.2.2 Consultation - a new and better way?**

Turner *et al.* (1996) and Wagner (2000) provide justification for the implementation of consultation. Turner *et al.* report that, within their EPS, the traditional mode of service delivery had been 'technical consultation'. Technical consultation involved an 'expert' EP who generally interacted with consultees in a linear, step-by-step approach, undertaking psychometric testing and then reporting outcomes, giving advice and designing programmes. In Turner *et al.*'s opinion, members of their EPS felt technical consultation was not very effective in bringing about change for the child and advice given was often ignored or programmes not implemented. Wagner claimed this mode of working meant many EPs were experiencing low morale and dissatisfaction. In her opinion this type of work was leading to increased numbers of children with 'SEN' and rising costs in provision for them. Both authors present the introduction of

consultation as a positive change in EPs' working patterns that allowed EPs to engage in more problem-solving, advisory, training and preventative work with other professionals. Wagner claims that consultation provided a greater capacity for developing solutions rather than amplifying deviance and pathology. The EP's role shifted from an expert to a collaborative partner.

The articles, written during the time when consultation was gaining credence, by Turner *et al.* (1996) and Wagner (2000) present a downbeat description of the traditional 'technical consultant' EP role. This is however, only the authors' opinions of the situation at the time. The articles do not provide details of how judgements were made of the current state of affairs other than reporting the authors' own opinions, experiences and conversations. The authors' negative descriptions of the traditional mode of EPS delivery serves to justify the implementation of a new and better way: consultation. I am sure Wagner's argument appealed to many EPs' perceptions of how things could be better, however, it is possible that in the late 1990's the situation was not, in fact, as dismal as Turner *et al.* and Wagner suggest.

Wagner (2000) claims that 'consultation works' (p.17) because there had been a drop in requests for statutory assessment in her EPS, but no drop in requests for EP involvement, since the service had moved to a consultation model. She does not provide figures on this, and it could be that the nature of school requests changed for a different reason, perhaps because school staff knew the EPS had adopted consultation. Turner *et al.* (1996) conclude that consultation increased their capacity to work collaboratively with service-users and provided opportunities for EPs to clearly



define their role. They do not, however, provide the opinions of service-users. It could be, therefore, that consultees held different opinions about consultation to those of the authors. Without research providing backing to claims that consultation is a preferable mode of working, this argument can only be viewed as tentative. Not all EPs agree that consultation is the most desirable mode of service delivery, for example Boyle and Lauchlan (2009) argue that individual work and intervention with children provide opportunities for EPs to apply psychological theory and research and improve the well-being of children in schools. They warn that the EP profession could become 'obsolete' if there continues to be a move away from individual work and intervention towards consultative approaches. In order to address this issue, I will now review several more recent papers which have attempted to evaluate the use of consultation within EP practice.

### **2.2.3 What does consultation look like in practice?**

Turner *et al.* (1996) and Wagner (2000) discuss a move towards a mode of service delivery which championed consultation as the primary means of engaging with service users. Boyle and Lauchlan (2009) present consultation as the opposite to individual work and intervention with children. In practice, within my own EPS, 'consultation' is usually not a discrete activity. Consultation with children, teachers or parents is just one of a range of activities EPs may undertake as part of their 'casework'.

Kennedy *et al.* (2008) analysed how 17 EPs used consultation in practice. Transcriptions of initial consultations with teachers revealed that most conversations went through problem-solving stages (problem identification, problem analysis, plan implementation) but problem-identification was the most frequently coded aspect of the consultation conversations. Clear-cut intervention plans were not always assembled and few EPs checked whether strategies discussed to intervene with the 'problem' were feasible in terms of teachers' sense of self-efficacy, perception of the problem, classroom environment and other professional concerns. Kennedy *et al.*'s findings suggest that problem-solving seems to be an important aspect of consultation conversations. There are, however, limitations to the findings. Data collection techniques omitted non-verbal aspects of the consultation conversations, for example body language, which may have influenced the outcomes of consultation. Kennedy *et al.* only recorded initial consultations, meaning that this was the first time the EP had met with the teacher to discuss a specific issue. If recordings had been made of follow-up consultations, there may have been greater discussion of intervention plans and the extent to which the teacher had been able to make changes.

Nolan and Moreland (2014) observed, recorded and analysed seven consultations that occurred between EPs, teachers and parents. They also interviewed all those who had participated in the consultations. The purpose of their research was to find out more about what occurred during the process of consultation in order to explore 'how change might be facilitated' (p.3). Discourse analysis of the data occurred, and the discursive strategies or 'ways of intervening' (p.6) used by EPs when conducting consultations were identified. Nolan and Moreland reported that the language used

by EPs promoted collaboration, demonstrated empathy, questioned, wondered, challenged, focused, re-focused, summarised, reformulated, suggested, explained, discussed outcomes and offered follow-up. The authors claim that their findings suggests that EPs use discursive strategies 'to foster collaboration, joint problem-solving and promote learning' (p. 12) during consultation.

Nolan and Moreland's (2014) research focussed upon 'consultee-centred consultation'. They describe this type of consultation as supporting the consultee to develop new ways of conceptualising the 'problem' to gain a broader view of the issue and restore or improve professional relationships. In my opinion, the discursive strategies observed are likely to have been used by EPs in order to achieve the aims of consultee-centred consultation. The findings are useful as they provide insight regarding the type of discursive strategies EPs use when assisting consultees to develop their conceptualisations of problems. The findings, however, do not tell us whether EPs use similar or differing discursive strategies during other types of consultation, for example solution-focused consultation. Perhaps EPs choose (consciously or not) their discursive strategies depending upon the purpose they ascribe to a consultation session.

Farouk (1999) surveyed 120 EPs across England and Wales. EPs responded to open questions asking them to recall the practical details of, and their opinions about, consultations they had held with teachers. A majority of EPs reported that teachers and EPs would usually agree upon strategies during consultation but that teachers would often follow these only partially. EPs reported that suggestions should be realistic and practical and often required follow-up work. Culture of the school, time,

rapport, level of collaboration, EP's level of empathy, teacher stress and involvement of parents were reported as factors EPs believed could influence the uptake of strategies agreed during consultation. These findings are interesting as they suggest that context is constraining upon consultees' behaviour following consultation. It would have been interesting if Farouk had surveyed the consultees themselves to gain their perspectives regarding factors that had constrained or enabled them to follow-up the strategies agreed during consultation.

Timmins *et al.* (2006) carried out structured interviews of 19 teachers who had received consultation. Their thematic analysis of teachers' responses suggested that, on the whole, teachers valued consultation as a means of accessing their EPS; however there appeared to be a lack of understanding amongst teachers of the underlying principles of consultation, particularly in those who had not had the model explained to them prior to the consultation. Timmins *et al.* (2006) advise that it is important to explain the practical aspects as well as the purposes of consultation to consultees at the outset of a consultation. Although Timmins *et al.*'s findings suggest that teachers valued consultation, participants were interviewed by members of the EPS who had delivered consultation. As there was very limited description of how Timmins *et al.* analysed the interview data it is unclear to what extent their own interpretations, position within the research and experiences contributed to the findings. The structured interviews format may also have limited what teachers felt they were able to say. It would also have been useful for the researchers to have explored what it was about consultation that teachers had valued.

Munro (2000) describes the introduction of consultation within her EPS and reports this was evaluated through '360 appraisal' (p. 57). She reports that feedback regarding consultation was largely favourable and that EPs appreciated the increased focus upon systemic rather than individual work. Dickinson (2000) reports a decrease in statutory assessment work since the introduction of consultation within his EPS and an increased level of development work. He reports this had improved EP morale and claims this is evidence that consultation 'works' (p.19). Munro (2000) and Dickinson (2000) do not provide details of their evaluations further than these descriptions. Their conclusions do not appear to take into account the opinions of service-users.

Gillies (2000) discusses 'consultation workshops': a series of training events held by her EPS for other professionals. The workshops trained participants on the use of consultation within their own practice. Gillies (2000) reports positive anecdotal comments from the training days, regarding participants' feelings towards using consultation. Participants (52) also completed and returned a postal questionnaire reporting positive benefits of the use of consultation within their own practice. Gillies (2000) concludes that adopting consultation provides many benefits to an EPS including: clarification of the EP's role, increased joint-working and time spent in schools and enhanced rating of the EPS by service users. Gillies (2000) findings, however, do not fully support her conclusions. Her findings only contain the perspectives of those who had received training about and then implemented consultation within their own practice, and therefore are likely to have had a professional investment in consultation. It does not contain the opinions of those on the receiving end of consultations. Instead her findings appear to suggest that

professionals who attended training on consultation had a greater understanding of consultation and valued using consultation within their own practice.

#### **2.2.4 Consultation - is it effective?**

Taken together, findings in the above papers appear to suggest consultation involves listening, collaboration, identification and exploration of problems and discussion of strategies. There is little information, however, to support the conclusion that consultation results in a change in practice for the teachers involved. Kennedy *et al.* (2008) and Farouk (1999) appear to suggest that context could be constraining upon the outcomes of consultation. Findings appear to suggest that teachers and EPs value consultation however this conclusion is based upon small-scale research and EP opinions, with the conclusions largely being based upon the reports of those implementing consultation rather than those receiving consultation.

In Kennedy *et al.* 2008's opinion, there are still aspects of consultation that require further research: does consultation make a difference for children, young people and their families? How effective is consultation in terms of enabling teachers to implement strategies and suggestions - do they fit with school culture, classroom environment and consultee self-efficacy? Are training needs met and treatment integrity considered during consultation? There also appears to be a lack of theory around how consultees' thinking and practice are affected by consultation. It appears

that further research investigating the process and outcomes of consultation is required in order to gain further insight into the efficacy of the process.

## **2.3 Group consultation**

Until this point, the literature under review has related to one-on-one consultations, yet the phenomenon under research involves consultation with groups of teachers. It is therefore necessary to review how consultation has been conceptualised, utilized and evaluated with groups of professionals; a type of consultation I will refer to as 'group consultation'.

### **2.3.1 A problem-solving approach to group consultation**

Several EP practitioners (e.g. Stringer *et al.*, 1992, Bozic & Carter, 2002) have implemented and evaluated the use of a group consultation model influenced by the work of Gerda Hanko. An influential trainer and writer, Hanko (1999) developed an approach to group consultation: 'Collaborative Problem-Solving'. Hanko cites Caplan's medical health consultation model, which has roots in psychodynamics, as influential in the development of her work. 'Collaborative problem-solving' involves groups of teachers, facilitated by an EP, discussing a case presented by a member of the group. The sessions follow a problem-solving structure: case presentation, gathering of additional information, then exploration of the issue aimed at finding new strategies and approaches. The ANPs follow a similar problem-solving format: presentation of

the problem situation, questioning to clarify the situation, questions aimed at exploring the consultee's desired situation and brainstorming of strategies and approaches (see appendix two, pages seven to ten, for details of the meeting format).

Hanko (1999) claims that collaborative problem-solving allows joint exploration of problems through the pooled expertise of several teachers, uncovering systemic and interpersonal factors that may be influencing a child's behaviour. It allows the teacher bringing the problem to take a 'fresh look' and gain increased understanding of the situation. Hanko claims that group consultation helps to restore 'objectivity' and examines how personal feelings may have intruded upon professional practice. The EP's role during meetings is as a facilitator, guiding the process and modelling questions and language that develop a deeper understanding of the whole situation. Hanko claims it is the change in awareness and exploration of the issue that is helpful to the teacher. Hanko claims that collaborative problem-solving is effective through the description of several case-studies involving group consultation and the changes, in her view positive, that occurred for the children involved.

Stringer *et al.* (1992) report an evaluation of the use of group consultation, based upon training and support they received from Hanko within their EPS. As well as facilitating group consultation, Stringer *et al.* also provided training courses to allow schools to set up their own consultation groups, using members of their staff as facilitators. In my opinion, Stringer *et al.* invested a large amount of professional time in setting up consultation groups within schools. Their article contains lots of description of the groups and reporting of the researcher's conversations about, and experiences of,



facilitating and setting up consultation groups. The authors could be presenting group consultation in a positive light due to the influence of their own experiences and involvement. Stringer *et al.* evaluated the use of group consultation through a questionnaire (61 respondents) that was administered nine months after schools had implemented group consultation. Several advantages of group consultation were reported: teachers valued the group and valued being able to discuss problems, sessions provided an opportunity to meet with colleagues, reflect, support, plan and reduced isolation. Disadvantages were also reported: there were time limitations to the meetings, school staff felt like the problem was not being dealt with immediately and sometimes there was 'suspicion' from senior management. Although the authors administered questionnaires, they do not provide details of the questions or how data from the questionnaires was analysed to pick out themes. The authors have reported 'main points' with illuminating quotes, but without knowing how they went about this and how much of the interpretation was influenced by the authors' own understandings, the findings should be seen as reflecting the authors' perspectives of group consultation.

Bozic and Carter (2002) administered Likert-scale questionnaires to teachers (26) who had been members of four school-based consultation groups following the Hanko (1999) problem-solving structure. Each group had met on four, five or six occasions. Overall responses indicated that teachers agreed that: the groups were a good use of their time; allowed them to think more deeply about the way they worked with individual children in their classes; raised awareness of strategies that could be used in the classroom; and had tried something new as a result of the group. Half of

respondents indicated the groups had made them feel more confident, less stressed and that they had discussed the group with other professionals at school. Qualitative analysis of an open question at the end of the questionnaire suggested the groups reduced feelings of isolation and made teachers feel reassured. These findings suggest that teachers value consultation; however the respondents were teachers who had volunteered to take part in the groups. This may have meant that they already viewed the groups in a positive light, prior to participation. On the Likert-scale questions, participants had to indicate their level of agreement with statements posed by the researchers, for example 'to what extent do you agree that the group has been a good use of your time?' Did participants actually think that the groups had been a good use of their time, or would they have shown an agreement with any positive outcome on the questionnaire? The findings do not provide an analysis of the outcomes of group consultation, other than those posed to participants by researchers, or a detailed exploration of how or why teachers valued, or felt supported by, group consultation.

Farouk (2004) and Guishard (2000) report case studies of the implementation of group consultation within their own practice. Both authors applied Hanko's problem-solving structure to group consultation, but in addition they describe their model as influenced by 'process' consultation. Farouk (2004) claims this approach allows the consultant to 'attend to emotional and interpersonal factors that can interfere with or contaminate the effective functioning of a group' (p. 204). Farouk (2004) describes in detail her model of group consultation and reports her perceptions of the benefits, such as allowing teachers time and space to reflect on their relationships with pupils. Guishard (2000) asked teachers (n = 16) to provide a rating (on a six-point scale for two

questions) before and after they took part group consultation. Findings revealed that teachers felt they had a better understanding of children's needs and difficulties and felt more confident they could reach goals or targets with those children, after they had participated in three sessions of group consultation.

The research reported above provides insight into the perceived benefits that others have attributed to group consultation. The findings, however, only provide partial or incomplete perspectives. Hanko (1999) and Farouk (2004) each report positive experiences and outcomes of group consultation however they report their own opinions based upon their professional experiences and observations. Each author invested a large amount of professional time in implementing group consultation within their professional practice and this is, in my opinion, likely to have influenced their positive descriptions of group consultation. Stringer *et al.* (1992) administered questionnaires to participants, but their article does not provide details of how data from the questionnaires was analysed, the authors merely reported 'main points' with illuminating quotes. It is therefore a possibility that interpretation of the findings was influenced by Stringer *et al.*'s own experiences and perceptions. Guishard (2000) provides limited support to back her claim that group consultation brought about a change in teacher's thinking and confidence as the sample size was fairly small and teacher opinion was only collected as a response to two rating scale questionnaire items. Bozic and Carter's (2002) findings suggest that group consultation is valued by teachers and makes teachers feel supported. Participants were however volunteers who agreed with statements given on a Likert scale. Previous research into the collaborative problem-solving model of group consultation, therefore, appears to

provide only a limited insight into consultee perspectives. The research findings do not provide detailed exploration of how or why teachers valued, or felt supported by, group consultation.

## **2.3.2 Variations upon the problem-solving model**

### **2.3.2.1 Solution Circles (SCs)**

Brown and Henderson (2012) evaluated three SCs that took place with groups of teachers within a primary and a secondary school, facilitated by a TEP. Brown and Henderson describe SCs as stemming from Hanko's collaborative problem-solving; however SCs are a modified version of this approach. A SC involved a teacher presenting a case for a formalised discussion structured in four steps: 'problem description, brainstorming solutions, problem clarification and first steps' (p.180). Brown and Henderson ended the SC that occurred within the High School with what they describe as a 'round of words' (p. 181). They summarise that teachers thought the session was better than they had expected, the session had a shared focus, was positive, and was a good way of formalising discussion and consideration of problems.

Evaluation of two SCs that took place in the primary school occurred through several modes of data collection (SWOT analysis with teaching staff (n = 9), discussion with Head Teacher, questionnaire (n = 9)). Data was analysed qualitatively, and in summary, the findings indicated that primary school staff had found the SC enjoyable, thought-provoking, supportive, practical and reassuring. Staff reported that the SC

had provided a useful, formalised opportunity to talk and listen to one another, become aware of each other's difficulties, as well as encouraging team work, consideration and trialling of ideas, advice and solutions, and the opportunity to identify recurring problems within the school. On a scale of one to five teachers reported a mean score of 3.9 relating to how much it had impacted upon their practice.

Participants in Brown and Henderson's (2012) research had only participated in one or two SCs. It is questionable whether the SCs had happened enough for participants to have gained sufficient familiarity with the process. Evaluations took place immediately after SCs had occurred, so participants were not allowed time for reflection. There are limitations, therefore, to the claims that can be made from their findings.

### **2.3.2.2 Circles of Adults (CoA)**

Newton (1995) reports upon the use of CoA. This model is based upon Hanks's (1999) collaborative problem-solving, but also incorporates steps aimed at uncovering psychodynamic concepts and drawing up an action plan. Newton interviewed teachers who had participated in a CoA within a secondary school (number of interviewees not provided) to discuss children presenting with emotional and behavioural difficulties (EBD). Participants commented that the groups had been supportive, had helped them to develop new skills and understandings, and they felt more able to ask questions and reflect on situations where pupils presented with EBD as well as feeling more able to chair consultations relating to children with EBD. Wilson and Newton

(2006) comment that 'Circle of adults is a robust facilitation tool that has been thoroughly road tested by the authors in a range of educational settings and with a wide range of different professionals. We can confidently say, that properly facilitated, the process works' (p.6). Newton (1995) reports a small-scale case study, and facilitated the SC as well as interviewed participants. It may have been that Newton's own opinions and relationship with participants influenced the findings. Newton and Wilson (2006) provide their opinions about SC within a book sold by their consulting service 'Inclusive Solutions'. It may be that they present SCs in a particularly positive light in order to increase the profitability of their business. Although Wilson and Newton's writing provides further perspectives upon the benefits of group consultation, they provide only limited information regarding the perspectives of practitioners who participated in CoAs.

### **2.3.2.3 Group supervision**

Scaife (2001) describes supervision as:

'...what happens when people who work in helping professions make a formal arrangement to think with another or others about their work with a view to providing the best possible service to clients and enhancing their own personal and professional development. It thus includes what some authors have defined as "consultation"' (Scaife, 2001, p.4)

Research into group supervision is therefore relevant to the current research. Soni (2013) reports a realistic evaluation of group supervision, facilitated by an EP that was used by 12 family support workers (FSWs) in a children's centre. Soni interviewed all

12 FSWs after the group had been running for one year. Soni reports that interviewees reported many more positive outcomes than negative. Positive outcomes included learning from others, sharing experiences and problems, gaining ideas and strategies, gaining other's perspectives and views, reduced feelings of isolation, raised confidence, reassurance, development of team relationships and increased desire to listen to and help others in the group. Reported negative outcomes were sometimes individuals dominated the process, feeling exposed or judged by others and time costs. Soni (2013) provides information on the outcomes attributed to group consultation, however the context and nature of the model she evaluated does not directly map onto the ANPs.

Hawkins and Shohet (2012), practitioners experienced in the field of supervision, provide opinions on the advantages and disadvantages of group supervision. These are presented in table 2.1. The advantages and disadvantages of group supervision are based upon Hawkins and Shohet's (2012) practical experiences of using group supervision in the field, rather than active attempts to collect the views of participants in group supervision. Their practical knowledge is likely to be influenced by their values, experience and the context. Further investigation would be required to identify whether positive and negative outcomes relating to group supervision also apply to the ANPs.

Advantages of group supervision	Disadvantages of group supervision
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• time-efficient,</li> <li>• provides a supportive atmosphere where group members can share worries with peers, receive support from others and feel less alone,</li> <li>• Supervisees can learn from others' cases,</li> <li>• supervisees can learn about their own areas of weakness,</li> <li>• organisational learning can take place,</li> <li>• supervisees contribute to the process therefore supervision is not dominated by the supervisor,</li> <li>• the group can provide a wider range of life experience, more wisdom, insight and perspectives,</li> <li>• if the group context reflects supervisees work context, this provides a learning experience for supervisees.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• group supervision does not emulate individual case work,</li> <li>• there are group dynamics which have the potential to undermine the supervision process or become a pre-occupation of the group e.g. bombardment from the group can cause confusion, competition between group members, group members judge, or feel judged by one another, or 'group-think',</li> <li>• there is less time in a group for each person to receive supervision/discuss their cases,</li> <li>• greater time commitment from supervisees,</li> <li>• issues of confidentiality/boundaries - e.g. group members may know about others' work context, client group.</li> </ul>

Table 2.1: Hawkins and Shohet's (2012) opinions on the advantages and disadvantages of group supervision.

### 2.3.2.4 Solution-focused group consultation

Alexander and Sked (2010) carried out an evaluation of the use of a structured solution-focused format within multi-agency meetings. Telephone interviews, questionnaires and focus groups were administered to professionals, children and parents involved in the meetings. Findings revealed that respondents found the solution-focused approach useful for generating solutions, felt it provided structure to



meetings, and allowed discussion to be non-judgemental. It was reported, however, that action plans were not always followed through.

Alexander and Sked's (2010) evaluation suggests that the use of solution-focused approaches could be useful to group consultation, and provides a unique contribution to the understandings of group consultation as the researchers collected the views of children and parents. The context, however, differed to the ANPs as groups involved multi-agency professionals who all worked with and knew one particular child. Parents (who are not invited to ANPs) also attended the solution-focused consultations.

#### **2.3.2.5 Group consultation as a mode of EPS delivery**

Evans (2005) evaluated the use of group consultation as an obligatory mode of service delivery with groups of SENCOs. In Evan's opinion the group consultation approach made a significant impact on service delivery as several school action plus (SA+) cases were discussed at each meeting. At the end of every session (each SENCO participated in three sessions) SENCOs (n = 16) rated whether the session had: enabled them to draw up a plan of action, enabled them to benefit from the experience and skills of other colleagues and enabled them to contribute skills and experience to the concerns of colleagues. For the first two questions mean rating was high, and for the third slightly lower which Evans suggests as indicating that staff did value the process but perhaps did not feel as empowered as EPs had hoped.

Participants in Evan's (2005) study only answered three questions using a rating scale on a questionnaire. Participants agreed to differing extents that outcomes described by the researcher had occurred. This method of data collection did not allow exploration of participants' viewpoints or alternative outcomes. Evan's findings are relevant to the ANPs as the findings suggest that group consultation may be an effective mode of EPS service delivery however the structure and format of Evan's meetings was slightly different to the ANPs. The groups were smaller, containing only two or three SENCOs, and ground rules were explained clearly to the group at the beginning of each session.

### **2.3.3 Summary of the evaluations of group consultation**

In summary, the majority of evaluations above relate to models of group consultation which are based upon, or stem from Hanks's (1999) collaborative problem-solving. The reported research makes claims to the following positive outcomes for group consultees:

- deeper understandings and new perspectives (Brown & Henderson, 2012; Evans, 2005; Guishard, 2000; Hanks, 1999; Newton, 2005; Soni, 2013);
- raised awareness of novel strategies and resources (Bozic & Carter, 2002; Soni, 2013);
- feeling supported, reassured, more confident, less isolated and less stressed (Bozic & Carter, 2002; Brown & Henderson, 2012; Guishard, 2000; Soni, 2013; Stringer *et al.*, 1992);

- finding group consultation useful (Brown & Henderson, 2012; Stringer *et al.*, 1992);
- group consultation allows consultees to:
  - discuss and share problems (Bozic & Carter, 2002; Brown & Henderson, 2012, Soni, 2013; Hanco, 1999),
  - learn from others (Soni, 2013),
  - meet with colleagues (Stringer *et al.* 1992),
  - reflect (Farouk, 2004; Hanco, 1999; Stringer *et al.*, 1992),
  - plan (Alexander & Sked, 2010; Evans, 2005; Stringer *et al.*, 1992),
  - make a good use of their time (Bozic & Carter, 2002),
  - try something new (Bozic & Carter, 2002),
  - develop team work (Bozic & Carter, 2002; Brown & Henderson, 2012),
  - develop their ability to consult with, listen to, question and help others (Newton, 2005; Soni, 2013).

There are also several negative outcomes reported:

- action plans not always being followed through (Alexander & Sked, 2010; Farouk, 1999);
- feeling judged or exposed (Soni, 2013);
- not always addressing a problem immediately (Stringer *et al.* 1992);
- 'suspicion' from Head Teachers (Stringer *et al.* 1992);
- group dynamics having a negative impact upon the process (Hawkins and Shohet, 2012; Soni, 2013);
- group consultation having high time costs (Hawkins and Shohet, 2012; Stringer *et al.* 1992; Soni, 2013).

Taken together, the research suggests that EPs have found group consultation beneficial as an approach to supporting professionals working with children and also suggests several positive outcomes of group consultation. These findings, however, are based upon small-scale case-studies, the practitioner-researcher's opinions and observations or Likert or rating-scale questionnaire data, meaning that the perspectives of consultees have not always been explored fully. In Bennett and Monsen's (2011) opinion the majority of findings relating to Hanko's (1999) collaborative problem-solving do not consider group processes and the impact of school culture upon findings. There were differing models reported in the research meaning that researchers, facilitators and consultees are likely to have had differing experiences of group consultation in different pieces of research. There does not appear to have been research into the impact of group consultation upon teacher's practice or exploration of outcomes for children. Furthermore, the models of group consultation discussed above are not exactly the same as the ANP model, and occur in a variety of differing contexts.

The findings of other studies are useful, however, as drawn together they indicate some similarities of experience between those who have been involved in the different types of group consultation. I hope that this will have begun to support the reader to develop an understanding, or theory, regarding the benefits and disadvantages of group consultation.

### **2.3.4 Issue-focused group consultation**

An alternative approach to group consultation, developed and evaluated by an EPS in Jerusalem, Israel, is issue-focused consultation (Cohen & Osterweil, 1986). Cohen and Osterweil (1986) devised this approach as an alternative to collaborative problem-solving. From their professional experience, Cohen and Osterweil (1986) reported limitations to collaborative problem-solving: sometimes it caused anxiety and defensiveness in the consultee presenting the problem; other group members could act in a manner that was uninvolved or disruptive; or group members could present with low self-esteem, a lack of theoretical knowledge, limited communication and problem-solving skills. These factors all, in their opinion, served to undermine the process. As a result they formulated an alternative model: 'issue-focused' consultation. Issue-focused consultation centres upon an issue or topic that is relevant to a number of cases in different consultee's classrooms. Instead of questioning, discussing and devising strategies relating to a specific case, these stages of consultation occur in relation to a particular topic. The aim of this approach is to meet the professional needs of the group whilst reducing anxiety and defensiveness. This ran as a mode of service delivery, within their EPS, to pre-school teachers with the aim of being preventative and to develop teacher's skills.

Cohen and Osterweil (1986) report that new schools and teachers requested implementation of issue-focused consultation as initial groups gained a positive reputation. They also report groups were well-attended and participants were enthusiastic. In addition, teachers who had participated in groups took part in

structured interviews. Descriptive statistics of their responses indicated the majority of interviewees agreed that consultation groups increased their sense of group belonging, learning, understanding of children, problem-solving, coping ability, knowledge, experience, self-enrichment and growth. Participants were pre-selected by researchers in terms of their willingness and commitment. It could be that their positive responses during the structured interviews were influenced by their commitment to the process.

In a further piece of research, Osterweil and Plotnik (1989) conducted a randomised control trial with pre and post measures into the use of issue-focused consultation with adults who cared for pre-school children within a Kibbutz. Participants completed an attitude to work rating scale before and after participation in issue-focused consultation. An observer also noted specific work behaviours before and after participation. Findings revealed a positive change in attitude towards their work and an increase in specific work-related behaviours in participants. Osterweil and Putnik (1989) implemented issue-focused consultation in an intensive (once every two weeks) manner and context was very different to EP practice in the UK, therefore the findings cannot be assumed to indicate that issue-focused consultation will make such dramatic impact upon teachers within the current research. The research methods also limited the exploration of participants' experiences of issue-focussed consultation.

In some of the ANPs evaluated in this research, EPs held issue-focused consultations, as part of the ANP meeting. The findings of Cohen and Osterweil (1986) and Osterweil and Putnik (1989) suggest that issue-focused consultation is valued by teachers and

could impact upon their practice however the current research evaluates the use of issue-focussed consultation in a different context with less intensive implementation than in previous research.

## **2.4 Factors reported to impact upon group consultation**

I have so far reported upon the outcomes attributed to group consultation. As the ANPs are a novel approach to service delivery it is also relevant to consider contextual and practical factors that could impact upon the success of ANPs.

### **2.4.1 Collaborative problem-solving**

Stringer *et al.* (1992) (research introduced previously) reported several factors that appeared to facilitate group consultation: enthusiastic facilitators, support from Head Teachers, commitment from group members and a need for mutual support from group members due to perceived difficulties in their work.

### **2.4.2 Consultation as a mode of EPS delivery**

Dennis (2004) reports a grounded theory study evaluating the use of consultation within her EPS. Dennis (2004) identifies several factors that appear to have helped or hindered the development of consultative working. In particular the attitudes of school staff towards, and understandings of, inclusion, in terms of willingness to try

new approaches, implement early intervention and use additional adult support effectively, appeared to influence how consultation was embraced. There are limitations to Dennis' (2004) research: EPs linked to the SENCo's school rated the level they perceived the school to have embraced consultation. It was this rating that was used as a lens to interpret data and identify factors common (in interview data from 12 SENCos) to schools with higher or lower ratings. It is possible that EPs opinions about the schools were influenced by their relationship with the SENCo. It could be that a school rated low by an EP would not outwardly appear to embrace any type of EP intervention, not just consultation. The findings are relevant, however, as they suggest that school culture could impact upon SENCo engagement with the ANPs.

### **2.4.3 Teacher Support Teams (TSTs)**

TSTs are problem-solving 'teams' within schools. Their design also stems from Hanks' collaborative problem-solving. Teachers bring a concern relating to SEN to a small group of teachers (the team) to take part in a problem-solving discussion. Creese *et al.* (2000) trained staff in four High-Schools to set-up and run TSTs. EPs offered supervision but did not themselves take part in the TST meetings. Creese *et al.* report that TSTs had varying levels of success, within the different schools.

Creese *et al.* (2000) studied the impact of the TSTs 'through a combination of qualitative and quantitative data collection methods' (p.310) which they report as including background information, semi-structured interviews, questionnaires and field notes. They collected data before, during and after one year of implementation



and operation of TSTs. Data was analysed qualitatively to pick out themes using NUDIST software. Table 2.2 reports themes that emerged relating to contextual factors that appeared to promote effective working of the TSTs.

TSTs are slightly different to ANPs, as they occur within one school (and school culture appeared to affect functioning). TSTs are therefore not directly comparable to ANPs; however research into TSTs does provide suggestions of factors that could affect the functioning of groups of teachers that meet to discuss SEN issues.

Etscheidt and Knesting (2007) report a qualitative case study of pre-referral teams (a type of TST). They studied one team, based within an elementary school in the USA that had been described by the school district as 'exemplary'. Etscheidt and Knesting conducted semi-structured interviews and a focus group with members of the team, conducted a micro ethnographic observation of a meeting and also interviewed teachers who had referred to the team. They analysed data using interpretive content analysis to attempt to identify the interpersonal dynamics that seemed to promote effective working of the team. The findings suggest factors that could positively influence the functioning of TSTs and are tabulated in table 2.2 below.

The authors used several data collection methods at different time points and have gathered a range of perspectives; however the findings are context-specific. Etscheidt and Knesting's (2007) research took place in the USA and local culture is likely to have had an impact upon findings.

Creese <i>et al.</i> (2000)	Etscheidt and Knesting (2007)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support from senior management;</li> <li>• No hidden agenda during meetings;</li> <li>• Teachers consulted about joining the TST prior to the group starting, so the group contained volunteers;</li> <li>• Senior teachers trusted the TST and did not interfere in the TST process;</li> <li>• The SENCo was viewed by the TST as a problem-sharer not a problem solver;</li> <li>• The team emphasised collaborative working;</li> <li>• The TST had a high profile within the school;</li> <li>• The Ethos of the school;</li> <li>• The TST was used to improve IEPs.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The team was multidisciplinary (SEN teacher, school psychologist, guidance counsellor, social worker, classroom teacher);</li> <li>• The team contained professionals with experience and expertise;</li> <li>• The team were continuous and consistent (the same group members attended meetings regularly);</li> <li>• The team members were committed;</li> <li>• Parents were invited to participate in meetings;</li> <li>• Teachers brought data and documentation to the meetings;</li> <li>• Discussion focussed upon a single issue that was causing concern;</li> <li>• The team explored multiple options for resolving problems;</li> <li>• Members maintained professional relationships, even during conflict or dissent;</li> <li>• Teachers accepted and 'bought in' to the process;</li> <li>• Members of the team made continuing efforts to improve the process.</li> </ul>

Table 2.2: Factors reported to positively influence the functioning of Teacher Support Teams (TSTs).

The findings suggest that a supportive school culture, support from management, commitment of the team, a multi-agency, consistent and experienced team, and a structure and focus to the discussion during meetings could all support effective workings of the ANPs. It is interesting to note that Creese *et al.* (2000) and Etscheidt and Knesting (2007) conducted semi-structured interviews with group consultees. This method of data collection appears to have allowed the researchers to gain insight into participants' understandings of the factors that had inhibited or promoted effective

functioning of the TSTs. The impact of contextual factors was not explored in much of the previous research into group consultation.

#### **2.4.4 Solution Circles (SCs) and Circles of Adults (CoA)**

Primary teachers in Brown and Henderson's (2012) study reported (as part of the SWOT analysis) that weaknesses and threats to the process were:

- time pressures;
- the small number of teachers within the school;
- the possibility of differing advice and related conflict/disagreement;
- keeping to the agreed structure and time limitations;
- fear of exposure and possible ridicule.

It is important to note that these findings do not report problems that actually occurred, but factors that teachers believed had the potential to disrupt the process. Brown and Henderson (2012) also elicited the Head Teacher's views on what helped the process to work effectively: positive comments, discussing solutions, as well as having a formalised structure to support discussion and note-taking.

Newton (1995) comments that group consultation should involve asking questions which 'empower and lead recipients to finding their own way forward from their own resources, knowledge and experiences' (p.9) The CoA model therefore emphasises asking questions at each stage, rather than offering advice. In the discussion section of

his evaluation, Newton ponders whether questioning was the most effective aspect of CoA, or whether 'it was crucial to agree strategies and a plan of action' (p.13).

Brown and Henderson (2012) and Newton (1995) provide propositions regarding factors that could inhibit or promote effective working of group consultation. A potential avenue for the current research is to explore how their suggestions relate to the experiences of those who participated in the ANPs.

### **2.4.5 Group supervision**

Soni (2013) completed a realistic evaluation of group supervision (please see earlier section for details of the group). As well as reporting outcomes of group supervision, her findings reported mechanisms and contexts that promoted or inhibited group consultation. Mechanisms are aspects of the process and contexts are aspects of the social, cultural and physical environment. These are presented in table 2.3.

Soni (2013) specifically devised her interview schedule and conducted her data analysis to identify contexts and mechanisms. These are aspects of the process and social environment believed to affect the functioning of group supervision. In my opinion, this approach to data analysis was useful in developing understandings of group consultation, as not only did it identify positive and negative outcomes, but also assisted the researcher in identifying ways that the model of group supervision could be improved.

<b>Factors reported as promoting group supervision</b>	<b>Factors reported as inhibiting group supervision</b>
<p><b>Mechanisms:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Participants could listen and not speak if they chose to,</li> <li>- managers were not present,</li> <li>- the group had a relaxed and informal approach,</li> <li>- more than one person's view contributed to the supervision session,</li> <li>- the group was facilitated.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Mechanisms:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Timing,</li> <li>- domination by one participant,</li> <li>- the group was large,</li> <li>- group members felt concerned about what to say.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Contexts:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- the team trusted and supported each other,</li> <li>- managers were in favour of group supervision.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Contexts:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Poor team dynamics,</li> <li>- lack of trust in the group.</li> </ul>

Table 2.3: Factors reported by Soni (2013) as promoting or inhibiting group supervision.

Soni (2013) states that the implications of these findings are that contract discussions with managers, and working group agreements with participants, relating to ground rules and facilitation, are mechanisms that can support group supervision. Soni comments that her research 'identifies the entry phase of group supervision as being crucial, so that all parties understand the aims and purposes.' (p.157). Soni concludes that support from management and positive team dynamics are crucial features of the context that support group supervision.

Hawkins and Shohet (2012) and Proctor and Inskipp (2001) provide practical advice relating to group supervision. Hawkins and Shohet (2012) advise that 'early stage contracting' should occur to identify group objectives, composition, meeting structure, expectations and boundaries. Proctor and Inskipp (2001) advise that there are 'various agreements that group supervisors and supervisees need to make openly if they are to

be in a fruitful working alliance' (p.105). Proctor and Inskipp advise that a professional contract, relating to issues such as time-commitments, ethics, confidentiality, rights and responsibilities should be made available to participants before the start of the group. A group working agreement should also be formulated during initial meetings, and reviewed as appropriate, relating to roles and responsibilities within the group, working arrangements, ground rules and individual responsibilities. Each session should also have an agenda, and clear agreements should be reached with each supervisee regarding what he/she hopes to achieve during a particular piece of supervision.

Practical advice provided by professionals experienced in the field of supervision, as well as the findings of Soni's (2013) evaluation appear to suggest, therefore, that working agreements are important during setting up and implementation of group supervision.

#### **2.4.6 Relevance to the current research**

The literature discussed above would suggest that school culture and support from management, composition of the group, group dynamics and contracting (particularly during initial stages) are all factors that could impact upon effective working of group consultation. The studies reported above provide information relating to models of group consultation that are different, both contextually and practically, than the ANPs. The conclusions drawn have taken into account the opinions of service users, and this seems to have been helpful in developing understanding of factors that could impact

upon group functioning. It would be useful for the current evaluation, therefore, to examine whether the factors above had implications upon the workings of the ANPs.

## **2.5 Solution-focused approaches**

Recently, many EPs have attempted to adopt a solution-focused approach (SFA) within their practice. The origins of this approach lie in a counselling technique, Solution-focused brief therapy, developed by de-Shazer (cited in Redpath and Harker, 1999). Rhodes and Ajmal (1995) claim that 'although these ideas and practices started in the context of 'therapy', we believe that this way of thinking can be transferred to other settings and ways of working.' (p.7). Rhodes and Ajmal outline the underlying principles and techniques of a SFA, presented in table 2.4.

The ANP model of group consultation follows a structured problem-solving format. The model is described as 'solution-focused' as the consultee is encouraged to consider their 'desired situation' (their goal). At each stage group members are also encouraged to use solution-focused techniques as part of their questioning (see appendix two, pages nine to ten).

Kahn (2000) comments that consultation involves moving consultees along a 'continuum of involvement' from visitor (present at consultation because someone else has coerced them), complainant (can describe the problem but does not feel they can change it) to customer (someone who has a definite desire to do something about the problem). It is the job of the consultant, through the use of solution-focused

Underlying principles of a Solution-focused approach	Solution-focused techniques
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It is not necessary to focus upon the past or details of problems to develop solutions;</li> <li>• For every problem there are always exceptions, times when the problem is not as bad or not present;</li> <li>• Clients possess resources to solve their problems;</li> <li>• One small change can cause further positive changes to occur (the 'ripple effect');</li> <li>• Different clients will co-operate in different ways during therapy;</li> <li>• The client's goals are central to therapy.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Problem-free talk - this involves talk with the consultee about aspects of their life unrelated to the problem and noticing strengths and competencies;</li> <li>• Exceptions - asking the consultee about times when the problem is less or not present. Exceptions can then be explored to assist identification of factors that may alleviate the problem and use these to plan next steps;</li> <li>• Goals - asking the consultee about their goals;</li> <li>• Hypothetical solutions - asking the consultee what life would be like without the problem;</li> <li>• Rating scales - asking clients where they are in terms of reaching their goal, and what they could do to take a step towards their goal;</li> <li>• Tasks and compliments - complimenting the consultee on what they have achieved so far and setting follow-up tasks that fit with the consultee's expectations and suggestions.</li> </ul>

Table 2.4: The underlying principles and techniques of a solution-focused approach.

techniques to facilitate movement of the consultee along the continuum. Social Constructionist theory underpins this approach; an assumption that reality, is at least in part, constructed through the use of language. The way EPs talk about 'problems' therefore influences how they are perceived by consultees.



### **2.5.1 Evaluating the use of a Solution-focused Approach (SFA)**

Kahn (2000) implemented a SFA within her work as a school counsellor in the USA and claims that a SFA may be more successful than traditional problem-solving approaches to consultation. Kahn met with teachers one-to-one using solution-techniques, leaving the 'door open' (p. 251) for future follow-up consultations. The manner in which Kahn implemented a SFA within her work therefore differs to the ANPs.

Copeland and Geil (1996) describe how they used a SFA within a small organisation. Overall, they report that consultees appeared to respond favourably to a SFA and began to focus on solutions rather than long-standing problems within the organization. The context of this research also differs greatly to the way a SFA was implemented within the ANPs.

Redpath and Harker (1999) claim that a SFA can be taken in many aspects of EP work including meetings, casework, in-service training and consultation. Redpath and Harker (1999) implemented a SFA into these aspects of their own work and claim a SFA helped them to work collaboratively with clients to identify, nurture and develop practical solutions and that feedback from clients had been positive. This indicates that EPs may find a SFA useful in their work. Redpath and Harker do not however, report the views of service-users, and I believe it would be useful for further research to explore the experiences of recipients of a SFA.

The case-study research reported above, from several contexts, suggests that adopting a SFA, through applying some of the techniques and principles from solution-focused brief therapy, has supported practitioners to work in a way they perceive as effective with clients. The context into which SFAs have been applied in previous research is different to the ANPs, and research does not take into account the opinions of those who experienced the SFA. The findings, therefore, only provide an indication that a SFA might be beneficial during ANP meetings.

Stobie *et al.* (2005) report findings from an internet-based survey on how EPs were using a SFA in the UK. 31 respondents reported using a SFA in their work, in particular with individuals (pupils, teachers, parents). Half of respondents, however, reported that they did not evaluate their solution-focused work. Although the sample size was small, the authors conclude that the use of a SFA has not received a high level of evaluation in the field of UK EP work.

In Stobie *et al.*'s (2005) opinion there are pragmatic reasons for implementing a SFA, despite the dearth of evaluative research. The low level of evaluation of a SFA within EP work, however, raised several questions in my mind regarding EP practice: how do we decide upon the techniques we use? Is it for pragmatic reasons or because they tie in with our underlying assumptions? Should we be making a greater effort to evaluate our work? Should we examine how service-users have experienced our services or be satisfied if our practice just 'seems to be working'? These are issues I hoped to address in the current research, as I hoped to acquire the views of the recipients of the ANPs. I felt that it was not enough that EPs thought the ANPs 'seemed to be going well', or had

decided to implement the ANPs for pragmatic reasons. I wanted to gain perspectives on when, why and how SENCos appreciated the ANPs. I wanted to find out if there were problems with the ANPs, and if there were ways in which the ANPs could be improved.

## **2.6 Conclusions**

Previous research findings appear to suggest that consultees have found individual and group consultations useful. EPs that have used consultation and solution-focused approaches have provided positive reports on these modes of working. The literature suggests that group consultation allows consultees to reflect and develop their knowledge and understanding, to feel reassured and less isolated, to meet with colleagues to learn and plan, and try new strategies and resources. The literature therefore appears to suggest that the ANPs could be a supportive way of working with SENCos, who could experience some of these described benefits.

The conclusions provided in the research literature are largely based upon small-scale case studies, observations and opinions, and questionnaire data, and attribute a wide range of outcomes to group consultation. Further research into group consultation could help 'pull together' previous findings and help develop shared understandings, or 'theory', regarding group consultation. Previous research has collected limited information regarding the experiences and viewpoints of the recipients of the different types of consultation. Where these viewpoints have been collected, however, this has helped develop theory regarding factors that could impact upon effective functioning

of group consultation. I therefore decided that it would be important to interview SENCo participants in the current research.

The literature provides limited information regarding the impact of group consultation upon teachers' practice or the joint client - children and their families. It would be useful to examine ways in which the ANPs have provided effective service delivery through the consideration of a wider range of outcomes than those reported in previous research.

Previous research reports several negative outcomes of group consultation, including consultee anxiety, negative group interactions and time costs. The literature suggests that group dynamics, school culture, support from management and contracting can all impact upon the workings of group consultation. This would suggest that the ANPs may not always work effectively, and this could be due to contextual or process factors. It would be useful to consider when, and in what ways, the ANPs were effective, but also, negative outcomes of ANPs. This could be used to provide information on how ANPs could be modified to promote optimal working.

### **2.6.1 Research questions**

ANP meetings were designed to combine collaborative problem-solving with the use of solution-focused techniques. Issue-focused consultation also occurred at some ANP meetings. The ANPs were based upon a model of group consultation that had been successfully implemented as a mode of service delivery within another EPS. The model

was then adapted and refined by myself and other members of my EPS during the academic year 2012-13. ANPs do not therefore map directly onto previously researched models of group consultation and the current research is explorative in nature.

My approach to the current research was pragmatic, I wanted to find out whether the ANPs were working as intended, and also whether there were aspects of the ANPs that could be improved. There were several questions I wanted to answer:

- What were the outcomes of the ANPs?
- Were the benefits of group consultation, reported in previous research, also ascribed to the ANPs?
- Did SENCoS report positive experiences or problems with the ANPs?
- Could previous research and SENCo insights indicate improvements that could be made to the ANPs?

I therefore decided, in summary, to answer two questions in the current research:

- **Do ANPs deliver effective service delivery, and if so, when, why and how?**
- **Are there ways in which the ANPs could be improved?**

The next chapter, methodology, will outline the methodological approaches I chose to adopt in answering these research questions.



## **3      Methodology**

### **3.1    Introduction**

In the previous chapters I introduced the topic of research, the ANPs, and provided a rationale for the research questions: **Do ANPs deliver effective service delivery, and if so, when, why and how? Are there ways in which the ANPs could be improved?** In the present chapter I will provide a rationale for the methodological approach employed to address these questions. I will also discuss criteria adopted to uphold quality within the research.

### **3.2    Positionality**

It was important, when designing this piece of research, to examine how I view the world, what I take understanding to be, and what I see as the purpose for deepening understandings of the world (Cohen *et al.* 2005).

#### **3.2.1 Ontology**

Ontology is the philosophical study of existence. In this section I will outline my ontological stance, which is closely aligned with critical realism, a position illustrated in the writings of Bhaskar (1978).

### **3.2.1.1 The Real, the Actual and the Empirical**

Critical realist ontology is stratified; it claims that there are different types of 'things' in the world: the real, the actual and the empirical. The real consists of what exists (natural or social phenomena). Bhaskar (1978) claims that real objects exist whether or not we have adequate knowledge of them. This view of reality is anti-foundationalist, it claims that reality exists, but makes no assumptions about the nature of reality (Maxwell, 2012). Real objects have capacities to behave in certain ways and susceptibilities to certain types of change - they have powers - due to their inner structures (Collier, 1995). For example, a bureaucracy has the potential to process large volumes of information quickly due to the organisation of its workforce, or an individual has the potential to work due to his or her physical make-up and experiences (Sayer, 2000). The actual refers to what actually happens when the powers real phenomena have are activated. So if a person has a physical and mental make-up, and access to resources, this provides them with the capacity to work (the real). The work they carry out, the way in which their powers are exercised and the effects this has, belong to the domain of the actual (Sayer, 2000).

The empirical refers to human experiences of the real and the actual. We are able to make observations of objects and how they act, however it is not possible to make full and complete observations. We must make causal explanations (theories) about the real and the actual. We cannot ever be sure our theories about the real and actual are sufficient; however we can accept our explanations as plausible if they are based upon observable effects that can only be explained as a product of the real and actual we



believe to exist (Sayer, 2000). Bhaskar (1978) makes a clear ontological distinction between events themselves and our experiences of them; the existence of the real or actual does not depend upon the empirical.

### **3.2.1.2 Emergence**

A critical realist position acknowledges that the real may have powers that lay 'dormant' or unexercised. This means that what exists now (real or actual) does not limit the way things could have happened instead or will happen in the future. Critical realism argues that new phenomena are created by the process of emergence: situations when the real converge and produce something (due to the activation of their powers) that is irreducible to those constituents. Whether powers are activated or not depends upon the conditions, for example a worker may have the physical power to build a wall, but may only do so when provided with tools (Sayer, 2000). The real may form 'structures' when their powers combine, and these structures have the potential to constrain or enable the occurrence of particular events (Sayer, 2000).

### **3.2.2 Epistemology**

Epistemology is concerned with how and what we can know; it is concerned with how knowledge is created. As the purpose of my research is to contribute to the body of knowledge relating to EP practice, it is important that I am clear about the claims I am making about 'knowledge'. My epistemological position is also closely aligned with critical realist philosophy.

### 3.2.2.1 Transitive and intransitive knowledge

Bhaskar (1978) argues that established 'facts' are social products, produced by antecedent social products. Knowledge production is significantly influenced by historically established knowledge, the structure of the language we use and the social activities that propagate knowledge. People are not passive recipients of facts and recorders of observations; knowledge is produced by human activity. Knowledge is not just description of the world; knowledge provides explanations of how and why things are the way they are (Virtanen and Uusikylä, 2004).

Bhaskar (1978) describes two dimensions of knowledge: an intransitive dimension in which the objects of knowledge are the structures and mechanisms that exist in the world and operate independently of people (the things we study). (The term 'mechanism' refers to the description of a process that causes something to happen.) The transitive dimension consists of theories and discourse about the world. The transitive dimension may have been influenced by the objects of study themselves or by social processes. When the transitive dimension changes, this does not mean that the intransitive dimension has changed, for example when the flat Earth theory was replaced with the round Earth theory (transitive dimension) this did not mean that the Earth itself had changed (intransitive dimension) (Sayer, 2000). Bhaskar (1978) describes a theory as 'a conception or picture of a natural mechanism or structure at work' (p. 11). Critical Realism is therefore epistemologically relativist. It claims that we can only know about the things that exist in the world through particular

descriptions. It therefore rejects the correspondence theory of truth - it does not agree that what we know about the world corresponds directly to what is in it.

### **3.2.2.2 The social world**

A critical realist view of society is that it provides structures which generate and constrain social activities (Collier, 1995). Social reality has a stratified nature; causal powers not only lie within individual objects and people, but in social relations. All human activity is embedded within social rules or institutions. Social relations and the organisational structures they form have causal powers over human actions (Pawson and Tilley, 1997). Structures are reproduced and transformed through human agency; they are created by the relationships between, and actions of, humans. Social reality therefore has a duality of structure - our actions both create and are constrained by social structures, and a duality of praxis - our behaviours are both a production of our own conscious and an unconscious adherence to structure (Cruikshank, 2003). Facts about the social world cannot therefore be reduced to facts about individual people (Sayer, 2000). Instead it is possible to develop theories about how structure shapes events within the social world. Knowledge about the social world can only ever be transient in nature as it is unlikely that structures remain stable or unproblematic across time and space (Sayer, 2000).

### 3.2.2.3 Causation

Critical realism rejects a 'successionist' view of causation. This is the view that the world can be explained through universal causal laws, for example every time A happens, B happens (Collier, 1995). Researchers collect 'evidence' of such laws under controlled conditions (for example in a laboratory) when they alter one variable and this consistently results in a change in a second variable (consistent conjunction) (Robson, 2011). The problem with this viewpoint is that it does not account for the influence of structure (Collier, 1995). The same events do not always happen under similar conditions in open systems, like the social world, as human activity reproduces and changes structure (Cruikshank, 2003). Critical realism would suggest that to provide explanation for events, it is preferable to attempt to identify which mechanisms were activated and under what conditions (Sayer, 2000). Pawson and Tilley (1997) describe a 'mechanism' as 'a theory which spells out the potential of human resources and reasoning' (p.68). Research methodology should involve theoretical interpretations of complex events. This is a 'generative' view of causation (Robson, 2011) and is represented in figure 3.1.

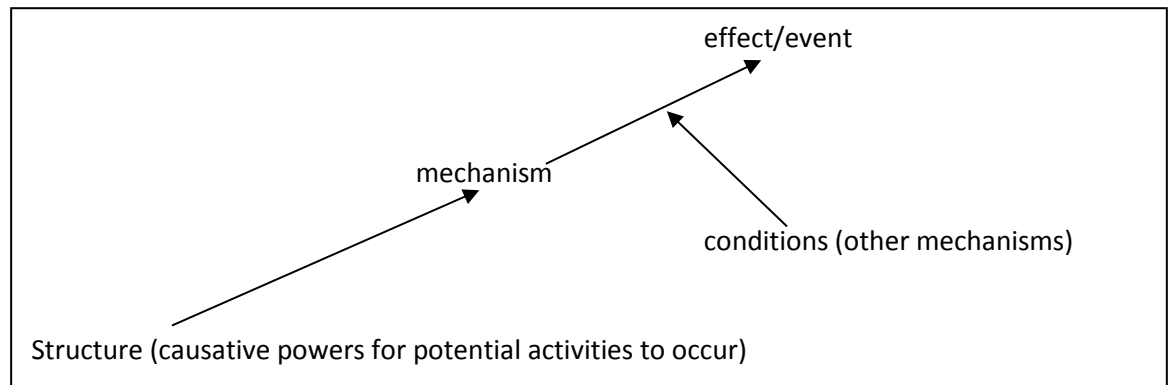


Figure 3.1: Generative causation (Adapted from Sayer, 2000).

### 3.2.3 Alternative positions

#### 3.2.3.1 Positivism and Empiricism

There are alternative philosophies to critical realism. Positivism asserts that it is possible for people to gain direct knowledge of what exists through scientific activity. A goal of positivist research, therefore, is to produce knowledge that is impartial and unbiased (objective). This position does not account for how people's perspectives, actions or interpretations mediate knowledge (Cruikshank, 2003) and is therefore a position I reject. Research with an experimental design is grounded within a positivist philosophy and adopts a successionist view of causation. I therefore decided not to employ an experimental design within my research.

### 3.2.3.2 Social Constructionism

An alternative position is social constructionism, a relativist stance that shares some features of critical realism. Social constructionism takes a critical stance towards established knowledge and emphasises that knowledge is created through social processes and is historically and culturally specific; it denies that knowledge is a direct representation of reality (Burr, 1995). It is different to critical realism however as it denies that there is a 'real' nature to the world, the objects of thought are merely words (Cohen *et al.* 2005). Knowledge is something that people do, a practice reproduced through language (Burr, 1995). The focus of research based within a social constructionist philosophy is therefore to reveal the processes that produce knowledge: how current understandings of the world (meanings) were produced, how they change across cultures and history, and how they shape people's experiences (Willig, 2008). Social constructionist research therefore explores personal and political topics such as 'race' or 'behaviour' because questions about these issues have the potential to cause damage if they are left concealed (Banister *et al.* 1994). Research based within a social constructionist philosophy includes narrative, phenomenological and discursive methodologies.

I have rejected a social constructionist philosophy as I believe that a critical realist philosophy is more useful to my research. In my research I will discuss events and how and why they may have happened, and in doing so I am implicitly assuming that these things existed independently to my knowing about them. This is incompatible with a social constructionist stance. In addition I have chosen not to adopt a methodology

underpinned by social constructionist philosophy as this would not produce the type of findings that would answer my research questions. I do not aspire to describe what the ANPs meant to individual participants and how these meanings were constructed. Instead I hope to produce tentative theories explaining cause and effect within the ANPs.

### **3.2.4 Pragmatism**

I believe that my approach towards this research project could be described as 'pragmatic'. My understandings of the purpose of this research align with many of Johnson and Onwuegbuzie's (2004, p.18) characteristics of pragmatism: I will not claim to provide conclusions that are complete, certain or absolute. Instead I hope to create practical theory - theory that will inform practice. The purpose of my research is practical, I want to find out 'what works.' I therefore view 'theories' as instrumental, meaning that I view them as true to the extent that they seem to provide workable explanations of the ANPs. I view knowledge as tentative and changing over time. My research is value-orientated; I have a specific aim of making the EPS better for service users. I hope to uncover examples of effective or unsatisfactory practice in order to address perceived inequalities within the ANPs.

### **3.2.5 Summary of my position**

Critical realism provides the philosophical assumptions underpinning my research. I believe that within the ANPs there were events that had the potential to come about, and actual events that happened. In my research I hope to produce tentative theories: statements about the structures and mechanisms I believe explain activities that occurred within the ANPs. The research process was inevitably influenced by prior knowledge, language and social practices. I therefore acknowledge that my findings do not provide a complete or transparent representation of reality; instead I aspire to produce knowledge that will help to develop EP practice. A critical realist philosophy and a pragmatic approach directly impacted upon the choices I made when designing my research, a process I will describe further in the following section.

### **3.3 Research design**

My approach to designing the research was pragmatic. I wanted to gain a deeper understanding, to theorise, about the ANPs. I believed this would help me to improve professionally and to support the development of the EPS in which I worked. I decided to carry out a qualitative evaluation and employed a realistic evaluation (Pawson and Tilley, 1997) framework. This is because I believed that analysing data qualitatively, within a methodological framework that encouraged explanation, would provide rich findings that would deepen my understandings of the ANPs.



### **3.3.1 Evaluation**

This research could be described as 'action research' because, according to McNiff and Whitehead (2000, p.3), 'action research generates practical theory.' I wanted to develop explanations that related to my specific context. I wanted to know *how* the ANPs worked. I wanted to know *why* the ANPs may not have provided a satisfactory service all of the time. I believed that through the creation of this practical theory I would gain a deeper understanding of the ANPs. These understandings would allow me to make informed choices in terms of my future actions as a practitioner.

This piece of research could also be described as 'real world research'. Its main purpose is to address an issue (the ANPs) affecting the lives of everyday people (children, EPs, SENCos, parents) rather than to develop or extend the academic discipline of psychology (Robson, 2011). Specifically, I wanted to gain some insight into whether the ANPs were working effectively. I hoped that my research would be used to inform organisational decisions regarding the way the ANPs were run. I decided therefore that the research would best be described as an 'evaluation'.

### **3.3.2 Interviews**

Interviewing EPs and SENCos was, in my opinion, particularly well-suited to this evaluation as each ANP group differed contextually in terms of location, school organisation and culture, and individuals involved. There were also differences in the

way the ANPs were delivered due to their novel nature. My research was carried out within an 'open system'. I view the ANPs as phenomena that were in a continual process of change, the people involved having the potential to become involved in a range of activities. I therefore decided that it would be important to gain descriptions of events that occurred within the ANPs from the people that were involved in them: SENCOs and EPs. I was interested in their personal experiences, interpretations and perceptions of how the ANPs shaped their actions. I hoped to use their insights to generate emergent theories about the ANPs. It therefore seemed most appropriate that I conduct interviews and analyse them qualitatively. I felt that if I used quantitative measures, I would lose the 'intensity, subtlety, particularity, ethical judgement and relevance' (Shaw, 1999, p.2) that characterise qualitative research. I thought this would help provide findings that I could relate to the wide range of existing perspectives on group consultation summarised in the literature review. I also wanted to look for differences or inconsistencies within and between the accounts of SENCOs. It appeared that the use of group or individual interviews might help develop a multi-faceted 'theory' relating to the ANPs.

### **3.3.3 Why realistic evaluation?**

In 1997, Pawson and Tilley wrote a book advocating a 'realistic' approach to evaluation. A central thesis of this book was the rejection of an experimental approach to evaluation as they report this had produced 'a rather disappointing mixed bag of findings' (p. xiii). Positivist methodology, in their view, oversimplified the

complex reality of the social world, but had become established as it provided evaluators with scientific credibility. They argue that social programmes operate in the real-world, and thus involve disagreements, power-plays, and interdependences which lead to (sometimes unintended) customs and practices. Social programmes are therefore emergent and complex. By programme, Pawson and Tilley are referring to a policy or intervention that introduces new resources, ideas or practices into an existing set of social relationships and interacts with them with the intention of making a change. (The ANPs are the 'programme' evaluated within this research.)

Pawson and Tilley (1997) assert that if an evaluation is to be 'realistic', its purpose should be to understand the balance of choices and resources available to participants within a programme. Methods should be perfected to meet this purpose. The primary aim of an evaluation should be to benefit policy-makers, practitioners, programme participants and not to gain academic credibility. Findings should be presented in a manner that is user-friendly rather than in mystifying scientific language (Pawson and Tilley, 1997). This pragmatic argument appealed to me.

Evaluation in the social world, according to Pawson and Tilley (1997), is all about finding out whether a programme works. Sometimes a programme will bring positive outcomes in one context, but not in another; findings are often context-related (Timmins and Miller, 2007). There is a need, therefore, when developing a new programme, to uncover which bits have worked, for whom and why. This is the reason I decided to use realistic evaluation; I wished to identify not only if the ANPs worked,

but answer the question 'how, why and when did the ANPs work?' and following on from this 'how could the ANPs be improved?'

Bozic and Crossland (2012) used realistic evaluation to evaluate an induction programme within their LA. They report that realistic evaluation appeared especially well-suited to their study as the programme outcomes had not been clearly defined. Data collection allowed specification of outcomes. The ANPs had been implemented within my LA as it was thought they would be 'a better way of working'. I felt therefore that realistic evaluation would be useful as it could also help answer the question 'in what ways were they better, and for whom?'

Realistic evaluation is a relatively new methodology (Pawson and Tilley, 1997) however it has recently gained credence, being used or advocated by several UK EPs (Timmins and Miller, 2007; Simm and Ingram, 2008; Bozic and Crossland, 2012). This provided another reason for my choice; I hoped that through developing the use of a relatively novel type of evaluation I would produce a piece of research that was unique and distinct.

### **3.3.4 Realistic evaluation**

I have explained why adopting a realistic evaluation framework appeared attractive when designing my research. I will now explain the understandings of social reality that underpin realistic evaluation and the type of findings it therefore claims to

produce. I hope this will further elucidate why I believed a realistic evaluation was particularly well-suited to the current research.

### 3.3.4.1 Realistic explanation

Realistic evaluation is underpinned by critical realism, and therefore attempts to explain events using a generative view of causation (Robson, 2011). Outcomes (Os) are interesting, puzzling or socially significant occurrences. A realistic explanation proposes underlying mechanisms (Ms) - interactions of structure and agency - responsible for these outcomes. A realistic explanation also addresses how the activation of mechanisms is contingent upon local, historical and institutional contexts (Cs) (Pawson and Tilley, 1997). This is represented in figure 3.2.

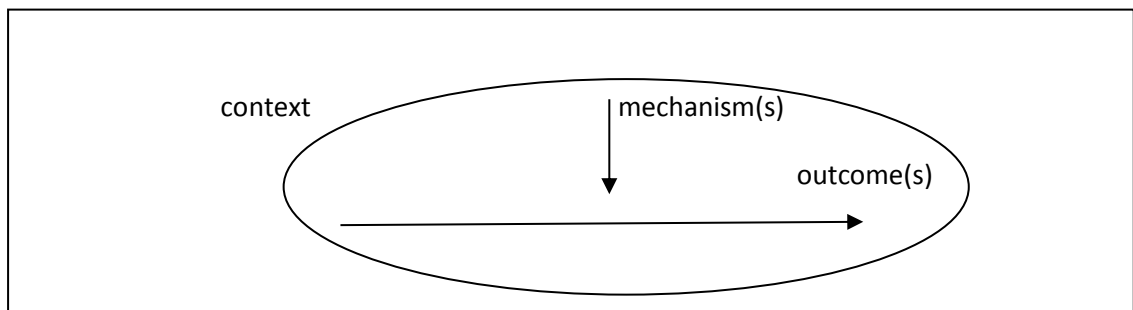


Figure 3.2: A representation of a realistic explanation (adapted from Robson, 2011).

Realistic evaluation therefore construes causation within the social world according to the following formula:

$$\text{mechanism} + \text{context} = \text{outcome}$$

(Pawson and Tilley, 1997)

A realistic evaluation attempts to identify the inner-workings of a programme by proposing context-mechanism-outcome (CMO) pattern configurations, models of the way different Cs, Ms and Os come together. This explanation is called the 'programme theory'. Data collection in a realistic evaluation therefore involves identifying, describing, testing and refining speculative CMO configurations.

#### **3.3.4.2 The realistic evaluation cycle**

Pawson and Tilley (1997) do not advocate one particular approach to collecting information about Cs, Ms and Os. Instead they advocate the use of multiple methods and data sources, whichever will help to produce a clearer picture of the mechanisms that produce optimal outcomes within the context. Realistic evaluation is not aimed at producing universal truths about 'what works'. Instead the purpose is to contribute to evolving knowledge about a programme (Pawson and Tilley, 2001). Realistic evaluation is sometimes referred to as a framework for evaluation (e.g. Byng *et al.* 2005) rather than a methodology.

Realistic evaluation is theory-driven and cyclical in nature. Programmes are designed to bring about change within social systems. Their design is therefore based upon theories about social reality and implemented according to hypotheses about what might work for particular people within a specific context. When programmes are implemented, they are embedded within existing social systems and involve people who actively make decisions and choices. Programmes therefore often result in unexpected as well as expected outcomes (outcome patterns) due to the activation of

different mechanisms in different contexts. Data collection should involve analysis of CMO configurations in order to test initial programme theories so that they can be refined. The findings of a realist evaluation elucidate potential CMO configurations that are needed sustain the programme (Pawson and Tilley, 2004). This cycle is represented in figure 3.3.

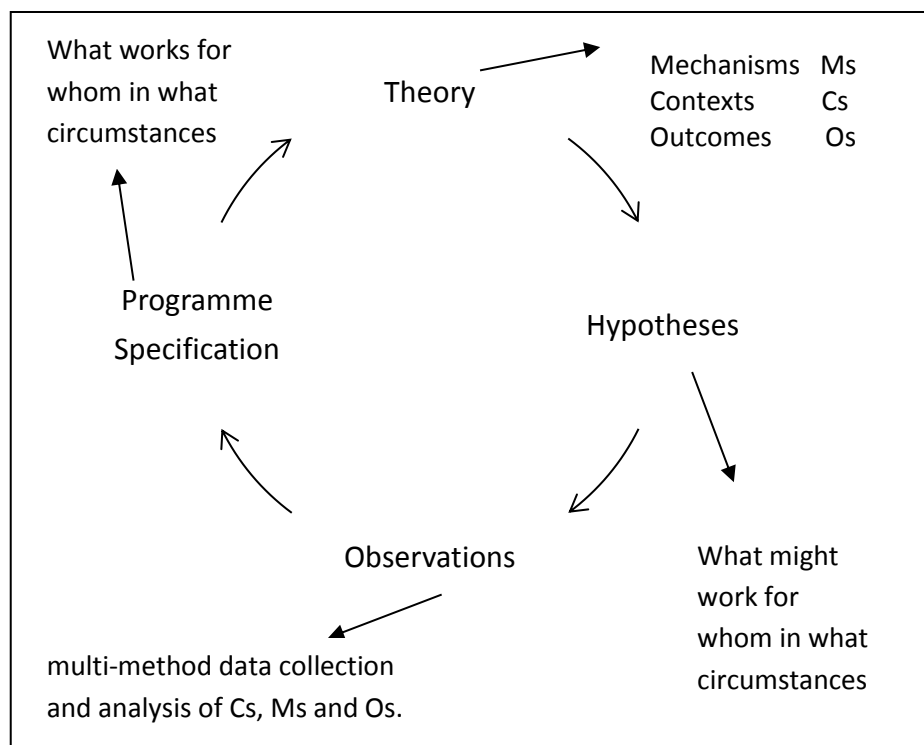


Figure 3.3: The realistic evaluation cycle (adapted from Pawson and Tilley, 1997).

McNiff and Whitehead (2000, p.8) claim that 'research is learning in order to gather information and to create and test new theories'. This pragmatic viewpoint appealed to me, and is one reason why I was drawn to realistic evaluation. It regards research as evolutionary; new knowledge is created from modifying, adapting and supplementing older knowledge. I planned to carry out one cycle of realistic evaluation, with an

assumption that I would not have 'learnt' everything there was to know about the ANPs. Instead I hoped to have gained deeper understandings of the ANPs.

Pawson and Tilley (1997) advise that methods of data collection and analysis should be carefully selected so that they relate to the hypotheses developed earlier in the research process. Realistic evaluation does not therefore ascribe greater credibility to either qualitative or quantitative research. Instead it prescribes methodological flexibility (Michell, 2004). In the current evaluation, I regarded psychological entities such as meanings, beliefs, values and intentions, as having causal powers (Maxwell, 2012). The reasoning and interpretations of those involved in the ANPs impacted upon the activities that occurred. I decided therefore that it would be most appropriate to explore these causal processes through interviewing EPs and SENCOs who had been involved in the ANPs and analysing their responses qualitatively.

Within a realistic evaluation, methods (i.e. structured interview, questionnaire) are not chosen because of the type of data they produce. Instead research is designed and conducted with the purpose of collecting information about how a programme works. Pawson and Tilley (1997) argue that interviews should be 'theory driven ... the researcher's theory is the subject matter of the interview, and the subject (stakeholder) is there to confirm, to falsify, and above all, to refine that theory' (p. 155). The interviews I conducted were realist interviews which employed two strategies: the 'teacher-learner function' and the 'conceptual focusing function' (Pawson and Tilley, 1997, p.155). The practical details of the interviews will be discussed in further detail in the Procedures chapter.



### **3.4 The quality of research**

The quality of research within psychology has traditionally been judged according to standards of validity, objectivity and reliability. The underlying assumptions of these concepts, as I will explain in this section, are based within a positivist philosophy and a history within psychology of conducting quantitative experimental research. They therefore pose challenges to qualitative research based within a critical realist paradigm which I will attempt to address. I will then outline alternative quality criteria that were employed within the current research.

#### **3.4.1. Validity**

Within the traditional experimental paradigm, research is judged to have a higher level of validity if it appears likely that measurement instruments have measured what they purport to measure (Cohen *et al.*, 2000). This conceptualisation is problematic when applied to qualitative research which usually entails attempts to capture internal senses, exploration, elaboration and systematisation of an identified phenomenon, or the illumination of meaning (Parker, 1994). The concept of 'measurement' is therefore often immaterial in relation to qualitative methodology. Recent discussion of the validity of qualitative data has explored issues such as the honesty, depth, richness and scope of the data, triangulation (using data to strengthen arguments) and the objectivity of the researcher. Within qualitative research validity is therefore more

commonly used to assess the degree of bias that is likely to be present within the research (Cohen *et al.* 2005).

### **3.4.2 Objectivity**

An assumption of traditional positivist epistemology is that the validity of findings is influenced by researcher subjectivity - the degree to which the researcher gathers and analyses data objectively (Madill *et al.* 2000). A critical realist position would assert that it is not possible to obtain objective observations or understandings of the world. In addition, qualitative analysis involves the inference of meaning within textual material (Madill *et al.* 2000) and findings are therefore implicitly influenced by the researcher's perspective. Parker (2005) argues that objectivity is constructed (it is a myth perpetuated through current discourse). The researcher's hunches, intuitions, hopes and assumptions will inevitably influence their approach to the research; even attempting to adopt an objective stance is a form of subjectivity (Parker, 2005). I expect the current research to be influenced (biased) by my perspective. 'Validity' and 'objectivity' are therefore irrelevant concepts when considering the quality of the current research.

### **3.4.3 Reflexivity**

I believe this research will be of higher quality if I make my standpoint explicit and actively consider how my own subjectivity, emotional investment and position have

influenced the research process (Willig, 2008). This will allow the reader to question my findings and bring their own understandings to bear upon the research. I have therefore embedded *reflexivity* within the research process. In order to do so I have attempted to make my philosophical position and methodological rationale transparent. I have also kept a reflexive diary throughout the research process. Research is a form of social interaction (Smith *et al.* 1995) and therefore the researcher is central to qualitative research (Parker, 1994). As a TEP I have been involved in designing and running the ANPs and my institutional background as well my values, experiences, beliefs, politics, wider aims in life and social identity (Willig, 2008) will have shaped my approach to the research. The diary was used to support a reflexive analysis of how I influenced the research process. This is something I have attempted to make clear in my writing throughout this thesis. I have also attempted to provide definitions of concepts within this report so my understandings are apparent to the reader.

#### **3.4.4 Reliability**

Traditionally, research was judged to be reliable according to the generalisability of findings: the likelihood that similar results would occur if the research was repeated using the same methods in a similar context (Cohen *et al.* 2005). Reliability is therefore unworkable as a quality standard for a realistic evaluation as it is expected that subsequent evaluations of a similar programme will produce differing findings. So how can I make claims that my research provides findings that are of relevance beyond the current context? I aim to produce transferrable theories: 'this type of programme

seems to work in this way, for these people, in this type of circumstances' (Pawson, 2002). Pawson and Tilley (2001) argue that cumulative evaluations analysing similar programmes operating within differing situations could serve to identify common conditions and mechanisms that enable programmes to work optimally (a realist synthesis). I hope to produce transferrable lessons, an inventory of issues that should be thought through during future implementation of ANPs (Pawson, 2004).

### **3.4.5 Quality criteria**

In my opinion, this research will be of high quality if it produces findings that are interesting, distinctive and provide a valuable contribution to current bodies of knowledge. In order to do so I have reflexively employed three overarching criteria - grounding, coherence and accessibility (Parker, 2005) - to guide the research process. Parker presents these as flexible guidelines on how the researcher can explain, describe and justify what they did.

#### **3.4.5.1 Grounding**

Grounding involves relating the research to existing theory and lines of research (Parker, 2005). The literature review and discussion chapters will locate the current research within existing bodies of knowledge and discuss how established theory influenced data collection and analysis.

### **3.4.5.2 Coherence**

Coherence describes the clarity of the argument within the research (Parker, 2005). I will attempt to use a step by step approach to explain how I made decisions and arrived at my conclusions. My central argument is that research can be used to improve EP practice. I will argue that through the development of practical theory, this research has impacted upon my practice and also provides transferrable knowledge that other practitioners may find useful.

### **3.4.5.3 Accessibility**

Accessibility relates to the clarity with which the research is presented so that conceptual backgrounds, processes and perspectives are apparent to the reader. I have attempted to make this research as accessible as possible and have been supported in this by university staff and peers who have critiqued and proof read drafts of the final product.

### **3.4.6 Limitations**

In order to provide a coherent account it is important that I outline potential difficulties related to my research design and the decisions I made to minimise their impact.

### 3.4.6.1 Limitations to realistic evaluation

A realistic evaluation involves identifying Cs, Ms and Os however previous researchers report that this can prove difficult. Timmins and Miller (2007) report that because schools and their support services are 'complex and fluid systems' (p.15), it can be hard to identify Cs, Ms and Os. To overcome this issue in my research, I decided it would be important to have a clear working definition of Cs, Ms and Os that I referred to when carrying out the data analysis. Timmins and Miller (2007) also report that as programmes develop, Cs, Ms, and Os may exchange places. This has relevance to my research as an O at an earlier stage in the ANPs may have provided a M at a later stage, for example a SENCo may have felt disillusioned following earlier meetings, meaning that later they did not contribute during discussions. This is something that I remained aware of, and although it might become confusing, I hope that my imperfect analysis will still provide utility in mapping out chains of cause and effect.

Pawson and Tilley's (1997) explanation of causation - mechanism + context = outcome - gives the impression that a single aspect of the context and an individual mechanism work together to produce one outcome. Byng et al. (2005) report that in actuality, there may be multiple Cs and Ms that bring about one or several Os (see figure 3.2). Explanations may not be as straightforward as context + mechanism = outcome. It was likely that I would, in fact, find that contexts + mechanisms = outcomes. I therefore expected that my findings could potentially take shape as a holistic Cs, Ms and Os picture rather than a presentation of discrete CMO configurations. Byng *et al.* advise that a holistic picture still provides explanatory value.

From the outset it therefore appeared that attempting to identify Cs, Ms and Os and their configuration may prove problematic. The process would be influenced by my judgements and interpretations. It is important to state therefore, that the *purpose* of this evaluation was not to identify and isolate Cs, Ms and Os and their configuration in order to produce precise theory. I did not want to commit 'methodolatry', where methodology takes precedence and the research questions become adrift (Parker, 2005). Instead I viewed my methodological technique pragmatically: I hoped that searching for CMO configurations would help improve my understanding of the ANPs and generate suggestions on how the ANPs could be improved. I acknowledge that my findings are fallible and open to criticism. I will thoroughly explain my reasoning in the procedures chapter to provide clarity regarding the decisions I have made.

### **3.5 Summary**

I hope that I have provided a coherent and accessible account of the choices I made when designing the current research. In the procedures chapter I will describe the methods I utilized to collect data and the decisions I made to overcome potential limitations of my chosen data collection techniques.





## **4      Procedures**

### **4.1    Introduction**

This thesis describes a qualitative evaluation of a programme, the ANPs, carried out within a realistic evaluation framework. The previous chapter provided a rationale for my methodological choices. The current chapter will focus upon the methods used and provide a rationale for the decisions I made relating to data collection and analysis.

### **4.2    Summary of realistic evaluation**

Realistic evaluation adopts a generative approach to causation: it is the reasons or resources that a programme provides to those involved that cause events to happen (Pawson, 2002). 'If we provide these people with these resources it may change their behaviour' (Pawson, 2004, p.472). A realistic evaluation has several aims: 1) to uncover programme mechanisms (Ms) - actions and activities undertaken as part of the programme, including patterns of thinking and feeling that may occur - that are thought to influence subject's actions. 2) to understand how the context (Cs) - aspects of the social environment in which the programme operates - are thought to have triggered or inhibited particular Ms. 3) to collect information about outcomes (Os) - anything that appears to have happened as a result - of the programme (Pawson, 2002). Collection of data about Cs, Ms and Os, is used to develop and refine theories

about combinations of Cs, Ms and Os that occur within the programme (the programme theory). This is used to develop understanding of how, why and when the programme works.

#### **4.2.1 The realistic evaluation cycle**

Pawson and Tilley (1997) conceptualise realistic evaluation as cyclical; subsequent evaluations are part of the ongoing process of programme design and improvement. (For a detailed diagram of the cycle please refer to Figure 3.3). Timmins and Miller (2007) provide a summary of the activities that occur at each stage of a cycle of realistic evaluation:

- '1) Programme theory based on a review of relevant research literature and expert/practitioner knowledge;
- 2) An initial programme specification, derived from programme theory, which maps the programme in terms of assumed Cs, Ms and Os;
- 3) Hypotheses derived from the initial programme specification;
- 4) An evaluation design and associated data gathering approaches, as suggested by the hypotheses, to check whether the programme is working as anticipated;
- 5) Findings that highlight how the programme might be modified or inform replications in other settings.' (Timmins & Miller, 2007, p.10)

### **4.3 Evaluation design**

The current evaluation progressed through three phases, following the stages outlined above by Timmins and Miller (2007). Phase one involved a group interview with the EPs that were involved in piloting and setting up the ANPs. The purpose of this was to 'elicit and formalise the programme theories to be tested' (Pawson and Tilley, 2004, p.11). I was mapping their theories (in terms of Cs, Ms and Os) about how the ANPs were an effective way of working to create an initial programme specification (IPS). This would provide hypotheses that I would explore in phase two of the research.

Phase two of the research entailed realist interviews with SENCOs who had taken part in the ANPs. The purpose of phase two was to 'interrogate the embryonic hypotheses' (Pawson and Tilley, 2004, p.11) generated in phase one and to provide further opportunities to identify and clarify Cs, Ms and Os (Bozic & Crossland, 2012). I enlisted SENCOs as participants as I believed they were best placed to comment on how the ANPs had worked. I then analysed data from SENCO interviews to identify patterns of successes and failures of the ANPs. I looked for commonalities within SENCO descriptions of similar experiences and compared groups who had described differing outcomes to identify the interaction of Ms and Cs that appeared to lead to particular Os.

Phase three of the research included documentation and interpretation of the findings (including comparing findings from phases one and two) and feedback to relevant parties. Were the ANPs working as had been hypothesised? Feedback incorporated

suggestions on how the ANPs might be modified or how ANPs may be best replicated with future clusters of schools.

A flow chart outlining this evaluation design can be viewed in figure 4.1 below.

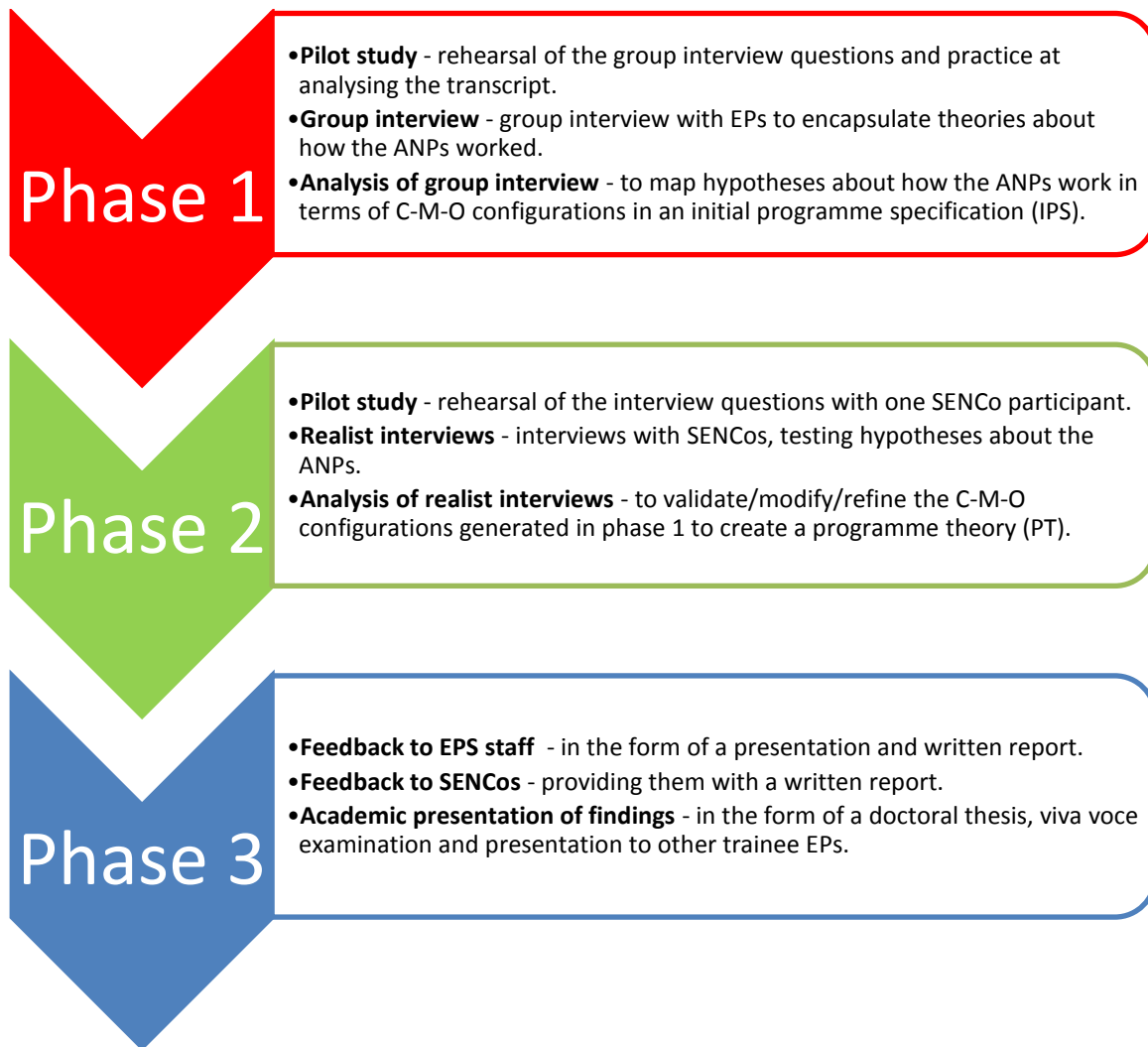


Figure 4.1: A flowchart outlining the evaluation design.

### **4.3.1 Phase one**

#### **4.3.1.1 Participants**

The participants in phase one of the research were a purposive sample. They were three EPs who had been involved in setting up and piloting the ANPs. They had designed the ANPs based upon their knowledge of relevant practice literature and the LA context. I therefore made the assumption that implementation of the ANPs was based upon their speculative programme theories: proposals of how SENCOs would interpret and act upon the resources offered to them through the ANPs and how aspects of the context may restrict or enable the operation of particular programme mechanisms (Robson, 2011). Through the group interview and analysis I hoped to encapsulate this speculative theory as the IPS. Phase one was therefore an exploratory phase. I decided a group interview would be more useful than individual interviews, as I hoped that the dialogue between EPs would promote thinking and reasoning about the ANPs.

In a recent review of realistic evaluation literature, Jackson and Kolla (2012) describe several methods that could be enlisted to generate an Initial Programme Specification (IPS), including review and synthesis of the literature, discussion with key stakeholders or empirical research. To generate an IPS, Priest and Waters (2007) conducted a focus group with staff (who were running an intervention) asking what they thought was working about the intervention and why. I decided I would adopt a similar approach. This was the first piece of research I had done in this area, so I did not have previous

empirical research to draw upon. Also, the ANPs were a slightly different phenomenon to models of group consultation evaluated in previous research literature. I decided it would be appropriate to generate an IPS using the knowledge of 'expert practitioners' rather than previous research findings.

#### **4.3.1.2 Procedure**

A pilot interview was carried in February 2013. This involved an independent TEP interviewing me about the ANPs, using proposed group interview questions. There were two purposes to this: to improve and refine the questions and to practice analysing the interview transcript to identify C-M-O configurations. I decided I would be an appropriate interviewee, rather than another TEP, as I had been involved in running ANPs, so had the relevant knowledge to answer the questions. (Please note, due to ethical considerations, I decided it would not be appropriate to interview an EP participant as the research project had not passed ethical approval at this time point. It was, however, important that the pilot occurred in Feb 2013 due to the research timeline).

The proposed group interview schedule contained open questions regarding what happened before, during and after the ANPs and a question asking about the benefits of the ANPs. The purpose of these questions was to elicit descriptions of how the ANPs worked (contexts and mechanisms) but also hypotheses regarding what positive outcomes of these mechanisms and contexts might be. During the pilot the TEP interviewer asked me four open questions:

- 1) Before the ANP meetings, what kind of preparation happens?
- 2) Could you tell me about the ANP meetings and what happens?
- 3) After the ANP meetings, what happens?
- 4) What benefits do you think the ANPs have?

I provided the TEP interviewer with a range of probes to follow up these questions, for example 'why does that happen?' or 'how is that helpful?' I also advised the interviewer that she was able to add in additional prompts as appropriate.

I found that acting as the pilot interviewee was a useful experience. I was able to interpret the questions and gained an understanding of the type of information each question seemed to elicit. I was able to experience the patterns of thinking the questions seemed to prompt. Following the pilot interview, the TEP interviewer and I discussed the probes. I was then able to refine the interview schedule to include probes that seemed to elicit more information about outcomes and conceptual refinement, for example 'you mentioned .... why is this useful/helpful?'. The purpose of this was to provide rich and detailed information regarding contexts, mechanisms and outcomes.

Creating the group interview schedule was daunting. I had read journal articles and others' theses relating to realistic evaluation, but this had not provided me with example schedules relevant to my research. Pawson and Tilley (1997) advise that during a realistic evaluation 'the actual form of the interview will depend on the precise stage of theory development or testing which the inquiry has reached' (p. 169). The group interview was aimed at developing an initial programme specification (IPS)

and was therefore explorative. Pawson and Tilley highlight the importance of pilot interviews: not only do they provide an opportunity to elucidate what the answers to the questions will be, but also allow reflection upon the questions. It was therefore useful that I myself was the interviewee, as this allowed me to reflect upon how the questions made me think and the type of information I gave in response. The pilot interview also provided an opportunity to practice data analysis. A copy of the analysis of the pilot interview can be found in appendix nine.

Once I had refined the questions and analysed the pilot interview, I recruited EP participants using a recruitment letter (appendix three) and information sheet (appendix four). All three EPs consented to taking part in the research and signed a consent form (appendix five). A group interview took place at the Educational Psychology base during the participants' usual working hours. A Dictaphone was used to record the group interview. The EP participants were EP1, EP2 and the PEP, as they had been involved in designing and refining the ANP process in autumn term 2012 (please see Introduction chapter for further details.). I therefore regarded them as 'expert practitioners' in relation to the ANPs.

The main purpose of the group interview was to collect the EPs' speculative theories regarding the ANPs. The piloting stage allowed me to make the questions as wide-ranging as possible, discussing what happened before, during and after the ANP meetings, as well EPs' thinking about the ANPs. This allowed me to create the group interview schedule found in appendix six. The interview schedule questions are tabulated in table 4.1 below.



Question number	Questions
1	Before the ANP meetings, what kind of preparation happens? Why is this preparation useful? You mentioned .... (e.g. the preparation would give SENCOs time to think about the problem) why is this useful/helpful?
2	Could you tell me about the ANP meetings and what happens? What do you think are the benefits of these types of meetings? Why is .... a benefit? / What is helpful about ....?
3	After the ANP meetings, what happens? How do you think the meetings impact upon SENCOs' practice? I noticed you mentioned (e.g. about it being important for it to be supportive). Why is it important for (e.g. the meetings to be supportive)?
4	What benefits do you think the ANPs have for children? I noticed you mentioned (e.g. the meetings mean SENCOs have new ideas to try with the children). Why is that important?
5	What is the Educational Psychologists role in the ANPs? Why is it important for EPs to .....?
6	Is there anything else about the ANPs, in your opinion, that is beneficial?

Table 4.1: Phase one interview questions.

The schedule (appendix six) was used as a prompt during the actual group interview, but I changed the wording of probes/questions, as appropriate, in response to what the interviewees said. I also added prompts that seemed relevant. (The group interview transcript can be found in appendix ten).

I think it is appropriate to describe the group interview as a 'realist interview' (Pawson and Tilley, 1997). This is because the group interview was designed and conducted with the purpose of eliciting CMO propositions. The group interview was aimed at

eliciting the EPs' 'theoretical postulations and conceptual structures' (Pawson and Tilley, 1997, p.182). During the interview I asked the EPs to describe what happened within the ANPs and what they felt the benefits of these processes might be. Pawson and Tilley (1997) advise that practitioners implementing a programme are likely to have specific ideas on what it is within the programme that works (Ms), have experienced successes and failures (Os) and have some awareness of when and for whom the programme works (Cs). My interview schedule was therefore devised to elicit examples of Cs, Ms, and Os from the EPs. During my analysis of interview transcript, I pulled these examples together to form a C-M-O table, which would constitute the IPS.

## **4.3.2 Phase two**

### **4.3.2.1 Participants**

Participants in phase two were SENCOs who had taken part in ANPs during the 2012/2013 academic year. The purpose of phase two was to refine theories formulated in phase one. Were the ANPs working as expected? The SENCOs were recipients of the ANPs and had experienced and interpreted the impact of the ANPs upon their practice. Pawson and Tilley (1997) advise that instead of attempting to elicit views from as many stakeholders as possible, evaluators should focus and prioritise their inquiry to elicit the views of those with the relevant expertise and knowledge. Bozic and Crossland (2012) argue that it is of great importance to gain feedback about a programme from those actually involved in the programme. In my

opinion, the SENCOs were best placed to comment upon the IPS, so I focussed phase two of the research upon eliciting their accounts.

#### **4.3.2.2 Procedure**

SENCOs were recruited as an opportunity sample. I e-mailed all SENCOs who had taken part in ANPs (n=30) informing them about my evaluation. (See appendix three for an example of the recruitment letter and appendix seven for an example of the information leaflet included with the e-mail). A week later I e-mailed the SENCOs again, asking if they would agree to take part in an interview. 11 SENCOs agreed and I interviewed each one at a convenient time at their place of work. Each SENCO signed a consent form (appendix five). Interviews were recorded using a Dictaphone.

I decided to interview each SENCO that agreed to participate. I was not expecting to uncover uniform accounts of the ANPs; I hoped that different SENCOs would recount differing experiences of the ANPs. Each account would be unique and could therefore make a distinct contribution to emerging theories. SENCOs participated from each ANP, as shown in table 4.2 below. The sample did not represent an even spread, there were a higher proportion of SENCOs from Atown and Btown ANPs. I was one of the EPs involved in running those ANPs, and this could be the reason why more participants volunteered from Atown and Btown.

	<b>Atown ANP</b>	<b>Btown ANP</b>	<b>Ctown ANP</b>	<b>Dtown ANP</b>	<b>Etown ANP</b>
<b>Number of SENCOs interviewed</b>	4	2	1	1	3
<b>Total number of SENCOs within the ANP</b>	6	3	4	6	10

Table 4.2: Number of participants from each ANP.

The first interview was intended as a pilot for the purpose of refining the interview questions. Following the interview I reflected upon what had happened. I felt that the SENCo had understood and been able to answer each question fully and gave answers that were relevant to the IPS (Pawson and Tilley, 1997). I did not, therefore, change the interview schedule, as it was workable in its original form (appendix eight). I decided that I would include the pilot interview within my findings as it provided a rich and detailed account of the ANPs. I felt that the SENCo had been open and honest with me as she had discussed things that were not working so well about the ANPs.

As the first interview was a pilot, I asked the SENCo how she had felt about the questions. She replied:

'Yeah, no they were fine I think just, like, I went on to some of the other things... It's kind of more wide ranging isn't it? So I know some if you were reading them back to me and saying "I think we've covered this," I think that's hard isn't it because you want to make sure you've covered everything and you're fair in answering your questions.'

I felt satisfied that the questions I had used were 'open' enough. The SENCo seemed to be saying that she had a lot to talk about, and had felt prompted to give broad responses. There was a lot of overlap in her responses, for example she seemed to have partially answered later questions in response to earlier questions. To be polite, I had on several occasions said 'we might have already covered this but...' The SENCo seemed to be saying that this comment may have made her feel like she should perhaps have limited her response. I therefore decided that it would be important not to make this comment again in future interviews.

I conducted ten further interviews using the original schedule (appendix eight). Table 4.3 outlines the questions that SENCos were asked during the semi-structured interview. In each interview, I asked the questions shown in table 4.3, but followed the questions with prompts that seemed appropriate, for example 'how?' 'why?' 'can you give me an example of a time when....' 'It seems like your saying...'

The interviews were realist interviews. This meant that they had a teacher-learner and conceptual refinement function. The IPS was the subject of the interview. I hoped that participants would be able to confirm, falsify and refine the IPS (Pawson and Tilley, 1997). I assumed that interviewees were not passive recipients of the ANPs but were actively involved in interpreting and making sense of the ANPs, and held individual understandings of how the ANPs worked.

Question number	Question
1.	The Educational Psychology Service thought that the Additional Needs Partnerships would enable SENCoS to meet children's needs more effectively. What do you think about this?
2	The Educational Psychology Service thought that the Additional Needs Partnerships would allow SENCoS to develop new perspectives and acquire knowledge. What do you think about this?
3	The Educational Psychology Service thought that the Additional Needs Partnerships would provide emotional and peer support for SENCoS. What do you think about this?
4	The Educational Psychology Service thought that the Additional Needs Partnerships would allow SENCoS to gain psychological advice for children lower down the code of practice. What do you think about this?
5	The Educational Psychology Service thought that the Additional Needs Partnerships would support SENCoS to work more effectively with parents/carers. What do you think about this?
6	The Educational Psychology Service thought that the Additional Needs Partnerships would help parents to feel more informed and confident that school is meeting their child's needs What do you think about this?
7	Is there anything you would do differently/change about the ANPs?
8	Is there anything, in your opinion, that's not working about the ANPs?
9	How did you feel about talking to me?
10	Was there anything else you would like to say?

Table 4.3: SENCo interview questions.

During a realist interview, the interviewer specifically presents to the participants initial findings (teaching) with the purpose of finding out what needs changing (learning) (Nanninga and Glebbeek, 2011). This allows the participant to make an

informed and critical contribution to hypotheses generated in the IPS (Pawson and Tilley, 1997). Pawson and Tilley (2004, p.12) explain the 'teacher-learner' function:

*'The realist interview recognises the theory-testing purpose of evaluation and it is this that shapes the research relationship. Subjects are thus understood to be trying to respond to what they deem the interests of the interviewer. Collecting data that are relevant to evaluation thus involve teaching the respondent the particular programme theory under test in order that subjects can summon responses which speak in relevant ways to CMO configuration at issue.'*

I carefully tried to contextualise for SENCOs why I was asking particular questions and the purpose of the interview. I did not want participants to spend time 'second-guessing', for example thinking 'why is she asking that?' or 'what should I be saying?' Instead I wanted them to be aware that I would be using their responses to develop understandings of whether the ANPs were working as expected. During the interview I introduced SENCOs to six hypothesised outcomes of the ANPs (questions one to six, table 4.3). I explained that this was because I wanted to gain their opinion about each hypothesised outcome. I used probes such as 'why do you think.....' to elicit clarification. I attempted to make it clear that I wanted to reach a mutual understanding of their experiences of the ANPs, so would also use phrases like 'it sounds like you're saying....' I asked participants to give examples of times when hypothesised Os had, or had not, occurred, as this aided development of participants' descriptions. My aim was to enable participants to postulate Ms or Cs that had triggered or inhibited specific Os. The use of probes helped conceptual refinement, in terms of CMO configurations. The interview structure allowed me to add in questions I felt were appropriate in order to elicit extra information.

It is important to note that although the questions asked about specific outcomes, there was overlap in SENCo responses to different questions. I think this is what the pilot SENCo meant when she said, 'I think just, like, I went on to some of the other things... It's kind of more wide ranging isn't it?' For example the pilot SENCo discussed children's needs (outcome mentioned in question one) in response to question three.

SENCOs were e-mailed a copy of the interview schedule one week prior to their scheduled interview in order to provide them with time to think about their answers (appendix eight). The interview schedule also clearly outlined the purpose of the research. The information sheet was e-mailed to SENCOs twice before the interview and given to them on the day (appendix seven).

At the end of SENCo interviews I posed three open questions, 'Is there anything you would do differently/change about the ANPs?' 'Is there anything, in your opinion, that's not working about the ANPs?' and 'is there anything else you would like to say?' There were two reasons for this. Firstly, questions one to six focussed upon specific Os of the ANPs. This had the potential to limit participant's responses and the information they were able to provide. I wanted to present them with the opportunity to discuss topics they believed to be of significance. Secondly, the first six questions were designed to identify how the ANPs work through the production of programme theory. I decided that a useful addition to these findings would be to identify specific aspects of the ANPs SENCOs thought were not working, and their suggestions on how the ANPs could be improved.



I was concerned that the SENCOs may not have felt, during the interviews, that they could be open and honest with me. I used several strategies to attempt to overcome this limitation:

- I provided SENCOs with interview questions prior to the interview to give them time to think about and prepare their answers.
- In my recruitment letter and pre-amble to the interview I made it as clear as possible that my research was aimed at improving the ANPs and I therefore welcomed their opinions and was happy for them to share negative experiences.
- I attempted to use my interpersonal skills as effectively as possible so that participants felt that I was empathetic, understanding and non-judgemental.
- I made it clear to participants that their responses would be anonymised.
- I explained to participants that I would be sharing findings with them at a later date, so they would have another chance to share their opinions (if they felt these have changed at a later date) and influence research findings.
- I explained to participants that the research was aimed at evaluating how the EPS delivered its service NOT at evaluating SENCOs, their practice or the schools they work in.

Pawson and Tilley (1997) argue that evaluators should select the most appropriate method for the research task. The realist interviews provided enough freedom to encourage SENCos to provide detail about Cs, Ms and Os and to follow-up interesting topics that emerged, but also afforded sufficient structure to focus the interview upon areas I wanted to explore. It was therefore the most appropriate method for phase two data collection.

#### **4.4 Analytical strategy**

Analysis of data followed the phases of thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Clarke and Braun (2013) identify thematic analysis as an analytic method (not a methodology) which is flexible and 'can be applied within a range of theoretical frameworks' (p.120). It was therefore possible to adapt this technique to fit within a realistic evaluation framework. My analysis was theoretically driven. First I identified Cs, Ms and Os within texts, and then I searched for themes within identified Cs, Ms and Os. I took a semantic approach. Themes were identified from the explicit meanings of what participants said (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This type of analysis was trialled during the pilot study (February 2013, see appendix nine), so that when I came to analyse the group interview I was confident in using the analytic process described below.

#### 4.4.1 Phase one analysis

1) Familiarisation with the data - I transcribed the group interview (extract appendix 10) word for word using punctuation as seemed appropriate. I then re-listened and read through the transcription several times to check for mistakes and familiarise myself with the content.

2) Highlighting Cs, Ms and Os - I read through the entire transcription and highlighted contexts, mechanisms and outcomes in different colours (example appendix 11). I used the following operational definitions:

- Context - an aspect of the social environment (e.g. school/local authority/community) or of the people involved (e.g. EPs/teachers/school staff/children) that was outside of the EPS' control. These may have existed prior to or during the ANP process. Some examples of contexts are personality, role, knowledge, motivation, organisational structure or political climate.
- Mechanism - activities (including patterns of thinking or actions) undertaken as part of the ANPs. Examples of mechanisms are discussion, completing paperwork, time spent thinking about a problem or asking solution-focused questions.
- Outcome - anything that happens as a result of the ANPs. Examples of outcomes are a change in feeling/attitude/practice/confidence, a change in system such as a school, or a perceived change in a child or group of children.

It should be noted that mechanisms were the most frequent category highlighted and contexts the least frequently highlighted.

3) Coding - using Microsoft word functions, I 'cut and paste'-d all the highlighted Cs (sentences or sections of sentences) onto one page. I then gave each C a descriptive label (example appendix 12). I repeated this for all the Ms and Os. Occasionally I moved a piece of text to a different group (M, C or O) if upon further reading this appeared appropriate.

4) Searching for themes - using Microsoft word functions, I created a table of Cs, putting all sections of text with the same descriptive label in one column (see appendix 13), with the descriptive label at the top of the column (a theme). I repeated this process for the Ms and Os.

5) Reviewing, defining and naming themes - I then looked over the table of Cs to see whether several columns appeared to be describing similar Cs. I merged some columns together or placed them side-by-side, organising themes into meta-themes. I gave meta-themes an encompassing description (see appendix 13 for an example of the table containing C themes and meta-themes). I repeated this for the Ms and Os. By this point I had developed several meta-themes within the Cs, Ms and Os.

6) I did not look at the data for one week, and then re-read through the transcript and coding tables. I re-arranged and re-named some of the themes or meta-themes as appropriate.

7) Creating a table of the initial programme specification - from the analysis it was not possible to create individual C-M-O configurations. This is because themes within the contexts or mechanisms seemed to be discussed in relation to several of the outcomes during the group interview. Instead I produced a qualitative table showing all hypothesised Cs, Ms and Os (appendix 14). Each C, M and O within the table was a meta-theme produced in stages 5 and 6 above. I did not prioritise Cs, Ms and Os that were mentioned more frequently within the text. I regarded each C, M or O as equally important in understanding how the ANPs worked. This table (appendix 14) will be discussed in the next chapter entitled 'Findings'.

The Os described in the IPS (appendix 14) were presented as hypothesised Os to SENCos during the semi-structured interviews in phase two of the research.

#### **4.4.2 Phase two analysis**

Pawson and Tilley (1997) advise that the recipients of programmes are best placed to discuss Ms, as they are likely to have a good understanding of how the programme influenced their actions. Nanninga Glebbeek (2011) advise that practitioners (i.e. EPs such as myself) 'often have a good sense of the contexts that matter' (p.74). The evaluator is best placed to identify outcome patterns and CMO configurations, as they have an overview of how the programme has impacted upon the actions of several participants and can relate this to their knowledge of relevant literature (Nanninga and Glebbeek, 2011). It was therefore my role as evaluator/practitioner to draw the

SENCOs accounts together to develop an understanding of how individual SENCOs' reasoning and actions sat within a wider model of causes and consequences. Through interviewing several SENCOs I was able to identify outcome patterns. I looked for similarities in the accounts of SENCOs who appeared to be describing the same outcome in order to identify mechanisms and contexts which appeared to be related to those outcomes. Phase two data collection and analysis therefore put to test the C-M-O table formulated in phase one (appendix 14) - did the ANPs produce the expected outcomes in the hypothesised manner?

Analysis of data followed a theoretically driven and semantic version of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006):

1) Familiarisation with the data - I transcribed each individual interview and then listened to each interview twice more to check for mistakes and familiarise myself with the content (see appendix 15 which provides an excerpt of the transcript of interview 1 as an example). I made notes of my initial impressions about each interview, for example themes that seemed to be emerging and insights into the ANPs.

2) Highlighting - I analysed the data from SENCO interviews question by question (rather than interview by interview). I began with question one. I highlighted Cs, Ms and Os in different colours, using Microsoft word functions (see above for operational definitions of Cs, Ms, and Os). I did this for question one in each interview (interview one through to 11). I then transferred the Cs, Ms and Os from each interview into a table for question 1 (appendix 16). A representation of how I organised text extracts

within table 4.4 below. I split up the table into answers that appeared to describe a time when the ANPs had triggered, inhibited (or neither) the hypothesised outcome in the question from occurring. This was so that I could begin to formulate links between particular Cs, Ms and Os.

Interview number	Context	Mechanism	Outcome
On this row I pasted all Cs, Ms, and Os from answers that appeared to describe times when the hypothesised outcome in question 1 <i>had</i> occurred.	Extracts of text highlighted as contexts.	Extracts of text highlighted as mechanisms.	Extracts of text highlighted as outcomes.
On this row I pasted all Cs, Ms, and Os from answers that appeared to describe times when the hypothesised outcome in question 1 <i>had not</i> occurred.	Extracts of text highlighted as contexts.	Extracts of text highlighted as mechanisms.	Extracts of text highlighted as outcomes.
On this row I pasted all Cs, Ms, and Os from answers that appeared to be <i>neither agreeing nor disagreeing</i> that the ANPs led to the hypothesised outcome in question 1.	Extracts of text highlighted as contexts.	Extracts of text highlighted as mechanisms.	Extracts of text highlighted as outcomes.

Table 4.4: A representation of the table for question one when all the extracts from the interviews had been 'cut and paste'-d into the table. (Please see appendix 16 for the table I created during data analysis of question one containing text extracts).

Different SENCos indicated differing levels of agreement with the hypothesised O. This meant that different interviews contributed to different sections of the table. Some SENCos provided answers that described times when the O had occurred and also times when it had not. If that was the case, sections of their answer were placed into different sections of the table. I had to be careful to pick out the Ms and Cs that appeared to be linked in the SENCo's narrative to a particular O. I placed Cs, Ms and Os that appeared to be linked in the same row of the table.

In the 'interview number' column I wrote the number of the interviewee. I knew some details about the participants, for example whether they were new to the job. I thought it would be useful to note who had contributed to particular rows, as it could help provide some contextual information that I could add to the C column.

3. Coding - I searched for similarities within extracts of text in the tables.

- I. Searching for themes - I moved text extracts from each interview around within their section of the table so that extracts that seemed to relate to a similar idea were next to each other.
- II. Reviewing themes - I reviewed this by reading through the table and checking each extract of text seemed to have been slotted with similar extracts. I moved extracts around if necessary.
- III. Defining and naming themes - I then gave the group of extracts a name, which I called a theme, so that the table looked more like the representation in table 4.5. Some themes emerged from a single interview; however the majority contained extracts from several interviews. The coding table for question 1 can be found in appendix 16.

I repeated this process for questions two to six of the interview, eventually producing six tables. When coding, many extracts of text across questions appeared to be describing a similar C, M or O. I decided to use the same name for themes that emerged in subsequent tables if they appeared to be describing a theme within Cs, Ms or Os named previously. Some responses appeared to relate to a different O to that



presented in the question. I therefore moved some extracts of text around to slot them into tables containing similar Os. Appendix 17 shows an example of an interview transcript where the Cs, Ms and Os for questions one to six have been highlighted.

Interview number	Context	Mechanism	Outcome
On this row I pasted all Cs, Ms, and Os from answers that appeared to be describing a time when the hypothesised outcome in question 1 <i>had</i> occurred.	Extracts of text theme.	Extracts of text theme.	Extracts of text theme.
	Extracts of text theme.	Extracts of text theme.	Extracts of text theme.
	Extracts of text theme.	Extracts of text theme.	Extracts of text theme.
On this row I pasted all Cs, Ms, and Os from answers that appeared to be describing a time when the hypothesised outcome in question 1 <i>had not</i> occurred.	Extracts of text theme.	Extracts of text theme.	Extracts of text theme.
	Extracts of text theme.	Extracts of text theme.	Extracts of text theme.
	Extracts of text theme.	Extracts of text theme.	Extracts of text theme.
On this row I pasted all Cs, Ms, and Os from answers that appeared to be <i>neither agreeing nor disagreeing</i> that the ANPs led to the hypothesised outcome in question 1.	Extracts of text theme.	Extracts of text theme.	Extracts of text theme.
	Extracts of text theme.	Extracts of text theme.	Extracts of text theme.
	Extracts of text theme.	Extracts of text theme.	Extracts of text theme.

Table 4.5: A representation of the table for question 1 once coding had occurred.

4. Bringing the findings together - I then copied the tables for questions one to six into one Microsoft word document. I deleted the extracts of text from each table, so the six tables showed themes only (appendix 18). From this point forward, I will call themes 'Cs', 'Ms' or 'Os', (dependent upon the column they sat in within the table). It was then possible to begin to formulate links between Cs, Ms, and Os. The overview of themes can be viewed in appendix 18.

5. Merging themes - when I had collected all six tables together, I looked through the tables again. The SENCo answers had provided further specification of Os. For example for hypothesised O one 'the ANPs would enable SENCos to meet children's needs more effectively,' five Os emerged that seemed to agree with this: SENCos found the ANPs useful, helpful and effective; A better use of time than individual planning meetings; SENCos had been supported to deal with cases they have brought to the meetings; Relationships improved between schools; Benefits had been brought to children who had not been discussed at the meetings. Furthermore, each table appeared to be split into two or three categories of O: Positive Os (Os described in answers that seemed to agree with hypothesised Os), negative Os (those which seemed to disagree) and neutral Os (did not appear to agree or disagree). When I looked through tables, I noticed there were many overlaps and similarities between Ms and Cs relating to positive Os. I therefore decided to create a merged table for the positive Os. I merged the positive O row for all six questions so that all the Cs, Ms, and Os relating to positive Os sat together in one table (appendix 19). I moved each theme around within its section (C,M, or O) of the table so similar themes were next to each other. I then merged Cs, Ms or Os with the same or a very similar name (appendix 20). This produced a qualitative table showing Cs, Ms, and Os that appeared to have a causal relationship. This table will be discussed in the findings chapter and will be used to answer the research question '**Do ANPs deliver effective service delivery, and if so, when, why and how?**' The table constitutes the Programme Theory (PT); it proposes an explanation of how processes within the ANP, given particular contexts, produced positive outcomes. It therefore proposes an explanation of how the ANPs work, when they are working effectively.

I carried out a similar technique to produce merged tables relating to negative and neutral Os. I pulled all the sections of tables relating to neutral or negative Os into one document (appendix 21). I observed that there appeared to be similarities in the Cs, Ms and Os for some of these tables. I therefore decided to merge several of the tables. This created tables of neutral and negative Os (appendix 22). I thought it would be helpful to note which Cs and Ms had been discussed in relation to specific unanticipated Os, which is why I created several tables, rather than merging into one. These tables (appendix 22) will also be discussed further in the Findings chapter. They propose causal explanations of times when the ANPs did not work as had been hoped and will be used to answer the research question '**are there ways in which the ANPs could be improved?**'

6. Analysis of the open questions - when I looked through the open questions it became clear that answers fell into broadly into two categories relating to the questions 'Is there anything you would do differently/change about the ANPs?' and 'Is there anything, in your opinion, that's not working about the ANPs? I therefore decided to provide two additional sections to my findings: 'What's not working?' and 'Recommendations'. (If parts of the responses to the open questions appeared to describe a specific O then I highlighted Cs, Ms and Os and integrated these text extracts into the analysis process described in steps two to five).

### What's not working

I took sections of text from each interview that appeared to describe an aspect of the ANPs that was not working effectively (some sections of text also came from SENCo responses to questions one to six). I then gave these sections a descriptive summative sentence (Appendix 23). I compiled a list of the summary sentences. I then grouped summary sentences into themes (a group of sentences that appeared to be describing a similar concept) and attempted to provide a summary sentence for each theme (appendix 24).

### Recommendations

Analysis of the recommendations followed a similar procedure as described above for 'What's not working?' Extracts of text and descriptive summative sentences can be found in appendix 25. A summary document can be found in appendix 26.

Analysis of the open questions also contributed to answering the question **'are there ways in which the ANPs could be improved?'**

## **4.5 Feeding back findings to participants and the EPS**

I completed my analysis of the interview data in August 2013. I was aware that in September 2013, there would be several new ANPs commencing within the LA and therefore believed it would be useful to provide my initial findings to the PEP. I

prepared a document containing the qualitative C, M, O tables I had produced, in a format I believed to be accessible containing a brief explanation of the results (appendix 27). The explanation provided in the document was influenced by my own interpretation of the findings and issues I believed to be particularly pertinent to the EPS. Upon discussion with the PEP, I also produced a summary version of my findings which I sent out to the SENCo participants (appendix 28). I also agreed to hold a presentation and detailed discussion of the findings with all members of the EPS in summer 2014, after I had completed writing the thesis. The PEP was planning for further service delivery to occur via ANPs from September 2014 and my presentation would contribute to a professional development event for EPS staff.

#### **4.6 Ethics**

As a TEP, I was bound by ethical codes of conduct throughout all stages of the research process: planning, data collection and reporting. I followed ethical guidelines laid out by the Health and Care Professionals Council (2012) and the British Psychological Society (2009). Before data collection began, I was also required to submit a research ethics application form to the University of Sheffield School of Education (Appendix 29). The form was reviewed and the proposed research passed by the ethics board in April 2013 (Appendices 30 and 31). These measures ensured that, according to professional and university standards, my research was conducted in an ethical manner.

In my opinion, conducting research in an ethical manner involves more than ticking all the boxes on a checklist or adhering to guidelines in an absolute manner. Throughout the research process I was careful to ensure that the rights and values of my participants, and others who could be affected by the research, were maintained. Conducting the research ethically, therefore, was an active and on-going decision-making process. I did not forget about ethics once I had received ethical approval in April 2013. Cohen *et al.* (2005) explain that the pressure to produce credible research findings can sometimes create ethical dilemmas. Appendix 32 and 33 describe the ethical dilemmas I faced during my research journey and the decisions I made to address those dilemmas.

#### **4.7 Summary**

This chapter has outlined the theoretical and practical constraints that guided data collection and analysis. It has also provided explanation for the decisions I made during these processes. It describes the journey I took to arrive upon the set of findings I will use to answer the questions '**Do ANPs deliver effective service delivery, and if so, when, why and how?**' and '**are there ways in which the ANPs could be improved?**'

## **5 Findings and Discussion**

### **5.1 Introduction**

In the procedures chapter, I explained how I collected and analysed descriptions and accounts of the ANPs. I will now present the end product of this process - the findings of this evaluation. I will relate the findings to previous research and discuss the limitations and practical implications of the findings. I conceptualise my role within the research as the 'builder' rather than 'collector' of findings (Willig, 2008). In order to produce a reflexive account I have incorporated information relevant to the research context and relevant thoughts relating to the findings and research methodology within this chapter (Gough and McFadden, 2001).

### **5.2 Initial Programme Specification (IPS)**

Phase one of the research involved interviewing three EPs (as a group) to ask them how the ANPs worked, so that I could form an initial programme specification (IPS). The aim of the IPS was to capture EPs' theories about how the ANPs worked. I analysed what they said to pick out contexts (Cs), mechanisms (Ms) and outcomes (Os). Specific outcomes of the ANPs had not been clarified previously. The PEP had piloted the ANPs because she believed that they would be a 'better way of working'. At the time of the group interview, the interviewees had been involved in running the ANPs for three terms. They had also been involved in designing and refining the ANP

process. I therefore regarded them as expert practitioners. I assumed that following these experiences, they would have developed beliefs regarding outcomes of the ANPs, in terms of benefits for service-users. One purpose of creating an IPS was, therefore, to clarify EP theories regarding the outcomes of the ANPs. The second purpose was to gain insight into the EPs' explanations of *how* the ANPs worked. This was the purpose of creating an IPS. I regard it as a summary of the EPs' 'theories', 'beliefs' or 'predictions' about how the ANPs worked.

I had initially hoped that data analysis would allow me to link specific Cs, Ms and Os, however as I began to analyse the data, it became clear that this would not be possible. There were not obvious links between specific Cs, Ms and Os in the EPs' dialogue. I decided instead to create a qualitative table outlining the Cs, Ms and Os. This IPS is presented in qualitative table 5.1.



Context	Mechanism	Outcome
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ There are professional relationships between the clusters of schools who sign up to the Additional Needs Partnerships (ANPS) meaning that:                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- They make judgements of one another.</li> <li>- Sometimes the relationship between schools is negative.</li> <li>- Sometimes SENCos already know each other and have worked together before but sometimes they have not.</li> </ul> </li> <li>❖ Before the ANPs commence professionals will already have feelings about the meeting:                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Sometimes they may be apprehensive.</li> <li>- Sometimes they are eager to take part in the ANPs.</li> </ul> </li> <li>❖ There are constraints upon EP time:                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- There are competing priorities for EP work.</li> <li>- There are limits upon the time EPs have available to complete work.</li> </ul> </li> <li>❖ There are individual local factors for each ANP:                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The complexity of the children within the schools.</li> <li>- The needs of the individual SENCos.</li> <li>- Children move between schools in the ANPs.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ SENCos complete preparatory paperwork which prompts them to reflect upon the children they work with.</li> <li>▪ EPs prepare for the ANP meetings: they research issues, they plan how to manage group processes and check how much time they have remaining to carry out individual case work.</li> <li>▪ The ANPs provide a reason for SENCos to discuss children with parents.</li> <li>▪ SENCos are encouraged to take ownership of the meetings.</li> <li>▪ Group discussion allows SENCos to consider novel approaches to their work.</li> <li>▪ The meetings provide a reflective space for SENCos.</li> <li>▪ There is a structured meeting format.</li> <li>▪ Informal networking (between EPs and SENCos and between SENCos) occurs during the meetings and via e-mail.</li> <li>▪ EPs facilitate the meeting.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ The meetings provide emotional and peer support for SENCos.</li> <li>➤ Meetings allow SENCos to develop new perspectives and acquire knowledge.</li> <li>➤ SENCos are enabled to meet children's needs more effectively.</li> <li>➤ SENCos gain psychological advice for children lower down the SEN code of practice.</li> <li>➤ SENCos are supported to work more effectively with parents/carers.</li> <li>➤ Parents feel more informed and confident that school is meeting their child's needs.</li> </ul>

Table 5.1: The initial programme specification (IPS).

### **5.2.1 Outcomes (Os)**

Analysis of the data revealed six outcomes that EPs believed could occur due to the ANPs:

1. The meetings provide emotional and peer support for SENCos.
2. Meetings allow SENCos to develop new perspectives and acquire knowledge.
3. SENCos are enabled to meet children's needs more effectively.
4. SENCos gain psychological advice for children lower down the SENCoP.
5. SENCos are supported to work more effectively with parents/carers.
6. Parents feel more informed and confident that school is meeting their child's needs.

SENCos were questioned about these outcomes in phase two of the research. Appendix 34 contains a copy of the coding table used during thematic analysis to arrive upon the six distinct Os. It should be noted that some Os were discussed more frequently than others. Os one and two were discussed regularly, whereas Os five and six were the least frequent.

### **5.2.2 Mechanisms (Ms)**

The EPs described several Ms they believed operated within the ANPs:

- SENCOs complete preparatory paperwork which prompts them to reflect upon the children they work with;
- EPs prepare for the ANP meetings: they research issues, they plan how to manage group processes and check how much time they have remaining to carry out individual case work;
- The ANPs provide a reason for SENCOs to discuss children with parents;
- SENCOs are encouraged to take ownership of the meetings;
- Group discussion allows SENCOs to consider novel approaches to their work;
- The meetings provide a reflective space for SENCOs;
- There is a structured meeting format;
- Informal networking (between EPs and SENCOs and between SENCOs) occurs during the meetings and via e-mail;
- EPs facilitate the meeting.

During the group interview I asked the EPs to describe what happens before, during and after an ANP meeting. The EPs provided plentiful descriptions of what happens and appeared to give a neutral outline of a typical ANP meeting (rather than recalling specific events, or offering their own opinions on how the groups could run better). Descriptions of what happens at a meeting did not seem to have been a vehicle for EPs to relay personal opinions (negative or positive) about the ANPs. The coding tables for the mechanisms can be found in appendix 35.

During the group interview, when EPs had described what happened, I then asked them 'what is the benefit of ....?' or 'what is helpful about ....?' The purpose of this

was to prompt the EPs to verbalise Os they attributed to the Ms they had just described. The Ms outlined in the initial programme specification are therefore hypothesised to have a causal link to the Os.

### **5.2.3 Contexts (Cs)**

The EPs discussed several aspects of the context they believed could impact upon the workings of the ANPs:

- ❖ There are professional relationships between the clusters of schools who sign up to the Additional Needs Partnerships (ANPS) meaning that:
  - They make judgements of one another.
  - Sometimes the relationship between schools is negative.
  - Sometimes the SENCos already know each other and have worked together before but sometimes they have not.
  
- ❖ Before the ANPs commence professionals will already have feelings about the meeting:
  - Sometimes they may be apprehensive.
  - Sometimes they are eager to take part in the ANPs.
  
- ❖ There are constraints upon EP time:
  - There are competing priorities for EP work.

- There are limits upon the time EPs have available to complete work.
  
- There are individual local factors for each ANP:
  - The complexity of the children within the schools.
  - The needs of the individual SENCOs.
  - Children move between schools in the ANPs.

It is interesting to note that when discussing contextual factors, the EPs were usually offering an opinion on how the context could impact upon the running of the ANPs, either negatively or positively. The EPs seemed to be saying that two Cs helped the ANPs work effectively: if SENCOs knew each other and had worked together previously and if professionals were eager to take part in the ANPs. The other Cs all seemed to be things that could inhibit positive Os from occurring. Nanninga Glebbeek (2011) advise that practitioners (i.e. the EPs running the ANPs) 'often have a good sense of the contexts that matter' (p.74). Perhaps the EPs had experienced these Cs inhibiting effective working of the ANPs? The coding table for Cs can be found in appendix 36.

#### **5.2.4 Limitations of phase one data collection methods**

As I began to analyse the data from the group interview, I realised that I already had my own theories about how the ANPs worked and their outcomes. I was an 'expert practitioner' in terms of the ANPs (I had read literature on the topic, and ran and helped design the ANPs) therefore my thoughts and theories about the ANPs may have influenced the IPS. During analysis I was wary not to impose my own theories onto

the data. Even so there are parts of the IPS I recognise as having my influence. For example, some of the wording, 'consider novel approaches' and 'reflective space' seem to be phrases I have assimilated from research literature. It was also apparent, however, that some of the Cs, Ms and Os did not originate from me. For example, I was aware that I had not been of the opinion that the ANPs would support SENCOs to work more effectively with parents and carers. The inclusion of ideas that I recognise as not being my own, therefore, suggests that the IPS does provide a representation of other EPs' contributions. The IPS should perhaps be interpreted as a combination of expert practitioner viewpoints, a portrayal of both mine and the other EPs' theories about the ANPs.

At times the interview seemed slightly artificial as I was asking the EPs about things they knew I already knew about. They may have wondered 'why is she asking that?' or omitted information they assumed I knew. If I were to repeat the process I would have conducted a second pilot (following on from the Feb 2013 pilot) and interviewed a separate EP involved in running an ANP. This would have allowed me to rehearse asking another person the interview questions, and would have increased my confidence that the questions were broad enough to tap into a range of Cs, Ms and Os. I could then have refined my questions prior to the group interview.

Some of the above limitations could also have been reduced if I had presented questions, but then also contributed to the answers, so the interview would have felt more like a group discussion. This would have meant that my own thoughts and opinions would have been captured as part of the data collection process. This would

have strengthened my claim that the IPS is a combination of expert practitioner viewpoints. It may have also made the interview feel more like a regular workplace discussion, and less artificial.

I had found it hard to conduct the group interview. It was difficult to manage three EPs and they seemed to stray off topic regularly. Interpersonal dynamics may have influenced what the EPs felt they were able to say in a group, for example EPs may have reported Ms that did not occur regularly, like meeting preparation, to preserve an image of professional competency in front of colleagues. An alternative strategy could have been to interview the three EPs separately, and then a combined analysis of their separate accounts could have contributed to the IPS.

### **5.3 Phase two findings - positive outcomes**

Phase two of the evaluation involved the development of theory about how the ANPs worked and ways in which they could be improved. This involved questioning SENCOs about the six Os hypothesised in the IPS. I asked SENCOs what they thought about these Os and to describe times when they felt they had, or had not, been achieved. There were two purposes to this: to gauge whether SENCOs thought the ANPs were indeed bringing about Os predicted by members of the EPS who had been involved in designing the ANPs, and for SENCOs to describe Ms and Cs linked to particular Os. Different SENCOs agreed to differing extents that each O had been achieved. Table 5.2 shows the frequency of responses that appeared to describe times when each O had occurred (positive O), not occurred (negative O) or neutral. Please note that the Os

relate to the implementation of the ANPs as a mode of EPS delivery. I was not just asking SENCOs to discuss the outcomes in relation to the actual ANP meetings, but in relation to their participation in a new way of working with the EPS and each other.

I interviewed 11 SENCOs. Some SENCOs were able to provide description of times when an O had been achieved and times when it had not (for example, in the first few meetings they did not feel enabled to meet children’s needs more effectively, but as the meetings evolved they felt this O had been achieved). This is why the numbers across rows do not always total 11.

Outcome	Occurred	Did not occur	Neutral
1 – The ANPs would enable SENCOs to meet children’s needs more effectively.	7	3	3
2 - The ANPs would allow SENCOs to develop new perspectives and acquire knowledge.	10	3	
3 – The ANPs would provide emotional and peer support for SENCOs.	10	3	
4 - SENCOs would gain psychological advice for children lower down the code of practice.	9	4	
5 - SENCOs would be supported to work more effectively with parents/carers.	5	7	1
6 - Parents would feel more informed and confident that school is meeting their child's needs.	6	5	3

Table 5.2: Frequency table to show number of responses indicating an outcome had occurred, not occurred or neutral.



### 5.3.1 Programme theory (PT)

One of the purposes of phase two, was to develop a programme theory (PT) - this is a theory of how ANPs worked to achieve positive Os. The PT will be used to answer the first research question '**Do ANPs deliver effective service delivery, and if so, when, why and how?**' The PT is described in terms of outcomes (Os) - things that happened as a result of the ANPs, mechanisms (Ms) - activities that happened during the ANPs to bring about those Os and contexts (Cs) - aspects of the social environment that enabled Ms and Os to occur. Interviews with SENCOs provided detailed description of many positive Os, and Ms and Cs linked to these. This enabled me to develop a detailed PT, which is represented in table 5.3.

The Programme Theory (PT) presents positive Os that were reported to occur due to ANPs and explanations of how the ANPs brought about those positive Os. Not every C, M or O occurred in every ANP. Some of the positive Os were reported to occur in every ANP due to a selection of Cs and Ms. My analytic technique did not enable me to link individual C-M-O configurations as Cs and Ms were discussed across questions (please see the procedures chapter, section 4.4.2, for details of the analytic process).

Contexts	Mechanisms	Outcomes
<p><b>A varied combination of SENCoS:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ New SENCoS within the group.</li> <li>❖ SENCoS with a range of specialist knowledge and experience within the group.</li> <li>❖ Size of partnership (desirable size not specified).</li> <li>❖ Some SENCoS in the partnership had low numbers of children with a high level of need within their school.</li> <li>❖ Some schools in the partnership contained children with higher levels of need.</li> </ul> <p><b>Positive SENCo relationships:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ SENCoS had good relationships and worked together prior to the set-up of the ANP.</li> <li>❖ SENCoS in the group were supportive of one another.</li> <li>❖ SENCoS already knew the EP.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Structured discussion:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ joint problem-solving involving the sharing of ideas, suggestions, and experiences.</li> <li>▪ listening to a thorough and deep discussion of cases (hearing about the needs of other children in other schools) - this allows SENCoS to consider ways of supporting similar children in their own school.</li> <li>▪ receiving advice.</li> <li>▪ discussing general SEN issues and resources.</li> <li>▪ discussing children at all levels of the code of practice.</li> <li>▪ collecting information about children prior to transition.</li> <li>▪ creating an action plan for individual children.</li> <li>▪ Reviewing progress.</li> </ul>	<p><b>1. SENCoS supported to develop their practice:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ SENCoS developed new perspectives and acquired knowledge.</li> <li>➤ SENCoS expanded their role within their school (e.g. implementing school-wide strategies and staff training, increased ability to discuss SEN issues).</li> <li>➤ SENCoS felt more able to moderate judgements about children's level of need.</li> <li>➤ SENCoS became more aware of SEN issues in other schools.</li> </ul> <p><b>2. The ANPs provided support to SENCoS:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ The ANP made SENCoS feel supported.</li> <li>➤ Closer relationships developed between SENCoS and their schools.</li> <li>➤ SENCo confidence grew.</li> </ul> <p><b>3. A more efficient process:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ SENCoS felt meetings were a good use of their time, they took something from the</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ SENCOs had good relationships with parents.</li> </ul> <p><b>SENCO concerns about individual children:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ SENCOs prioritised cases.</li> <li>❖ SENCOs sometimes felt unsure about what to do in individual cases.</li> <li>❖ SENCOs had concerns about how to meet a child's needs.</li> <li>❖ Sometimes SENCOs found it difficult to contact an EP for advice.</li> </ul> <p><b>Parental concerns:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Parental permission for EP involvement not given.</li> <li>❖ Parents querying in-school support for their child.</li> <li>❖ Parents had concerns about their child.</li> <li>❖ SENCOs had already communicated with parents about their child's needs.</li> </ul>	<p><b>meeting preparation and follow-up</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ When SENCOs bring a case, they were asked lots of questions about the child. This, and the paperwork, meant that they had to prepare and find out information about the child from parents and teachers prior to the meeting.</li> <li>▪ Obtaining consent on the paperwork meant that SENCOs had to speak with parents.</li> <li>▪ SENCOs explained to parents that the meetings were pro-active and would help find solutions.</li> <li>▪ SENCOs met with parents to discuss the outcomes of the meeting.</li> <li>▪ The meetings were minuted.</li> <li>▪ Paperwork was more meaningful and less bureaucratic than the old SA+.</li> </ul> <p><b>Peer support:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Frequent meetings within the locality with other local SENCOs.</li> <li>▪ SENCOs networked informally which</li> </ul>	<p>meetings.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ SENCOs felt the meetings were a better use of time than individual planning meetings.</li> <li>➤ Individual cases were dealt with quicker.</li> <li>➤ SENCOs found the ANPs useful, helpful and effective.</li> </ul> <p><b>4. SENCOs felt Children's needs were met:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ SENCOs received advice which they believed helped them to meet the needs of children lower down the code of practice, for example at SA.</li> <li>➤ EPs only became involved in complex cases.</li> <li>➤ SENCOs supported to deal with cases they brought to the meetings.</li> <li>➤ SENCOs felt the ANP brought benefits to children who were not discussed at the meeting.</li> </ul> <p><b>5. SENCOs felt supported in their work with parents:</b></p>
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<p><b>Problems with the previous system:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Under the previous system there was limited EP time meaning that only statement and SA+ children could be discussed with an EP.</li> <li>❖ In the past EPs would have worked individually with all SA+ cases.</li> <li>❖ In the past SENCOs did not know what was happening in other schools.</li> <li>❖ Schools who previously did not always consult parents before putting interventions into place.</li> <li>❖ The previous system did not seem as structured.</li> </ul>	<p>involved the sharing of resources and knowledge.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Sharing concerns with other SENCOs who understood the difficulties of being a SENCO.</li> </ul> <p><b>EP contribution to the ANPs:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ EPs disseminated knowledge, sometimes via e-mails or handouts.</li> <li>▪ EPs attended the meetings and were supportive.</li> <li>▪ EPs were made aware of cases where statutory assessment was an appropriate course of action.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ SENCOs supported to communicate effectively with parents.</li> <li>➤ Parents reassured about what is happening for their child.</li> <li>➤ Parents agreed to their child being discussed at the meeting.</li> <li>➤ SENCOs more accountable to parents.</li> <li>➤ Formal discussions occurred with parents at an earlier stage.</li> <li>➤ SENCOs believed that being asked to consent to an ANP was less intimidating for parents than being asked to consent to EP involvement.</li> </ul>
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Table 5.3: The programme theory. Each bullet-point represents a theme that emerged in the Cs, Ms or Os during data analysis (please see appendix 20). I have grouped themes that seemed to be referring to a similar concept together and added the emboldened summary statement to describe each group of themes.

The interview questions allowed SENCo participants to discuss a range of Cs and Ms in relation to each positive O. As I analysed the data, it became clear that there were overlaps and similarities in the range of Cs and Ms discussed in relation to each positive O. Rather than one or two Cs or Ms leading to one positive O, a range of Cs and Ms seemed to trigger a range of positive Os. I therefore decided to present findings as a qualitative table providing summary and explanation of how the ANPs worked, when they were working effectively. If I had taken too much of a reductionist approach and attempted to link individual Cs, Ms and Os, I think this would have meant that I overlooked the complexity of the ANPs and interactions between aspects of the context and different mechanisms. In my opinion, 'the whole is more than the sum of its parts'. The PT will help answer the question '**Do ANPs deliver effective service delivery, and if so, when, why and how?**'

The PT could also be regarded as a theory outlining how the 'ideal' ANP might operate. I claim that the Cs listed can provide an environment that is conducive for the Ms to operate. These Ms can then enable positive Os to occur. Causality is therefore assumed in table 5.3. The PT is not an exhaustive list; there may be other Cs, Ms and Os that were not uncovered in this evaluation. The PT therefore has implications for practice, it contains Ms and Cs EPs should consider when running ANPs.

In the following section I will elaborate upon the Cs, Ms and Os presented in table 5.3 to provide clarity for the reader. It is important to note that *each* individual C, M, or O was not described by *every* SENCo. Instead, each C, M, or O is a theme that was created from text extracts from one or more SENCo interviews. I have included details

of Cs, Ms and Os that were pertinent for individuals, not just topics that occurred frequently across interviews. The reason for this was to provide information about how the ANPs were successful in different contexts and when things worked well, the variety of reasons why. The PT should be regarded as a compilation of things that were reported to work well across ANPs. In table 5.3 I have grouped together themes (Cs, Ms or Os) that appear to be discussing a similar topic and given each group of themes a summary title. It is important to emphasise that the PT is *theory*. It does not claim to report facts or truth about the ANPs, but explanations. The PT was inevitably influenced by my experiences of running ANPs and discussions and meetings with colleagues. The PT should be viewed as theory influenced by my understandings of the ANPs and my interpretations of what the SENCOs said.

### **5.3.2. Outcomes (Os)**

SENCOs discussed several desirable outcomes of the ANPs. I placed these into five groups of themes, each with an over-arching title:

#### **5.3.2.1 SENCOs supported to develop their practice:**

- SENCOs developed new perspectives and acquired knowledge.

- SENCOs expanded their role within their school (e.g. implementing school-wide strategies and staff training, increased ability to discuss SEN issues).
- SENCOs felt more able to moderate judgements about children's level of need.
- SENCOs became more aware of SEN issues in other schools.

When I asked SENCOs the question 'we thought the ANPs would allow you to develop new perspectives and acquire knowledge, what do you think about that?' Many SENCOs replied 'yes...' and then proceeded to describe how they felt the ANPs had done this. That is why I have left the original phrase from the IPS as an O within this category (many SENCOs also able gave additional descriptions of how their practice had developed).

The first set of positive Os appears to suggest that the ANPs impacted upon SENCO practice and met training needs. Below are some quotes highlighting benefits individual SENCOs described.

SENCO seven explained how the group discussion helped her compare cases within her own school to those within other schools:

'it's useful to share ideas and listen ..... I think it helps us to moderate judgements across the partnership.'

SENCo eight described how the ANPs had helped her to become more aware of SEN issues:

'because you can listen to other people, hear their issues, talk about what they're experiencing ..... You do learn things that otherwise you might need to go on a course for.'

SENCo three reported that she had used resources discussed in an ANP during whole-school training:

'the input that I got from yourself and from X, with all the support and the resources was phenomenal, so I came back to school and led a CPD session ..... with the whole school.'

This first set of positive outcomes are similar to the outcomes of group consultation described in the research literature: Hanks (1999) and Evans (2005) report that group consultation enabled consultees to gain deeper understandings and new perspectives. Soni (2013) and Newton (1995) report that taking part in group consultation developed consultees' abilities to question, listen to, consult with and help others. Bozic and Carter (2002) reported raised awareness of novel strategies and resources. The first set of positive Os therefore appear to echo findings in previous research: group consultation can support consultees to consider different perspectives, acquire knowledge, and gain a deeper understanding of problems and to acquire skills that enable them to discuss concerns and problems with other professionals. Specific to the current findings, SENCos felt more able to moderate judgments and felt they had



acquired a greater knowledge of SEN issues. This could, perhaps, be because the ANPs involved SENCOs from different schools. Previous research often related to consultation groups held within one setting. Several SENCOs also reported they had implemented school-wide strategies and staff training as a result of the ANPs.

Kennedy *et al.* (2008) questioned whether consultation could meet training needs. Findings in relation to outcome one would suggest that the ANPs can meet SENCO training needs. SENCOs seemed to be reporting that they felt to have increased knowledge and had developed skills relevant to their role. This could be because of the 'issue-focussed consultation' that occurred as part of some ANPs, but also listening and discussing cases seems to have been an important aspect of the process. (Further discussion of mechanisms will occur later in this chapter).

Previous research findings provided limited information regarding the impact of consultation upon teachers' practice, in particular whether strategies discussed during consultation were followed through (e.g. Alexander & Sked, 2010; Kennedy *et al.*, 2008). The current findings appear to suggest a change in SENCO practice, in terms of their development within their professional role. They do not provide insight, however, into how classroom teachers (under supervision of the SENCOs) dealt with individual cases discussed at the meetings.

### 5.3.2.2 The ANPs provided support to SENCOs:

- The ANP made SENCOs feel supported.
  
- Closer relationships developed between SENCOs and their schools.
  
- SENCO confidence grew.

The second set of Os relates to SENCOs feeling supported by the ANPs. The majority of SENCOs replied 'yes' to the question 'we thought the ANPs would provide emotional and peer support for SENCOs, what do you think about that?' SENCO one replied:

'That it definitely has. Just being able to talk to other people who know what you're going through and the stresses and strains of trying to support a difficult child, or someone with challenging needs, they understand more than perhaps some of your colleagues might in school.'

SENCOs also described how they had developed relationships with other SENCOs. For example, SENCO two responded:

'Yep, definitely, it's a really, I felt ... like it's some kind of club that I've now joined that I didn't know existed, in that it's such a friendly group, and it is a *really* massively supportive group, it's the nicest of all the networks that we go on, ..... we all look out for each other and support each another.'

Several SENCOs also discussed how participating in the ANPs had helped them to feel more confident, for example SENCO three described how she now felt more confident in her role as a SENCO:

'Without sounding to be too cheesy I just want to say thank you because if we hadn't of had the opportunity, I would still be floundering in many ways.'

Previous studies report that group consultees felt supported (Newton, 1995), reassured (Brown & Henderson, 2012, Soni, 2013), more confident (Guishard, 2000, Bozic & Carter, 2002, Soni, 2013), less isolated (Stinger *et al.*, 1992, Soni, 2013) and less stressed (Bozic and Carter, 2002). The second set of positive Os, combined with findings from previous research, provides backing for theory which claims that group consultation is supportive and develops consultee confidence.

#### **5.3.2.3 A more efficient process:**

- SENCOs felt meetings were a good use of their time; they took something from the meetings.
  
- SENCOs felt the meetings were a better use of time than individual planning meetings.
  
- Individual cases were dealt with quicker.
  
- SENCOs found the ANPs useful, helpful and effective.

The third set of Os described by SENCOs concerned their feelings that the process was efficient: the meetings were a good use of their time, cases had been dealt with quickly and they found the meetings helpful. Participants in Stringer *et al.* (1992) and Brown and Henderson's (2012) studies also described group consultation as useful, and participants in Bozic and Carter's (2002) research felt that group consultation had been a good use of their time.

Bozic and Carter (2002) researched collaborative problem-solving (based upon the work of Hanko, 1999), which is similar to the group consultation format used in the ANPs. In Bozic and Carter's research, data was collected via a Likert-scale questionnaire, meaning that participants were, perhaps, merely agreeing that the groups were a good use of their time. I did not specifically ask SENCOs how they felt, in terms of their time. The teacher-learner interview, therefore, did not prime or limit participant responses in the same way that Bozic and Carter's questionnaire may have done. In my opinion, the realist interview allowed me to gain greater insight into consultees' perceptions of collaborative problem-solving than those employed in previous research.

SENCO eight discussed how the meetings were a better use of time:

'Well I think the amount of time discussing referral pupils is probably the same as before but the difference is you can draw on other people's expertise and experience so rather than trying to research or problem-solve yourself you've got other people to talk to as well.'

SENCo six explained why she thought the process was quicker in terms of dealing with individual cases. Under the time allocation system SENCos had met once per term for an individual planning meeting with an EP. In her ANP, group consultations had occurred every half term:

'... it used to take quite a long time to get to that stage where the Educational Psychologist would be involved, where you'd get that richness of experience and advice, whereas if you're meeting every half term, I can take a child to that meeting, I can take as many as I want, and get advice every six to seven weeks, and I can go back after six weeks and say we've done x, y, and z and this doesn't work so can I try something new? So the process, I've felt has been much more, erm, swift.'

The findings are helpful in the development of theory regarding *how* SENCos describe the ANPs as useful: they were able to 'take' something from the meeting, for example ideas, strategies, resources, and it was an efficient way of problem-solving around individual cases. The current findings, therefore, provide the reader with detailed understandings of group consultation.

#### **5.3.2.4 SENCos felt children's needs were met:**

- SENCos received advice they believed helped them to meet the needs of children lower down the code of practice, for example at SA.
- EPs only became involved in complex cases.
- SENCos supported to deal with cases they brought to the meetings.

- SENCOs felt the ANP brought benefits to children who were not discussed at the meeting.

SENCOs described how they felt the ANPs had enabled them to meet the needs of children, both those children directly discussed at the meetings, and other children within their schools. SENCO two discussed how the ANPs had benefitted many children because she had brought ideas back from the meetings:

'So I think it hasn't just impacted upon on the children individually that I've brought, I really do think that's had an impact on them, but indirectly for me as a professional it means that I've been able to help more general children and enquiries about children from teachers.'

Another theme that several SENCOs described was that within their partnership, EPs had only become involved in complex cases. This was an O I believe EPS staff had been hoping for (although this was not made explicit during the group interview) as it meant EP time was used more efficiently across clusters of schools.

Previous research literature does not provide accounts of how school staff felt group consultation had impacted upon the children they worked with. Bozic and Carter (2002) and Soni (2013) report that consultees had raised awareness of novel strategies and resources, but do not indicate whether consultees felt able to translate this knowledge into practice. The fourth set of Os therefore provides a novel contribution to current understandings of the benefits of group consultation. It appears that

SENCOs involved in group consultation felt that they had been able to deal with individual cases, not just the children discussed during the meetings, but also other children within their schools. It also suggests that the group consultations freed up EP time to deal with the most complex cases. SENCOs, did not, however, provide examples of specific children or changes that had occurred for those individual children. It is important to note, therefore, that findings indicate that SENCOs *felt* they had been able to meet children's needs. Further research into classroom teachers' and childrens' perceptions, of how needs had been met, would help provide improved understandings of the benefits of group consultation.

#### **5.3.2.5 SENCOs felt supported in their work with parents:**

- SENCOs supported to communicate effectively with parents.
- Parents reassured about what is happening for their child.
- Parents agreed to their child being discussed at the meeting.
- SENCOs more accountable to parents.
- Formal discussions occurred with parents at an earlier stage.
- SENCOs believed that being asked to consent to an ANP was less intimidating for parents than being asked to consent to EP involvement.

Several SENCOs discussed how the ANPs had supported their work with parents:

'I think the paperwork's tightened up the way that I communicate with parents. I do have quite a good relationship with parents anyway. You know they know that I'm the SENCO and that I'm sort of involved or whatever and that they can come to me..... But certainly the paperwork for the additional needs partnership.... I think has sort of tightened up and it's ... sort of given parents a clear view of what's expected and what's going to be happening and things like that ..... Like I've fed back to parents about the outcomes of the meetings and ..... it's helped in that way.' (SENCO four)

Previous studies into group consultation have not provided information about how teachers felt about their work with parents/carers. The fifth set of Os therefore provides a novel contribution to current understandings of the benefits of group consultation. It is important to note that findings indicate that SENCOs *felt* supported in their work with parents, and *perceived* that parents felt reassured. It does not provide an indication as to how parents felt about the ANPs.

Only half of the SENCOs appeared to agree that the Os 'SENCOs would be supported to work more effectively with parents/carers' or 'parents would feel more informed and confident that school is meeting their child's needs' had occurred on any occasion (please see table 5.2). I think it is important to stress, therefore, that the fifth set of positive Os were formulated from the responses of fewer SENCOs than other positive Os. Many SENCOs responses contributed to negative Os discussed later in this chapter.



### 5.3.3 Mechanisms (Ms)

A large proportion of SENCo interview dialogue involved description of Mechanisms (Ms) - ways in which the ANPs had helped bring about Os SENCos had experienced. The Ms relating to positive Os - Ms that form part of the PT - are described below. I have organised the Ms into groups, to which I have assigned a summary label (emboldened).

A mechanism that SENCos discussed at length was the **structured discussion** that occurred during ANP meetings. SENCos described several aspects of the discussion that they had found helpful:

- joint problem-solving involving the sharing of ideas, suggestions, and experiences;
- listening to a thorough and deep discussion of cases (hearing about the needs of other children in other schools) - this allowed SENCos to consider ways of supporting similar children in their own school;
- receiving advice;
- discussing general SEN issues and resources;
- discussing children at all levels of the code of practice;
- collecting information about children prior to transition;
- creating an action plan for individual children;
- Reviewing progress.

This seemed to suggest that SENCos found the actual process of listening and talking with others in a similar role particularly helpful. Consultation is conceptualised in the current research as involving conversations that explore problems and the perceptions, beliefs, ideas and patterns of interactions within the system (e.g. class, school, education system) that contribute to the understanding of the problem. Consultation also allows the solutions and differences that members of the system could make to be explored. The first set of Ms would appear to suggest that these processes did indeed occur as part of group consultation. Kennedy *et al.* (2008) analysed how seventeen EPs used consultation in practice. Transcriptions of consultations revealed that most conversations went through problem-solving stages (problem identification, problem analysis, plan implementation). The first set of mechanisms would appear to suggest that these phases also occurred during ANP group consultations.

SENCos explained that the ANPs allowed them to reflect and obtain ideas and advice. SENCo nine described how the discussions at meetings had helped her, even though she had yet to bring a case of her own to the meetings:

'I haven't actually taken any cases to the meetings, as yet, but I've listened to some of the other cases that have been brought and actually it definitely brings other children to mind from school. So for strategies and interventions that have been suggested I've then been able to think 'right, that would work for this child'.... so I've found the sharing of ideas and sort of the cases that we bring really beneficial'

There were aspects of the meeting format that SENCos described as helpful: they received advice, completed action plans and were able to review progress. SENCo one

described how reviewing the progress of pupils discussed at previous meetings had been useful:

'then being able to review it at the next half term meeting and then again saying to each other 'have you tried this have you tried that?'

Previous research into group consultation reported that group consultation had allowed consultees to discuss and share problems (e.g. Hanks, 1999, Bozic and Carter, 2002), learn from others (Soni, 2013), meet with colleagues (Stringer *et al.*, 1992), reflect (Hanks, 1999, Farouk, 2004), plan (Alexander and Sked, 2010, Evans, 2005) try something new (Bozic and Carter, 2002, Brown and Henderson, 2012) and develop team work (Brown and Henderson, 2012, Soni, 2013). The structured format of the ANPs also seemed to allow these processes to occur.

It is interesting to note, that 'creating an action plan' was the only M that appeared to relate directly to solution-focused approaches. One aspect of a solution-focused approach is that the consultee is set follow-up tasks (Rhodes & Ajmal, 1995). Newton (1995) speculated whether questioning was the most effective part of group consultation or whether agreeing strategies and a plan of action was crucial. The current findings would suggest that receiving advice and suggestions and using these to draw up an action plan are indeed significant parts of the process.

SENCOs also discussed how **meeting preparation and follow-up** was a helpful part of the process:

- When SENCOs brought a case, they were asked lots of questions about the child. This, and the paperwork, meant they had to prepare and find out information about the child from parents and teachers prior to the meeting;
- Obtaining consent on the paperwork meant that SENCOs had to speak with parents;
- SENCOs explained to parents that the meetings were pro-active and would help find solutions;
- SENCOs met with parents to discuss the outcomes of the meeting;
- The meetings were minuted;
- Paperwork was more meaningful and less bureaucratic than the old SA+.

Several SENCOs described how the questioning that occurred during the meetings meant they felt obliged to prepare sufficiently. This had the effect of increasing SENCO awareness of the kind of information they should know about children in order to address their difficulties. This would support Newton's (1995) assertion that questioning is an important aspect of the process:

'I think the depth that it makes you go to because you're held to account at that meeting, because you gotta answer the questions ..... because if I don't know enough about the child's needs, then I can't, bring it to the partnership so it's actually pulled me up in terms of the level of what I need to know about a child.' (SENCO two)

Preparing for the meetings and then feeding back to parents also appeared to be a way in which the ANPs had supported work with parents. SENCO ten explained how

completing the paperwork provided opportunity for SENCos to discuss children with parents:

'I mean we always talk to them..... obviously we need their permission to bring a child to the partnership, so I would always sort of invite them into school and have a chat, explain the process and who's going to be at the meeting and what the outcomes would be.'

Evans (2005) reported that when group consultation was implemented as an obligatory mode of service delivery within her EPS, teachers had to complete a consultation request form, obtain permission and feedback to parents. Evans' did not, however, evaluate how this impacted upon the process. Instead Evans asked consultees to mark three rating scale questions, relating to the group consultation session, at the end of each meeting. Evans did not, therefore, investigate how meeting preparation and follow-up impacted upon group consultation as a mode of service delivery. The current findings therefore represent a novel contribution to understandings of factors that may promote the efficacy of group consultation as a mode of service delivery.

The paperwork SENCos had previously been required to complete (as part of the time-allocation model) in order to obtain EP involvement had been lengthy (approximately ten pages plus copies of IEPs, samples of work and behaviour logs). The preparatory paperwork for discussion at an ANP is two pages long (please find an example in appendix 2, pages 12 to 14) and the format focuses SENCo thinking around questions they may be asked during the meeting.

SENCos also described ways in which the ANPs offered them **peer support**:

- Frequent meetings within the locality with other local SENCo;
- SENCos networked informally which involved the sharing of resources and knowledge;
- Sharing concerns with other SENCos who understood the difficulties of being a SENCo.

The sharing of problems with others, who seem to be in a similar situation, was something many SENCos, for example SENCo ten, described as supportive:

'And also just to see how overwhelmed everybody can become with the paperwork and the processes and things and think, "it's not just me, I'm not working in isolation, everybody else is sort of having the same problems and facing the same difficulties."

Many SENCos described how they had networked with one or more members of their ANP outside of the meetings. This had allowed SENCos to ask each other questions and share resources. SENCo 11 described how members of her ANP had visited each other's schools to share practice:

'S's a sort of newly appointed SENCo so we feel .... that we want to support her and offer her support and she does e-mail if she needs, you know, anything .... And actually meeting other SENCos as well..... all those changes that have been introduced, I've had to go and find out information out from other SENCos, so I've ended up going up to T in my own time and she's gone through things with me.'

Previous literature discusses how group consultation reduced feelings of isolation (Soni, 2013; Stringer *et al.*, 1992,) and allowed consultees to meet with colleagues to

reflect and develop team work and relationships (Brown and Henderson, 2012; Guishard, 2000; Soni, 2013; Stringer *et al.*, 1992). Having the opportunity to meet with others in a similar role, to discuss problems and concerns, seems to provide a structure that enables consultees to feel supported by group consultation.

Previous research does not report informal networking that occurred outside of the group consultation sessions. The current research invited participants to reflect upon the ANP process as a whole, rather than focussing solely upon the content of meetings. I think this was an advantage of the chosen methodology as it enabled the development of wide-ranging theory regarding processes that promote effective functioning of the ANPs.

There were aspects of **EP contribution to the ANPs** that several SENCOs described as helpful:

- EPs disseminated knowledge, sometimes via e-mails or handouts;
- EPs attended the meetings and were supportive;
- EPs were made aware of cases where statutory assessment was an appropriate course of action.

SENCOs described times when EPs had contributed a psychological perspective to discussions, provided handouts or e-mailed resources as particularly helpful. For example SENCO nine described a time when an EP had e-mailed resources relating to a case that would be discussed at a meeting:

'One of the EPs e-mailed round some information about xxxxxx that I've printed off. And I've read and I've put in the file so I do feel like I've got a much better understanding of that now....the EP had decided it would be useful to have this information actually because of a case that was being brought .... you know they thought about what sort of children we're discussing, what issues we've wanted to sort of find out a little bit more about and sort of provided information to support that.' (SENCo 9)

I believe that the Ms 'EPs disseminated knowledge' and 'discussing general SEN issues and resources' may relate to SENCo experiences of issue-focussed consultation. This would suggest that issue-focussed consultation does add 'value' to the ANPs and should continue to occur in addition to collaborative problem-solving.

Several SENCos reported that they had found that the ANP process streamlined applying for statutory assessment:

'So you know, for example, there's a pupil in nursery .... had quite acute needs and it meant I could move forward more quickly with him than perhaps would have been the case if I'd only had three sessions and other children took all my EP sessions for the year.... this enabled me to evidence what we'd been doing with this child without having to have an EP visit until .... it was ready to move forward for statutory assessment and that was a better use of the EP's time as well.'

Soni (2013) reported that facilitation was a mechanism that promoted group supervision. This appears to relate to the M 'EPs attended the meetings and were supportive'. SENCos may not have used the word 'facilitate' however this M appears to represent that an EP's presence was facilitative.



Nolan and Moreland (2014) suggested that EPs use a range of discursive strategies to promote problem-solving, collaboration and learning during consultation. Although SENCos described the EPs as 'supportive', the current findings do not indicate how EPs used language to facilitate ANP meetings. Another avenue for future research could be to record several ANP meetings and analyse the way language was used during the meetings. This may help develop understandings of the Ms which promote effective workings of the ANPs.

#### 5.3.4 Contexts (Cs)

There were a range of contexts (Cs) SENCos described as they talked about positive Os of the ANPs.

The first group of Cs related to the characteristics of SENCos within the group. The combined accounts of several SENCos seemed to suggest that **a varied combination of SENCos** helped ANPs to work effectively:

- ❖ New SENCos within the group;
- ❖ SENCos with a range of specialist knowledge and experience within the group;
- ❖ Size of partnership (desirable size not specified);
- ❖ Some SENCos in the partnership had low numbers of children with a high level of need within their school;
- ❖ Some schools in the partnership contained children with higher levels of need.

I interviewed a range of SENCOs with varied lengths of experience. There were combinations of SENCOs within each group. The contributions of experienced and knowledgeable SENCOs were acknowledged by SENCO 10:

'That there's a vast, you know, amount of experience there that I can tap into. There's a vast awareness of the different resources that are out there of the people because it is very professional and there's a lot of expertise.' (SENCO 10)

Etscheidt and Knesting (2007) reported that the inclusion of professionals with expertise and experience positively influenced interpersonal dynamics within TSTs. The presence of professionals with skills and knowledge also appeared to promote effective working of the ANPs.

SENCO seven commented that developing new perspectives and knowledge could depend on the size of the ANP:

'I think that partly depends on the size of your partnership as well.'

She did not specify what a desirable size would be but seemed to be indicating that her ANP, containing six SENCOs, worked well:

'we've always been quite a co-operative partnership'.

Soni (2013) reported that if the group was large this could inhibit group supervision. Soni does not specify a desirable size, in terms of numerical value. The current findings, combined with Soni's, provide only limited information regarding the size of group that may be most conducive to effective working. Investigation into size of consultation group is a potential avenue for further research.

SENCOs also discussed the level of need of children within their schools. Several SENCOs described how they had few children with complex needs that academic year whereas other SENCOs discussed how they had multiple children with a high level of need. SENCOs from different contexts, therefore, said that they felt the ANPs had helped them to meet children's needs. When their accounts were combined, it seemed to indicate that ANPs contained SENCOs with differing cohorts of children within their schools. SENCOs mentioned these contexts when discussing positive outcomes. Having a varied cohort of children within member schools may therefore be linked to ANPs working effectively.

Soni (2013) and Brown and Henderson (2012) report time pressures as factors that could negatively impact upon group consultation, and in my opinion this could be related to why a varied cohort of children in member schools might be important. If few complex cases were discussed at the meetings, SENCOs did not learn as much, however, if there were too many complex cases, then there was a large demand upon EP time and air-time during the meetings. It could also be that a combination of cases discussed at meetings helped SENCOs to moderate judgements about children's level of need. In my opinion, these factors relating to group consultation warrant further

investigation. The level of need of children discussed and the amount of air-time each consultee receives provide potential topics of investigation for future research.

The second group of Cs related to **positive SENCo relationships:**

- ❖ SENCos had good relationships and worked together prior to the set-up of the ANP;
- ❖ SENCos in the group were supportive of one another;
- ❖ SENCos already knew the EP;
- ❖ SENCos had good relationships with parents.

Having existing positive relationships with other members of the ANP, including the EP, were contexts that SENCos linked to the ANP working effectively. SENCo one described how the initial meetings had run smoothly because the SENCos already knew each other:

'So 'cus we already all knew each other and we work closely together anyway, erm, the group started really well.'

Senco two described how she felt the caring nature of the people within the group helped her to feel supported:

'it is coupled with an awful lot of caring, a lot of support and it must be the people mustn't it? Because I can't see that the process would necessarily, make it have to be like that. You could just turn up to the meetings, say your bit, feel a bit judged, and just go away again couldn't you?'

SENCo ten, who felt the ANPs had supported her work with parents, explained that building positive relationships with parents was an existing part of her practice:

'well I'd like to think that we have quite effective partnerships with our parents anyway.... children who sort of come into school with special needs I get to start a good relationship there.... if I identify children early on then we can sort of build that rapport.'

It seems rational that existing positive SENCo relationships were a contextual factor that helped ANPs to work effectively. Switching to a new way of doing things can be anxiety provoking, and embarking upon the ANPs with supportive peers or a familiar EP is likely to have reduced SENCo worries and concerns. Soni (2013) reported that having a relaxed team, who trusted and supported each other, promoted group supervision. If the SENCo was an individual who prioritised the formation of positive relationships with parents, this may also have made it easier for the SENCo to explain the new process to parents.

When **SENCos** discussed how they had found the ANPs useful, this was often in relation to times when they had **concerns about individual children**:

- ❖ SENCos prioritised cases;
- ❖ SENCos sometimes felt unsure about what to do in individual cases;
- ❖ SENCos had concerns about how to meet the child's needs;
- ❖ Sometimes it was difficult to contact an EP for advice.

SENCOs have an overview of the children with SEN within their schools, and are sometimes unsure what the appropriate course of action will be. SENCO five talked about how there were times when she felt uncertain what to do:

'Well I suppose just because a SENCO role is quite difficult role in school to fulfil, it's not easy. And it's got so many different strands and aspects to it that even when you're experienced there's still things that you don't know, and still things you don't have experience about.'

SENCO eleven explained that the ANP had helped her to gain advice for a wider range of children. This was because the ANPs provided planned opportunities to meet with other professionals. In the past, contacting an EP with a query could sometimes prove difficult:

'and it's really hard isn't it because you're [the EP] always out, and I'm teaching. It's really hard to have conversations on the phone with people so it's a nice time just to think, "oh right I'll ask that next time I go."'

A large part of the SENCO role involves taking an overview of the SEN register within school and prioritising children to receive specific interventions, additional adult support and to refer to outside agencies. SENCOs often have queries and concerns about their work, and it can sometimes be difficult to locate appropriate advice. This group of Cs could be interpreted to mean that when SENCOs have cases that they are particularly concerned or unsure about, having planned opportunities to meet with other professionals is helpful. Perhaps, under the time allocation model, when SENCOs worked in isolation within their school, it was hard for SENCOs to judge whether they

were doing the right thing. Meeting with a group of professionals to discuss concerns must have been helpful.

The next group of Cs relates to times when SENCos felt they needed extra support or guidance on what they should do next when they had been faced with **parental concerns**:

- ❖ Parental permission for EP involvement not given;
- ❖ Parents/carers querying in-school support for their child;
- ❖ Parents/carers had concerns about their child;
- ❖ SENCos have already communicated with parents/carers about their child's needs.

The ANPs could provide reassurance to parents/carers and SENCos:

'... but I think parents like to feel that something is being done. Because often that's the case isn't it? You'll do your individual plans in school, your IEPs in school, erm, there might be intervention groups going on, but often they might feel that nothing else is being done and actually the progress made to improve the learning or the behaviour or whatever, it is too slow. So anything new, anything that's got the kind of word 'support' attached to it; they're very very welcoming of.' (SENCo three)

Dealing with worried parents can be stressful for SENCos. Sometimes school staff can perceive parents as demanding or troublesome. It is my perception that SENCos often worry that they will say or do the wrong thing or face blame if parents perceive their child has not been supported effectively. Being able to discuss these cases at ANP

meetings is perhaps particularly supportive for SENCos. And because the ANPs are 'official' meetings, this can also provide reassurance to parents that school is taking measures to meet their child's needs.

When SENCos discussed the benefits of the ANPs, they often placed this within the context of **problems with the previous system:**

- ❖ Under the previous system there was limited EP time meaning that only statement and SA+ children could be discussed with an EP;
- ❖ In the past EPs would have worked individually with all SA+ cases;
- ❖ In the past SENCos did not know what was happening in other schools;
- ❖ Schools who previously did not always consult parents before putting interventions into place;
- ❖ The previous system did not seem as structured.

Under the time-allocation system, SENCos had a maximum number of EP sessions per year, meaning that they had to prioritise children for EP involvement. In the ANPs, EP time was used flexibly across the partnership based upon level of need. The ANP meetings allowed SENCos to bring any child for discussion. SENCos discussed how children, at all stages of the SENCoP, were supported in other schools. SENCo ten compares the ANPs to the previous system:

'I certainly think they're a more effective way of working than we were doing before where we just invited the EP in and we didn't really know what was going on in the rest of the pyramid either and how the EP time was being used there. ... And I think, you know, we all understand that some schools with you



know perhaps more deprivation indicators are gonna need more EP time, but there's an acknowledgement that if we bring a child and we say you know we're really struggling you know this is a real crisis that they're supportive of us using some time as well.'

SENCo one described how the ANPs were more structured than the previous system and necessitated conversations with parents:

'Because its more structured I've found, because I felt it was all kind of a bit ad-hoc, not wishy-washy, but because like I said, you were waiting for the EdPsych, then you were waiting for appointments with other people and you were just kind of doing it, "oh we'll do this and if it doesn't work then we'll try this." Whereas now you've got an action plan it's much more structured. You can say to parents "we're doing this, then this, then we'll review it at this point,"so I've found it's much more structured.'

### **5.3.5 Summary of the Programme Theory (PT)**

This section will provide a summary and discussion of the PT. It is important to note, in understanding the PT, that *each* individual C, M, or O was not described by *every* SENCo. The PT should be regarded as explanatory theory. It provides a compilation of positive outcomes that are believed to have occurred across ANPs, as well as contextual factors and processes that seem to have contributed to the positive outcomes. The PT is not an exhaustive list. The ANPs may have produced other Os, and there may have been other factors that promoted effective working of the ANPs, that were not captured by current data collection methods. The practical implication of this is that the Cs and Ms in the PT should be regarded as an inventory of factors that, in the running of future ANPs, should be taken into account to promote effective working.

### 5.3.5.1 Outcomes (Os)

In summary, the findings would suggest that several positive Os could be attributed to the ANPs:

- SENCOs supported to develop their practice;
- SENCOs felt supported by the ANPs;
- SENCOs developed relationships with other SENCOs and their confidence grew;
- SENCOs found the process efficient and felt children's needs were met;
- SENCOs felt supported in their work with parents.

Several of these outcomes were reported in previous research into group consultation (Bozic and Carter, 2002; Brown and Henderson, 2012; Evans, 2005; Guishard, 2000; Hanco, 1999; Newton, 2005; Soni, 2013; Stringer *et al.* 1992). In my opinion, the outcomes described in the current research provide a useful supplement to understandings of group consultation provided in previous research, as well as clarifying outcomes that relate specifically to the ANPs.

In the current research, SENCOs reported feeling more able to moderate judgments and that they had acquired a greater knowledge of SEN issues. Several SENCOs also reported that they had implemented school-wide strategies and staff training as a result of the ANPs. SENCOs described how they had found the ANPs useful: they were able to 'take' something from the meeting, and they found it was an efficient way of problem-solving around individual cases. SENCOs felt that they had been able to meet

the needs of more children within their schools, not just those discussed at the ANP meetings. The findings also suggest that the ANPs freed up EP time to deal with the most complex cases. These are all outcomes that were not identified in previous research.

The realist interviews allowed collection of a wide range of perspectives from recipients of the ANPs. Rather than agreeing or disagreeing with a narrow set of outcomes I presented, the interviewees were able to offer their opinions and clarify and expand upon the outcomes I suggested. In my opinion, this is a benefit of the chosen methodology. The findings of the current research help to draw together and supplement the range of outcomes reported in previous research to develop rich theory regarding the benefits of the ANPs.

There are limitations to these findings. They do not provide information regarding the outcomes of individual cases discussed at the meetings, or the perspectives of teachers or parents who had met with the SENCOs following the ANP meetings. This suggests potential avenues for future research.

#### **5.3.5.2 Mechanisms**

SENCOs described a number of processes within the ANPs (mechanisms, Ms) they believed had brought about these positive outcomes:

- the structured discussion;

- meeting preparation and follow-up (including communication with parents);
- peer support;
- EP contributions (including e-mails and handouts).

Previous research into group consultation reported that aspects of the structured discussion during group consultation allowed consultees to discuss and share problems, meet with colleagues, reflect, plan, try something new and develop team work and that facilitation promoted group consultation (e.g. Hanko, 1999; Soni, 2013). All of these processes were discussed in relation to the ANP meetings.

Previous research did not discuss how meeting preparation and follow-up, informal networking, and EP contributions such as e-mails and handouts could impact upon group consultation as a mode of service delivery. The current findings therefore represent a novel contribution to understandings of factors that may promote the efficacy of group consultation as a mode of service delivery.

The realist interviews invited SENCos to reflect upon the ANP process as a whole, rather than focussing solely upon the content of meetings. I think this was an advantage to the chosen methodology, which enabled the development of broad theory regarding Ms that promote effective functioning of the ANPs.

It is interesting to note, that 'creating an action plan' was the only M that appeared to relate directly to solution-focused approaches. Although the ANPs were described as

'solution-focused group consultation' there seems to be little evidence, from SENCo reports, that solution-focused techniques were a key aspect of the process. I cannot, therefore, claim to have evaluated a SFA within the current research. Solution-focused brief therapy has been extensively evaluated in the sphere of mental health, where it is administered as a series of therapy sessions (Rhodes & Ajmal, 1995). Stobie *et al.* (2005) report that SFAs have not received a high level of evaluation in the field of UK EP work. Research into the 'evidence base' for a SFA within UK EP work, therefore, presents a potential avenue for further research. This could also be a complex issue to investigate. The findings of Stobie *et al.* and the current research would suggest that within UK EP practice a SFA has been considerably 'watered down' and is implemented in different manners by different practitioners.

### 5.3.5.3 Contexts

There were aspects of the context that seemed to enable the Ms discussed above, and therefore the positive Os, to occur:

- ❖ there were a varied combination of SENCos with varying levels of experiences and cohorts within their schools;
- ❖ SENCos had existing positive relationships with one another, parents, and the EP;
- ❖ SENCos appeared to find the ANPs particularly useful when they or parents had concerns about individual children;

- ❖ perceived problems with the previous system, such as its lack of structure, which meant SENCOs found the ANPs a preferable way of working.

There is limited discussion of the contextual factors listed above within previous research. The inclusion of professionals with expertise and experience and a team that emphasised collaborative working were reported as having positively influenced the functioning of TSTs (Creese *et al.*, 2000; Etscheidt & Knesting, 2007). Soni (2013) reported that a relaxed team, who trusted and supported each other, promoted group supervision. These are factors that seem to map onto the Cs 'SENCO positive relations' and 'a varied combination of SENCOs'.

The remaining Cs, relating to SENCO relationships with parents, parental and SENCO concerns and perceived problems with the time-allocation system, provide understandings of aspects of the context that may promote effective working of the ANPs. These contextual factors are not mentioned in previous research. This could be because these Cs are specific to the ANPs. It could also be because the realist interviews allowed SENCOs to discuss Cs in relation to the whole ANP process, not just the group consultation meeting.

It is likely that there are other Cs which promoted effective working of the ANPs that were not included in the PT. It could be that there were some Cs SENCOs did not have knowledge of, or some Cs that SENCOs did not mention because they did not enter their conscious awareness. SENCOs may not have been aware of the impact of structure (for example, the institutions of school and LA) upon their agency. Also, I

was not aware of all the contextual factors operating within schools and their localities, and therefore was not able to report a wide range of Cs. If I were to replicate this study, I would include a data collection method that would allow further collection of information about the context. This could have been through collection of background data about schools or through questions about context within the interview schedule.

### **5.3.6 Implications for practice**

The PT provides a summary of positive Os, and proposes Cs and Ms that enabled the positive Os to occur; however not all the positive Os occurred in all ANPs. Ensuring that the Cs and Ms described in table 5.3 occur across all ANPs would increase the likelihood that all ANPs work effectively.

EPs running ANPs should be aware of the Ms linked to effective working and try to ensure that these happen:

- The structured discussion is an important aspect of the meetings; a thorough and deep discussion should occur, individuals should be encouraged to ask questions and share ideas. To assist with this EPs should have a clear understanding of the format of the meeting (appendix two, pages seven to ten) and share this with group members.
- EPs should carefully facilitate meetings so that SENCOs find them supportive and affirming. For example, SENCOs described how being able to share concerns and worries with others in a similar position had been beneficial. EPs

should ensure opportunities occur for SENCOs to network informally and share contact details.

- It is important that SENCOs are aware of the preparation and follow-up that is expected of them, including discussions with parents. One way to do this is for EPs to explain processes clearly at initial ANP meetings.
- Some SENCOs found minutes helpful, so it may be useful for EPs to set up a system whereby ANP meetings are minuted.
- EPs should not underestimate the value that SENCOs place upon their psychological knowledge. Researching topics and providing advice and resources during meetings, as well as e-mailing SENCOs with follow-up materials, can add value to the experience for SENCOs.

Managers who are involved in designing and instigating new ANPs should be aware of the contextual factors that seem to promote ANPs to work effectively. Although there are some contextual factors that they may not have much control over, for example existing relationships between schools staff and parents/carers, there are some contextual factors they are able to take into account. An ideal ANP should contain SENCOs with varied professional experiences and schools that have diverse cohorts. It is also preferable for the SENCOs who form an ANP to have existing positive relationships with one another and with the EPs involved in running the group. I would suggest that if this is not the case, steps could be taken to develop and foster relationships prior to initial meetings. Hawkins and Shohet (2012) advise that in the early stages of setting up a group, the facilitator should 'attend to setting a group climate that enables group members to feel safe enough to open up their difficulties



and share their vulnerabilities' (p. 183). They suggest several ways to do this, which I have applied to ANPs:

- ask members to share their hopes and fears about the ANP;
- ask members to share what has been beneficial and difficult in previous experiences of EPS delivery;
- establish ground rules;
- the EP role models sharing their own hopes and fears;
- ask each member to share their strengths and areas for development, and how the ANP could help their development;
- ask each group member to complete the sentence 'what you need to know about me, for me to get the most and give the most to this ANP is ....';
- defining shared purposes and goals.

### **5.3.7 Answering the question 'do ANPs deliver effective service delivery, and if so, when, why and how?'**

Table 5.2 would suggest that the majority of SENCos agreed that the ANPs, overall, produced positive outcomes (Os). This would suggest that in many ways, the ANPs were an effective mode of EPS delivery. In addition, the programme theory (PT) provides detail of when, why and how the ANPs were effective.

One reason for the ANP pilot was that the PEP hoped that the ANPs would be a 'better way of working'. The range of positive Os provided within the PT proposes *how* the ANPs were beneficial. The PT is therefore useful, as it can be used to describe the

ways in which the ANPs are believed to have been effective as well as suggesting processes and contextual factors that may have promoted effective working.

It will be important for future research to take into account the perspectives of children, parents and teachers within the SENCo's schools. Although the findings would suggest that overall SENCos reported positive outcomes of the ANPs, perspectives from a range of stakeholders would help support understandings of the efficacy of the ANPs.

#### **5.4 Phase two findings - negative and neutral outcomes**

Although the SENCos I interviewed provided frequent examples of positive Os, there were also occasions when negative Os were described. Several SENCos also described neutral Os. I will discuss C-M-O tables containing negative and neutral Os to propose causal explanations of times when the ANPs did not work in the ways that had been hoped. This will help answer the question '**are there ways in which the ANPs could be improved?**'

##### **5.4.1 Neutral outcomes**

Several SENCo responses appeared to neither agree nor disagree that a hypothesised O had occurred. I have called these Os 'neutral'. Tables 5.4 and 5.5 present neutral Os. These have been split into two tables as the Cs and Ms were clearly linked to Os in

the SENCos' responses. SENCos whose responses contributed to this table were all experienced (they had been in the role for five or more years). This meant they had considerable experience of the previous time-allocation model of EPS delivery (described in chapter one - Introduction).

Neutral responses occurred for questions one, five and six. These questions all involved the word *more*. This group of SENCos replied that they did not feel that the ANPs had enabled them to meet children's needs *more* or *less* effectively than before, there was no difference in how parents perceived the school to be meeting children's needs, and they did not feel enabled to work *more* effectively with parents than they had done previously.

This group of SENCos were experienced and had valued the individual casework that EPs had conducted in the past. They highlighted several limitations of the new ANP model of service delivery: They described how EPs had met with the parents of all children at SA+ in the past, but now this only occurs if EP involvement has been agreed at an ANP meeting. The SENCos felt that there was the potential, within the ANP system, for some schools to use more EP time than others. They were concerned that sometimes parents had an expectation that their child should receive EP intervention, and this pressure from parents was hard for them to manage. They also described how sometimes they felt unsure that the meetings were relevant for them as they already had knowledge of the topics that were discussed.

Context	Mechanism	Outcome
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ SENCOs held concerns that some schools may use more of the EP time than others.</li> <li>❖ SENCOs felt unsure the meetings are relevant for them.</li> <li>❖ Experienced SENCO.</li> <li>❖ SENCOs valued the individual casework EPs had carried out in the past.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ SENCOs share ideas, but sometimes this might relate to topics SENCOs already knew about.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ SENCOs felt the process did not help them to meet children's needs more or less than before; meeting children's needs also depends upon contextual factors.</li> </ul>

Table 5.4: Table of neutral responses regarding meeting children's needs.

Context	Mechanism	Outcome
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Schools where the SENCOs felt there already existed an inclusive culture and good communication between staff and parents</li> <li>❖ In the past the school EP would have met with the parents of children at SA+.</li> <li>❖ Parents have an expectation that a child should receive individual support from an EP (sometimes this expectation is a result of advice given by medical professionals).</li> <li>❖ Experienced SENCO.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ EPs still met with parents when necessary.</li> <li>▪ SENCOs actively involved teachers and parents in meeting children's needs.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ There was no difference in how parents perceive the school to be meeting their child's needs.</li> <li>➤ SENCOs did not feel the ANP had enabled them to work <u>more</u> effectively with parents than they did previously.</li> </ul>

Table 5.5: Table of neutral responses regarding parents/carers.

This experienced group of SENCOs also discussed factors that seemed to balance out the limitations. They felt there was already an inclusive culture within their schools and they already communicated effectively with parents. This, perhaps, could be due to their length of experience and influence within their school? They reported that sometimes the group discussion introduced new ideas to them, for example SENCO five reported:

'So I think some of the advice that came from other SENCOs, it wasn't anything that I didn't know...But having said that, sometimes there are things, and sometimes there are programmes that people use, and you think, "oh, I haven't heard of that."

They explained that they actively involved teachers and parents in meeting children's needs, and that if it was necessary, EPs would still meet with parents:

'Because if they need to have a meeting with a psychologist at some point, that always happened before, that will happen now, so I don't personally see any difference in that really.' (SENCO five).

Taken as a whole, table 5.4 and 5.5 indicate that some experienced SENCOs had reservations about the ANPs; they could perceive limitations to the system. There were aspects of their own practice and of the ANPs; however that seemed to balance this out, so that the ANPs had not made things worse than before. Nonetheless, they did not feel supported to meet children's needs *more* effectively than before, their work with parents was not *more* effective and parental perceptions of school had not changed. In some ways, their work merely continued as before, despite a change in the way the EPS was delivered. Dennis (2004) claimed that an inclusive culture within

schools influenced the extent to which school staff embraced consultation. I speculated whether, in fact, school culture would influence the extent to which school staff would embrace any type of EP delivery, not just consultation. The current findings appear to clarify this issue to some extent. The current findings appear to suggest that inclusive SENCo practice promotes effective EPS delivery. Experienced SENCos were prepared to take on new ideas and actively involved teachers and parents in meeting children's needs. This meant that despite limitations of the ANP model, they felt they had continued to work effectively with children and parents, drawing on EP support as appropriate.

SENCos five, six and seven went on to suggest several Cs they felt could limit their ability to meet children's needs:

- Constraints upon EP's time.
- Different schools have different resources to meet children's needs.
- When SENCos require rapid support for children with complex needs.
- The level of respect between members of the ANP.
- Whether other school staff are willing to implement the advice or not.
- The Head Teacher's perception of the ANP.
- School culture
- Individual factors (e.g. level of confidence or experience).
- Whether the group members have commitment to, and shared understanding of, the process.

SENCo six speculated upon the potential limitations of contextual factors frequently during her interview. At the time I found this strange. She told me that she had found the ANPs beneficial, 'I do think it is a very, very good way forward,' she said, and 'I do think it's a very, very good process.' Yet she continued to offer reasons why the ANPs might not have worked. I wondered why this was. A few months later I learnt that several schools had pulled out of her ANP to return to the previous time-allocation model. She had been trying to tell me reasons why she felt that the ANP had not worked for other members of her group. The SENCo suggestions regarding contextual factors are therefore of note as they provide practical implications for the implementation of future ANPs.

It is interesting that experienced SENCos were able to speculate about situations that could inhibit the workings of the ANPs. Perhaps their time spent in role allowed them to reflect beyond their own experience of the ANPs and provide caveats - limitations and weaknesses they could predict in the system. Their opinions are relevant to previous research findings. Farouk (1999) reported that EPs believed that culture of the school, time, rapport, level of collaboration, EP's level of empathy, teacher stress and involvement of parents could all influence the uptake of strategies agreed during consultation. The experienced SENCos seemed to share these EP opinions. Alexander and Sked (2010) reported that action plans were not always followed through following solution-focused group consultation. SENCo suggestions appear to provide an explanation for this finding. Willingness of school staff to implement the advice or limited school resources could be factors that inhibit action plan implementation.



Soni's (2013) study reported that sometimes individuals could dominate group supervision, meaning that others felt exposed or judged. Hawkins and Shohet (2012) also suggest that group dynamics have the potential to undermine group consultation. This appears to relate to SENCo speculation that the level of respect between members of the group could impact upon the ANP. Creese *et al.* (2000) reported that support from senior management and the ethos of the school promoted effective TST working. The experienced SENCos appear to back this claim, emphasising the importance of support from the Head Teacher and other school staff.

The experienced SENCos had concerns about EP time: What if there was not enough? What if there was an emergency? (By emergency, I believe the SENCos meant a situation whereby a child with complex needs unexpectedly became on role at their school or there was a sudden change in a child's level of need). Imich (1999) claims that flexibility to cater for unexpected events is also a disadvantage of the time-allocation model. Lindsay (1995) suggests that whichever system is used to share time between schools, some staff will always feel like they have not received enough. Perhaps SENCo concerns about EP time are an on-going issue, and not a new problem created by the ANPs?

#### **5.4.2 Negative outcomes**

Several SENCos described times when negative Os had occurred. Analysis of responses allowed clear links to be made between Cs and Ms that appeared to have led to negative Os. This could be because the numbers of responses describing negative Os

were small (please see table 5.2), for example only three SENCOs discussed times when they had felt unable to meet children's needs effectively. SENCOs seemed able to pinpoint reasons why a negative outcome may have occurred. Analysis relating to positive Os had been more complex. The interview format allowed broad responses regarding how and why positive Os had occurred, and more SENCOs discussed each positive O. There were overlapping and similar Ms and Cs described in relation to each positive O (please see appendix 18 for an overview of themes that emerged in the responses to each question). It was easier to link specific Cs and Ms to negative Os.

Table 5.6 presents the first set of negative Os. I have split the table into rows so that the Cs and Ms that were discussed in relation to each O are clear to the reader.

Context	Mechanism	Outcome
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ SENCOs had lots of children they would have liked to discuss at the meetings.</li> <li>❖ When the process was still quite new to SENCOs.</li> <li>❖ The SENCO's school did not contain children with complex needs.</li> <li>❖ SENCOs would have valued help making judgements about children's needs.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ There were limits to the number of cases that could be discussed at each meeting.</li> <li>▪ Initially there were teething problems: the process was not clear; EP work did not happen as planned.</li> <li>▪ The Educational Psychologists have not worked individually with less complex children (with whom they might have in the past).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ SENCOs felt that, at times, these factors have, hindered them from meeting children's needs effectively.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ First few meetings</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ SENCOs spent a long time discussing each case.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Not an effective use of SENCOs' time.</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Group members did not have commitment to, and shared understanding of, the process.</li> <li>❖ Head Teachers did not support the ANP.</li> <li>❖ SENCOs did not work closely together prior to the ANP.</li> <li>❖ New group.</li> <li>❖ Some SENCOs are experienced; some are new to the role.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ SENCO discussion limited to individual cases brought to the meeting.</li> <li>▪ Initially there were teething problems: the process was not clear; EP work did not happen as planned.</li> <li>▪ The discussion instigated feelings of self-doubt in some SENCOs.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ SENCOs have not felt supported yet, but feel the group has the potential to be supportive.</li> <li>➤ SENCOs did not initially feel well supported. (SENCO confidence has grown over time).</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Some SENCOs were not consulted on how the ANP would run before it started.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Some SENCOs have not brought cases or issues to discuss at the meetings.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ The ANPs have not helped to develop new perspectives and acquire knowledge as the discussion at the meetings has been limited.</li> </ul>

Table 5.6: First Table of negative outcomes.

#### 5.4.2.1 Enabling SENCOs to feel they have met children's needs

Table 5.6 presents the first set of negative Os. Some SENCOs reported that they had not always felt that the ANPs had enabled them to meet children's needs effectively. Several SENCOs described how there were problems at the first few meetings. SENCO five explained that at first, the way the ANP system worked was not clear to her or other SENCOs within her group:

'And I think they did try and explain it well [the EPs], but I suddenly thought "well, I didn't know that, I didn't know that, and I didn't know that." But then when I spoke to other SENCOs, they were sort of, of the same view. I mean initially, I think I thought that the psychologist's time would just be guaranteed. I didn't realise that you've sort of got to ask the group.'

Several of the research articles describe how consultation was clearly explained to consultees from the outset. For example in Evans' (2005) study, training days were held for teachers prior to instigation of group consultation as an obligatory mode of service delivery. Farouk (1999) argues that 'the entry phase and role definition phase of the consultation process are of crucial importance' in order to overcome 'misguided expectations' and 'resistance to change' (p.255). Before consultation commences, clarification of roles and opportunities for communication should occur, so that participants gain mutual understandings of expectations. It appears that this did not always happen when the ANP pilots commenced and this meant that some SENCOs did not have a clear understanding of the process, and therefore did not feel able to use the ANPs as a tool to meet children's needs.

Some SENCOs reported that EPs had agreed to carry out a piece of casework during a meeting, but then this did not occur. SENCO seven explained that EP work had not happened as planned following one of the first ANP meetings:

'when that first child was approved for an EP visit and didn't get an EP visit for nearly a year that was where the system fell down.'

Several SENCOs described times when there were lots of children brought for discussion, but there were time limits to the number of cases that could be covered in one meeting. SENCO five explained that at the first few meetings, a long time was spent discussing each case, meaning that she felt that the meetings had not been an effective use of her time. Hawkins and Shohet (2012) suggest that this can be a disadvantage of group supervision as there is less time in a group for each person to discuss their concerns. Participants in Brown and Henderson's (2012) study speculated that if groups do not keep to an agreed structure and time limitations this poses a threat to group consultation.

Several SENCOs said they valued EP help to make judgements about children, for example SENCO four described how she appreciated EP observations of children which did not occur if a child was discussed at an ANP:

'I fear that I've missed something .... maybe another fresh pair of eyes might have seen, you know in the sort of analysis of what a pupil's like.'

Boyle and Lauchlan (2009) argue that individual work and intervention with children provide opportunities for EPs to apply psychological theory and research and improve

the well-being of children in schools. This finding would suggest that SENCOs value the distinct contribution that EP casework makes to the children within their schools.

The factors described above meant that sometimes SENCOs felt the process had hindered them from feeling that they had met children's needs effectively. Baxter and Frederickson (2005) argue that in order to meet children's needs effectively, EPs should ask school staff 'what they are trying to achieve for the children and identifying/negotiating ways in which we can use our particular skills to contribute to and enhance these achievements' (p.96). It seems that this did not always happen within the ANPs. Perhaps some SENCOs felt they could no longer ask EPs to become involved in casework due to misconceptions about the ANPs, or perhaps SENCOs could not fully discuss what they wanted to achieve due to time constraints of the meetings. Clarity should have been provided from the outset that EPs would still work within ANP schools, and perhaps this did not occur. The EPS staff should consider whether the group consultation meetings could act as a barrier to SENCOs enlisting EP support to meeting children's needs. Further research to investigate barriers and how they could be overcome, would, in my opinion, provide clarity on this issue.

#### **5.4.2.2 Developing perspectives and acquiring knowledge**

Table 5.6 uncovered that some SENCOs did not bring cases or issues to discuss at ANP meetings. (SENCO six suggested that this could have been because SENCOs were not fully consulted before the ANP commenced so may not have fully understood the process.) Kahn (2000) comments that there can be different types of consultees along

a 'continuum of involvement' from visitor (present at consultation because someone else has coerced them), complainant (can describe the problem but does not feel they can change it) to customer (someone who has a definite desire to do something about the problem). Perhaps at some ANP meetings, several consultees occupied the 'visitor' or 'complainant' role. This may have resulted in the limited discussion at some meetings, with some SENCOs therefore feeling that the ANPs had not helped them to develop new perspectives and acquire knowledge.

#### **5.4.2.3 Feeling supported**

Some SENCOs reported that they had not yet felt supported by their ANP but they did feel that the group had the potential to be supportive. Several SENCOs reported that the group had not worked together previously and this limited the level of support the SENCOs felt they received from the group. SENCO nine commented:

'We're probably too new a group to share, sort of in-depth issues in terms of the role at the moment, because we've only met probably three or four times.'

Others reported that they did not initially feel supported by their ANP; however this had changed over time. SENCO ten reported that initial meetings instigated feelings of self-doubt:

'Because they are such experienced group I can sometimes go along and think "everybody knows more than I do," but I think I've grown more confident sort of over the time that they've been running and feel more confident about



speaking up ..... because at the first meetings I used to just sit there and think "oh my goodness, I don't know any of these things."

Hawkins and Shohet (2012) and Soni (2013) reported that group dynamics could have a negative impact upon group supervision. When group members were not familiar with one another, or felt 'less experienced' in comparison to others, this impacted upon the level of support SENCOs perceived the group as providing. Soni (2013) reported that sometimes participants of group supervision could feel judged or exposed, and it appears this may have occurred within some ANPs.

Other factors, such as support (of the SENCO and the ANP) from the Head Teacher, SENCO level of experience as well as the commitment of group members and a shared understanding of the process, all influenced the discussion that occurred at meetings. This in turn impacted upon the level of support SENCOs felt the meetings provided.

Creese *et al.* (2000) and Etscheidt and Knesting (2007) reported that support for TSTs from senior management, a high profile of TSTs within school and support from other teachers, team commitment, school ethos, and an effort from team members to maintain professional relationships all promoted effective working of TSTs. The Cs mentioned in relation to this set of negative outcomes relate to these findings. When these facilitative contextual factors did not occur, this impacted upon the level of support SENCOs believed the ANPs could provide.

#### **5.4.2.4 Gaining advice for children lower down the code of practice**

Table 5.7 relates to the fourth question: 'The EPS thought that the ANPs would allow SENCOs to gain psychological advice for children lower down the code of practice, what do you think about that?' Four SENCOs (from different ANPs) responded that this had not always occurred, the children they had discussed at meetings had been at SA+ or statement level of the SENCoP (This is the entry level at which they had discussed children with an EP in the past). SENCOs provided several explanations for this. Some SENCOs felt that they had many children they would like to discuss at meetings, so they had to prioritise bringing children with more complex needs. SENCO ten said:

'I think the ones, as a SENCO you tend to be more concerned about, and want to do things more imminently with, are the ones that are at SA+..... so I'd say that was still sort of a priority.'

SENCO two described how being a new SENCO meant that she had several children she felt she should discuss at meetings:

'I think because of the position I was in, because I was new this year I had a bit of a backlog of children that I needed to bring.'

Contexts	Mechanisms	Outcomes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ New SENCo.</li> <li>❖ Lots of children the SENCo wanted to discuss at the meetings.</li> <li>❖ SENCos felt that their priority is always children with a higher level of need.</li> <li>❖ SENCo already felt confident to intervene in cases lower down the code of practice</li> <li>❖ High incidence of complex SEN within schools.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ SENCos have had to prioritise children to bring to the meetings</li> <li>▪ Cases discussed at the meeting were complex.</li> <li>▪ General SEN issues have not been discussed at meetings.</li> <li>▪ SENCos have already tried interventions before bringing children to discuss at partnership.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Children brought for discussion at the meeting were at SA+ or statement level of the code of practice.</li> </ul>

Table 5.7: Second table of negative outcomes.

This meant that some SENCoS felt that the majority of case discussion that had occurred had been around children with complex needs:

'I don't think any of the discussions we've had as a partnership have been around whole school practice .... I think everything's been around very specific very complex children.' (SENCo seven).

Brown and Henderson (2012) and Soni (2013) report time pressures as potential threats to group consultation. It appears that the limited time available to discuss each case may have meant that some SENCoS felt that they were not able to discuss as many children as they would have liked at the meetings.

More experienced SENCoS felt confident supporting children lower down the SENCoP, so had already tried many options before they considered bringing a child to an ANP. They described bringing children to the ANP as part of a process, a vehicle to move up the SENCoP, for example SENCo nine said:

'a lot seem to be sort of SA+ ..... people were wanting that sort of forum to discuss and either apply for a statement ..... because it's kind of expected that we've tried interventions and we've tried with these children before we take them.'

SENCoS who responded that the outcome 'the ANPs would allow SENCoS to gain psychological advice for children lower down the code of practice' had not occurred clarified this by responding that *children brought for discussion at the meeting* were at the SA+ or statement level of the code of practice. When I looked through their transcripts, however, they had commented elsewhere that the case discussion allowed

them to take ideas from the meeting and provided transferrable knowledge; therefore the meetings had supported their work with a wider range of children. So, in fact, even this group of SENCos agreed that the ANP meetings had helped them to *support* children lower down the code of practice. When answering this question, I think these interviewees were focusing upon the phrase *gain psychological advice*. I think they took this to mean an EP advising upon a case or actually working with the child. They did not agree that this had occurred for a wider range of children. In hindsight, I should have thought more carefully about the wording of the question.

#### **5.4.2.5 Working with parents/carers**

Table 5.8 presents a third group of negative Os. I grouped these together in one table as the Cs and Ms described as bringing about these negative Os were all discussed in relation to parents/carers.

Context	Mechanism	Outcome
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ In the past the school's EP would have responded rapidly to emergencies.</li> <li>❖ In the past the school EP would have met with the parents of children at SA+.</li> <li>❖ Teachers or parents/carers had an expectation that a child should receive individual support from an EP (sometimes this expectation is a result of advice given by medical professionals).</li> <li>❖ SENCo has not had any complex cases to bring to the meetings.</li> <li>❖ SENCos felt that parents/carers appreciate meeting with the school EP.</li> <li>❖ Parents/carers were vulnerable.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ There was a process to go through: obtaining consent and going to the ANP meeting before an EP became involved in working with an individual child.</li> <li>▪ SENCos shared the action plan with parents/carers.</li> <li>▪ SENCos provided parents/carers with information about the EPS.</li> <li>▪ SENCos discussed children with other professionals without parents/carers being present.</li> <li>▪ SENCos fed back to parents/carers.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ It took longer than the SENCo would have liked for an EP to become involved in working with an individual child.</li> <li>➤ School staff and parents/carers were confused by the process.</li> <li>➤ Parents/carers did not meet with the EP - (EPs do not meet with the parents of every child discussed at the ANP.)</li> <li>➤ Parents/carers were less involved in the process.</li> <li>➤ SENCos have found this challenging.</li> <li>➤ Parents/carers found the process hard to navigate.</li> </ul>

Table 5.8: Third table of negative outcomes (relating specifically to parents/carers).

Several SENCOs felt that the following outcomes had occurred:

- It took longer than the SENCO would have liked for an EP to become involved in working with an individual child;
- school staff and parents/carers were confused by the process;
- parents/carers found the process hard to navigate;
- parents/carers did not meet with the EP - (EPs do not meet with the parents of every child discussed at the ANP);
- SENCOs have found this challenging;
- parents/carers were less involved in the process.

Several SENCOs described how they found conversations with parents difficult, as the process was confusing and hard to navigate, and they were having conversations with parents alone, rather than in the supportive presence of an EP. SENCO four said:

'I feel for our parents they would prefer to meet the EdPsych themselves.'

SENCO seven gave her opinion on what the process might have felt like for parents:

'from a parent's point of view I'd say it probably feels like an extra step.... Another hoop to jump through..... When you've got quite a lot of hoops if you've got quite a complex child anyway.'

SENCO two explained why parents were less involved in the process:

'parents have *nothing* to do with the partnership. So it's very removed, it's, "I've talked to you, I've got your case, I'm now going to go away and talk to some important people over here and we'll let you know what we said.'"

One of the main reasons given by SENCOs for this negative O was that it was the SENCOs who discussed the child and fed back to parents/carers. They were discussing the child with professionals when parents were not present so there was not the contact between EP and parents (which there may have been in the past). Some SENCOs felt that the process of referring a child to the ANP - filling in the paperwork, attending the meeting and compiling an action plan - felt like an additional step before an EP would become involved in working with a child. SENCO seven compares the ANP process to the previous time allocation system:

'parents often have in their head .... an Educational Psychologist is somebody who's gonna see their child and things are going to happen. And I think discussing that with parents can be quite difficult as a SENCO because your saying 'well no, we're gonna discuss them, but the EP doesn't know their name, there's no case file, they're not actually, not necessarily gonna be seen ..... and if they are going to be seen your gonna have to sign some more paperwork, and then the EPs gonna come in'. So actually from a parents point of view it can kind of, I think, feels like almost kind of pushing it back ..... whereas before we prioritised and say I want .... you to see this child and you would come see them whereas now ..... there's another step in the process.'

Some of the dissatisfaction with the ANPs seemed rooted in satisfaction with the previous time allocation system. Several SENCOs described how, in the past, the school's EP had responded quickly if they had contacted them regarding what they felt was an emergency. Under the time allocation system, SENCOs prioritised children for SA+. The EP would have met with the parents of those children - even if those cases were not that complex. SENCOs described how in the past parents had appreciated



meeting with the school EP and even though the system had changed, some parents still believed their child should work individually with an EP. SENCo eight described the benefits of the previous system:

'I mean in the past our experience was that the psychologist would come for any review meeting where there was maybe an issue that I needed support with, erm, even if it wasn't an annual review. She would kind of come maybe on a termly basis or bi-termly, or whatever if there was an issue or she'd been out to see parents and there was something we needed to deal with straight away and she'd come.'

Previous research literature does not discuss how parents may have felt about their child becoming the focus of a group consultation, or about group consultation as an obligatory mode of EP service delivery. The current research therefore provides novel insight into this issue. It should be noted, however, that the findings report SENCo perceptions of parent/carer viewpoints. A potential avenue for further research would be to collect parental perspectives of the ANPs.

### **5.4.3 What's not working?**

I asked SENCos the qualitative question - Is there anything, in your opinion, that's not working about the ANPs? Below is a summary of their comments:

- ❖ EP time allocation - There are still decisions that need to be made about how EP time is allocated within the partnerships. The way EP time has been allocated has not been transparent and some schools may have felt it has been unfair.

- ❖ Initial meetings - There were problems with initial meetings: the process did not run smoothly, agreed EP work did not happen.
- ❖ Parents - EPs are not meeting with the parents of all children who are discussed at the meetings, this could be difficult for parents to understand.
- ❖ EP work - SENCOs would like individual EP casework to continue.
- ❖ The meetings - Sometimes having enough time to discuss each case at the ANP meetings can be an issue.
- ❖ Contextual factors - Some SENCOs' attitudes towards the process may have hindered the ANP. Some SENCOs don't have the support of staff or the Head Teacher within their school.

This question, as well as highlighting problems already covered during discussion of negative Os, emphasised a further issue with the ANPs. Some SENCOs felt the way EP time was shared out between schools within an ANP was not fair, for example SENCO four said:

'But, erm, I know that quite a few of the SENCOs that I've sort of met with ... kind of feel that ... some schools are getting more time than others ... But then they've got more complex cases than us, you know, so that's perhaps why. But, you know, our children should still be, you know, seen I think.'

Several SENCOs reported that they appreciated EP casework and were concerned that the volume of this was reducing. Turner *et al.* (1996) and Wagner (2000) present a downbeat description of the traditional 'technical consultant' EP role. SENCOs comments would suggest however, that school staff appreciate EP activities such as observation, assessment and provision of advice.

#### **5.4.4 SENCO recommendations**

Listed below are the themes that emerged in the recommendations provided by SENCOs:

- Promote the professional development aspect of the ANP meetings.
- Consider how time management could be improved during meetings.
- Carefully set up ANP groups communicating the process clearly to stakeholders.
- Greater clarity regarding EP work and how EP time is used.
- Better communication with parents about the ANPs.

### **5.4.5 Summary of reported problems with the ANPs**

Although, on the whole, SENCOs attributed positive Os to the ANPs, some SENCOs described times when negative or neutral Os had occurred. During initial meetings, there were problems. EP work did not always happen as planned (EP involvement had been agreed at an ANP meeting but then did not happen) and the process did not always seem clear. At some meetings, SENCOs had brought many cases, meaning that not every case could be discussed in depth. This seemed to have occurred more frequently during initial meetings, and sometimes this meant that SENCOs felt the meetings were not a good use of their time. At initial meetings, some SENCOs had found the discussion anxiety provoking as it made them aware of their own shortcomings. Others felt that their group was not yet supportive, SENCOs had not worked together previously, and were not well-acquainted enough to have frank discussions.

Hawkins and Shohet (2012) and Proctor and Innskip (2001) advise that contracting should occur before group supervision commences. Soni (2013) commented that 'the entry phase of group supervision as being crucial, so that all parties understand the aims and purposes.' (p.157). Clear working agreements should be made so that all participants are clear about meeting structure, commitments, rights, responsibilities and ground rules. Not all SENCOs attended initial discussions with the PEP before ANPs commenced (Please see the Introduction chapter for further details). Appendix two (ANP meeting guidelines) were also not distributed to EPS staff until February 2013. Combined with the above reports from SENCOs, this would suggest that contracting

and working group agreements did not consistently occur during the initial piloting of some ANPs.

Soni (2013) reported that if there was a lack of trust within a group, and members felt concerned about what to say, this inhibited group supervision. In Cohen and Osterweil (1986) opinion the problem-solving approach can cause anxiety and defensiveness in consultees, particularly if consultees have low self-esteem or a lack of theoretical knowledge. Participants in Brown and Henderson's (2012) study proposed consultee fear of exposure and ridicule as threats to group consultation. The current findings offer some support for these claims. During initial ANPs, when group members were unacquainted or contained SENCOs who did not feel confident, this limited the level of support SENCOs felt the group provided.

SENCOs reported that they valued EP casework, and because there were limits upon EP time, some SENCOs had felt it was unfair that EPs carried out more work in some schools than others. The majority of EP work was allocated at the ANP meetings; however, as I understand it, several EPs agreed core work with SENCOs via e-mail or telephone outside of the meetings. This may have contributed to SENCOs feelings that the way the time had been allocated was not fair.

Some SENCOs felt that EPs were no longer becoming involved in cases in the way that they may have done in the past. Although the literature would suggest that the EP role has developed considerably since the 1950s, and now encompasses a variety of activities and is not limited to assessment of individual children, perhaps some SENCOs

still do not view consultation as a specific EP function? Timmins *et al.*'s (2006) research suggested that, on the whole, teachers valued consultation as a means of accessing EPSs; however there appeared to be a lack of understanding amongst teachers of the underlying principles of consultation. Perhaps this was also the case with the ANPs, because the ANP meetings were additional to EP casework, some SENCOs did not conceptualise the ANP meeting as an EP intervention.

Some SENCOs, particularly those who were experienced, did not feel that they had benefitted as much from the case discussions because the discussion had been limited, or they already knew about the topics that were discussed. In some ANPs it had only been possible to discuss children at the SA+ or statement level of the SENCoP. This was due to the level of complexity of the children within SENCOs' schools.

Several SENCOs reported negative Os in relation to their work with parents/carers. They felt that the process was confusing and hard for parents/carers to understand. The process of gaining consent, discussing the child at the meeting, feeding back to parents then implementing and reviewing an action plan, felt like another 'hoop to jump through.' They reported that sometimes parents/carers gave the impression that they believed an EP should become involved in working with their child. This could make SENCo conversations with parents difficult. Some SENCOs also commented that the process did not involve parents enough in discussions relating to their child, and they felt that this was not helpful for parents/carers. Some SENCOs reported that in the past they had appreciated the direct work EPs carried out with parents/carers and were disappointed that this did not seem to be continuing.

Several experienced SENCOs were also able to speculate about contextual factors that could impede effective working of the ANPs. Support (for the SENCO and the ANP) from the Head Teacher, school resources and culture, SENCO level of confidence or experience as well as the commitment of group members and a shared understanding of the process, all had the potential to influence how well an ANP worked. Several SENCOs questioned what would happen if there was a situation they perceived to be an 'emergency' and rapid EP support was required.

### **5.5 Answering the question 'are there ways in which the ANPs could be improved?'**

This question relates to the practical implications of the findings. What do the negative and neutral Os, and SENCO explanations of these, teach us about improvements that could be made to the way in which the ANPs are organised and managed? In answering this question, I will not only include my own opinions, but draw upon the recommendations provided by SENCOs.

The negative Os provide a vital learning point for the instigation of new ANPs. The way the ANP process works should be explained clearly to SENCOs prior to the first meetings. Clear contracting before ANPs commence, and as an on-going process, could perhaps mitigate some of the negative outcomes discussed by SENCOs.

Proctor and Inskipp (2001) describe different levels of contracting that should occur between the EP and SENCos participating in group supervision. They advise that a professional contract and group working agreement should be made prior to groups commencing. These could include, for example, a clear explanation of how EP time will be used to work with the most complex cases. Clear contracts should also be made with school senior management to increase their support for the ANPs. Proctor and Inskipp also recommend that each session should have an agenda, and clear agreements should be reached with each SENCo regarding what will happen with each case that is brought to the meeting. As well as aiding smooth running of the meetings and SENCo understanding of the process, this could also help reduce SENCos feelings that the system is unfair.

In their recommendations, SENCos suggested that before initial meetings commenced, SENCos should meet with the EP to plan how the group will run. Findings from the current research suggest that Head Teacher and SENCo support for the ANP is important. Findings in Creese *et al.* (2000) and Etscheidt and Knesting's (2007) studies suggest that team commitment and support from management promote group consultation. If the process is not clear and SENCos do not believe in it, the group may not work effectively. It is important for SENCos to have met prior to initial meetings and have had input into how the groups will run. The ANP should also be explained clearly to Head Teachers. This will increase the likelihood that SENCos feel supported by the process and have an investment in the ANP. Although the PEP had met with SENCos and Head Teachers before each ANP commenced, not all Head Teachers or SENCos attended the meeting (please see the Introduction). In future, the PEP hopes



that more groups of schools will become involved in ANPs. It will be important that the PEP stresses to Head Teachers and SENCOs the importance of attending the initial meeting where she explains the process. It may be useful, following this, for the EP facilitators to meet with SENCOs and spend time planning exactly how the ANP will run. I am therefore suggesting that two 'contracting' meetings should occur before the first solution-focused group consultation session.

SENCOs provided the caveat that the ANP process may have to be more flexible during transition (the term when SENCOs move from the old system, time allocation, to the new system, the ANPs). As new ANPs commence, previously agreed SA+ work may still need to occur, otherwise there could be a backlog of cases to discuss at initial meetings.

Time management during meetings was cited as a problem by several SENCOs. SENCOs provided several suggestions regarding the way time management during the ANP meetings could improve: EPs should facilitate the meetings effectively so that SENCOs who are presenting their cases are succinct; SENCOs should all be given an equal amount of time to discuss their cases; SENCOs should be encouraged to submit their consultation forms before the meeting, as this allows others to read about the case beforehand and reduces the length of time that was required for case presentation; the meeting could split into two groups if there were numerous cases brought for discussion; the meetings should occur frequently, for example once every half term. This would mean that SENCOs would not have a lengthy wait if they had serious

concerns. These suggestions should all be taken into account when EPs plan how the group will run with SENCOs.

Several SENCOs reported that they had felt that case discussion during some meetings had not been relevant for them. This could be because they were experienced or the discussion at the meetings had been limited. EPs should attempt to make meetings relevant for all attendees. This could be through spending time discussing general SEN issues at meetings or it could be through providing handouts or signposting resources.

Several SENCOs suggested ways in which the professional development aspect of the meetings could be extended. They suggested inviting a wider range of professionals to contribute to the discussions, for example SaLT, mental health professionals, Head Teachers or High School staff. They also suggested issue-based discussions or a proportion of each meeting being devoted to training / knowledge dissemination. These options should be part of on-going discussions with SENCOs regarding the format of ANP meetings.

Another suggestion was that reviewing children who had been discussed at previous meetings would help evaluate interventions that had been discussed. As this was written into the meeting format (appendix two, pages seven to ten) this would again suggest that in some ANPs there was not always clarity and clear contracting on how the meetings should run. Contracting is something that should occur initially and as an on-going process between members of the ANP groups.

SENCOs made recommendations relating to ways in which administration of meetings could be improved. They felt that if upcoming meetings and EP work were physically marked in diaries at the meetings, this helped the process to run smoothly. Reminder e-mails and circulated minutes, as well as records of the case discussion were cited as helpful. Keeping a record of case discussions provided a useful bank of resources and ideas. SENCOs suggested that the way EP time had been used within the ANP should be clear and transparent. This could reduce SENCOs feelings that time had been used inequitably. EPs running ANPs should consider how they can efficiently monitor, track and present to the group the way they have used their time.

SENCOs valued the EP casework that had occurred as part of the previous time allocation model. SENCOs stressed that they would like this to continue and made several recommendations such as 'EPs still working with individual children' or meeting in school with parents to review the progress of children who had been discussed at ANPs. SENCOs also valued being able to ring or e-mail EPs between meetings and appreciated consistency from EPs. These recommendations seem to reflect a high level of SENCO anxiety that EPs were reducing their level of work within schools. EPs should consider how they can relieve this anxiety through ensuring that their presence is still felt within ANP schools, and making sure SENCOs know they will still continue to work with children when appropriate. This is something that should be made clear during contracting between EPs and SENCOs.

Several SENCOs reported that ANPs could be confusing for parents, and the process sometimes made their work with parents challenging. Not surprisingly, a further

theme in the recommendations related to parents/carers. It will be important for the EPS to collect feedback from parents/carers regarding the ANPs. This could be through a parents' forum or through interviewing parents/carers. Several SENCOs proposed creating a parental information leaflet that clearly explains how the ANPs work. This would support their conversations with parents. In my opinion, the issue of parents/carers requires further consideration by the EPS. Children are the joint clients of schools and EPs. EPs can make a difference for individual children through their work with parents. The EPS should consider measures they could take to ensure that the ANPs do not preclude valuable work with parents from taking place.

## **5.6 Comparison of phase one and phase two findings**

Phase two data collection and analysis put to test the IPS formulated in phase 1 - did the ANPs produce the expected Os in the hypothesised manner? When the ANPs worked effectively, was this in the way programme designers had predicted?

### **5.6.1 Outcomes (Os)**

Appendix 37 compares the hypothesised Os of the IPS with the actual Os SENCOs attributed to the ANPs. Generally SENCOs reported that the hypothesised Os had occurred, and were able to provide further clarification of Os. The exception to this generalisation appears to be Os relating to parents/carers. There were a higher frequency of negative Os reported by SENCOs in relation to questions about

parents/carers (please see table 5.2). This would suggest that the ANPs did not support SENCos to work as effectively with parents/carers as the programme designers had expected.

### **5.6.2 Mechanisms (Ms)**

In the IPS, EPs were able to describe several ways in which they believed the ANPs worked to bring about Os. They outlined several Ms: preparation for ANP meetings prompts SENCos to discuss children with parents, the meetings involve discussion and networking that supports SENCo thinking and EPs facilitate and manage the process, drawing upon their psychological knowledge. These Ms were all confirmed and expanded upon in the PT.

### **5.6.3 Contexts (Cs)**

The IPS predicted that if there were existing positive relationships between SENCos this would facilitate working of the ANPs. The PT seemed to confirm this. Good relationships within the ANP and SENCos having worked together previously were linked to positive Os.

The IPS also hypothesised that if SENCos were eager to take part in ANPs, this would promote effective working. SENCo six suggested that the commitment of group members to the ANP, as well as support from the Head Teacher and other staff in

school could influence how well the group worked. She also commented that SENCOs had not been fully consulted before her ANP started and had not fully understood the process. She speculated that this was why her ANP had not been very successful. Her observations therefore provide support for the hypothesis that if SENCOs are eager to take part in an ANP this will facilitate the process.

The IPS envisaged that limits upon EP time, and the level of need for EPs within schools, could have a negative impact upon the ANPs. This appeared to be confirmed when SENCOs answered the question 'what's not working?' SENCOs discussed how some schools appeared to have used the majority of EP time (from the shared time allocation) and this did not always seem fair.

The IPS suggested that negative relationships between schools could inhibit effective working of the ANPs. Soni (2013) also reported that negative group dynamics could inhibit group supervision. Relationships between schools were not a topic that was discussed by any of the SENCOs interviewed. Upon reflection, it is unlikely that SENCOs would have expressed negative feelings towards other school staff during an interview with an LA representative. Therefore phase two of the research seems to neither confirm nor disconfirm this hypothesis.

#### **5.6.4 Summary**

It seems therefore that hypotheses about how the ANPs work, presented in the IPS, were generally confirmed by the PT. The main exception being that, although the programme designers hoped that the ANPs would support effective working with parents/carers, approximately half the SENCOs (please see table 5.2) did not agree that this had occurred.

#### **5.7 Discussion of the findings**

The findings of previous research suggested that the ANPs could be a beneficial way for EPs to work with SENCOs. The current findings suggest that SENCOs valued the ANPs and there are similarities between current findings and those of previous research. The PT proposes explanations of how, when and why the ANPs worked effectively. The findings develop understandings and explanations of the ANPs and there are clear links between the PT and existing theories relating to group consultation.

Previous research collected limited viewpoints of the recipients of consultation. The current research employed realist interviews which provided opportunities for SENCOs to clarify their opinions and provide explanations. Data analysis techniques highlighted similarities and differences within and between SENCO accounts. I therefore believe that the current research provides a significant contribution to current understandings

of group consultation as a mode of EPS delivery. Another benefit of the chosen methodology was that findings of the current research help to draw together and supplement the range of findings reported in previous research to develop rich theory regarding the ANPs.

Parker (1999, p.15) claims 'the theory we [Psychologists] need ... has to be rooted in the experience of those who suffer psychology and has to be linked to action to change it.' I believe that my findings created theory rooted in the experiences of those on the 'receiving end' of psychology. Findings were presented with an emphasis on identifying and suggesting ways in which the ANPs could be changed to the benefit of service users. The voices of children, parents and teachers within the SENCos' schools were not, however, collected in the current research, and this is one limitation of the findings.

My approach to research was pragmatic; it was therefore underpinned by my values. I wanted to suggest ways to improve the ANPs (and therefore indirectly 'help' children). Other members of the EPS may not share my values and contextual factors may impact upon EPs' abilities to make the changes I have suggested. For example, a high work load with reduced staff could mean that there will continue to be time pressures at ANP meetings or the position of Head Teachers within the LA may mean the PEP feels unable to pressurise them to attend meetings. Although the current research provides suggestions on how the ANPs could be improved, contextual factors may constrain the EPS's ability to make those changes.



It is important to state that I do not claim to have produced findings that are generalisable or reproducible. The findings are considered to be transient and their purpose is to assist in the modification and improvement of the ANPs. Data collected during interviews provided a snapshot of EP and SENCo viewpoints and these were inevitably influenced by their individuality and the context. Their talk provided a representation of the ways the ANPs worked but was also 'part of their ongoing self-story and a manifestation of their psychological world' (Smith, 1995, p.10). Data analysis therefore involved interpretation of others' interpretations of the ANPs and the interview situation. This means that I cannot claim to have produced an objective account of the ANPs. Instead I hope to have produced findings that are transferrable: they contain details that are pertinent or relevant to other practitioners' situations.

My epistemological standpoint is that the findings are one representation of 'reality'. My position within the research as an EP practitioner is likely to have influenced the language within, and style of, the thesis. I have presented a particular version of the world based within my personal experiences and views. I acknowledge that the findings are open to different interpretations. I have therefore endeavoured to be reflexive and provide an accurate account of the research process and the way in which I produced my findings. The purpose of this is to ensure that it is clear to the reader how I arrived upon my representations of the ANPs (rather than how I maintained objectivity).

### **5.7.1 Limitations of the findings**

The data collection and analysis techniques employed within the current evaluation limit the scope of the claims that can be made from the findings. In the following section I will discuss these limitations as a series of answers to pertinent questions about the research process.

#### **5.7.1.1 Did the data collection methods uncover of a range of perspectives about the ANPs?**

Willig (2008) points out that it is important to pay attention to the contextual features of the interview situation. She advises that ‘it is important to reflect upon the meaning of the interview for both interviewer and interviewee, and to take care not to assume that the interviewee’s words are simple and direct reflections of their thoughts and feelings’ (p. 24). There appeared to be a high frequency of positive responses to the interview questions (please see table 5.2). The majority of SENCOs seemed to agree that hypothesised Os had occurred. One explanation for this could be that the SENCOs did not feel comfortable enough to be completely honest and open during the interview. I was a representative of the EPS, and I was asking them to comment about the EPS. It could be that SENCOs felt they could not be too critical due to my professional role. Another explanation for the high frequency of positive responses could be that SENCOs who volunteered to be interviewed held predominantly positive views of the EPS and/or the ANPs, and this positive attitude influenced their

responses. SENCo six informed me that several SENCos had pulled out of the CTown pilot at the end of the year (July 2013). I assume that they pulled out because they were dissatisfied with their ANP. If the SENCos who had pulled out had consented to take part in an interview, perhaps the findings may have contained a wider range of negative outcomes.

The above reflections suggest that the research methods may have limited the extent to which I was able to uncover negative perspectives of the ANPs; however several SENCos did provide details of times when less desirable Os had occurred. Although these Os were discussed less frequently, they still provided useful learning points as to how the ANPs could be more effective or pitfalls could be avoided in the future.

I do not claim to have produced findings that are unbiased (please see methodology chapter). Instead I have aimed to provide an account of my research that is transparent so that the reader is able to draw their own conclusions about the findings. I hope that by reflecting upon the high frequency of positive SENCo responses, I have helped the reader consider how the research methods may have influenced the findings.

#### **5.7.1.2 Could the interview format have meant that I missed out asking SENCos about important aspects of the ANPs?**

The first six questions on the interview Schedule asked SENCo participants about specific outcomes. This could have limited what they felt able to talk about. In an

attempt to avoid this limitation I included several open questions at the end of the interview schedule:

- How did you feel about talking to me?
- Was there anything else you would like to say?
- Is there anything, in your opinion, that's not working about the ANPs?

In your opinion, is there anything about the way the ANPs are run that could be improved?

### **5.7.1.3 I was immersed in the research, the LA and ran two ANPs. How did I prevent my own opinions from influencing the findings?**

Pawson and Tilley (1997) explain that evaluators will draw hypotheses about what works for whom in what circumstances from their study of similar and previous programmes. It is inevitable that my professional experiences and reading of others' research influenced data analysis and formation of programme theory. It is important therefore that I took the steps to make my influence upon findings transparent:

- Personal reflexivity (Banister *et al.* 1994) - I kept a reflective diary throughout the research process and reflected upon my own thoughts and feelings about the ANPs, decisions I made and understandings that developed as I progressed through the research. I read back over this as I wrote this thesis to attempt to identify how I may have imposed my own meanings onto the findings.
- Functional reflexivity - I held regular meetings with a research supervisor to discuss the research process and attempt to uncover values, biases or

assumptions that may have influenced the way I was conducting the research (Banister *et al.* 1994).

- I asked myself the questions outlined in appendix 38 throughout the research process.
- I included illuminative quotes within the research findings in order to promote the voice of the individual SENCOs.
- Disciplinary reflexivity (Gough & McFadden, 2001) - I have outlined existing assumptions, concepts and research techniques that have been involved in shaping current understandings of consultation, and discussed how this research contributes to those understandings.

#### **5.7.1.4 Is it possible that SENCOs had differing recollections of what had happened?**

I interviewed all SENCOs in June or July 2013. Table 1.1 shows that DTown held the preceding ANP meeting in April 2013, CTown in May 2013 and ATown, BTown and CTown in June 2013. Each ANP group also had a differing number of meetings in the Academic year 2012/13 ranging from six (CTown) to two (DTown). It could be claimed, therefore, that the time passed and number of meetings attended meant that SENCOs had differing recollections. Some interviewees had attended more frequent and recent ANP meetings and therefore may have had more vivid memories of what had happened during an ANP meeting. It is also likely that a range of factors, such as individual differences, salience of events, and discussion with peers, could also have impacted upon SENCO recall. In the introduction, I discussed how each ANP was different in terms of the amount of explanation SENCOs had received, size of group and

EPs involved. These differing experiences are all likely to have affected SENCo recollections and accounts of ANP meetings. I claim, therefore, that it is very likely that SENCos *did* have differing recollections of what happened during ANP meetings.

This research, however, is an evaluation of the use of group consultation *as a mode of EPS delivery*. ANPs involved changes to the way SENCos interfaced with EPs, planned and prioritised work, completed paperwork, networked with other SENCos and addressed the needs of children. I was therefore asking SENCos to consider the process as a whole, including things that happened outside of meetings, when providing their responses. SENCo recollections of the meetings are only one aspect of their accounts that contributed to findings.

I adopted a methodology that attempted to uncover explanations of the ANPs. I was interested in the SENCos' personal experiences, interpretations and perceptions of how the ANPs shaped their actions. I actively looked for similarities and differences in their accounts. I claim that my findings are 'theories' about the ANPs, influenced by my own subjectivity and the subjectivity of the SENCos. This includes our differing experiences and how we interpreted and remembered events. I do not claim to have uncovered objective 'truths' about group consultation.

#### **5.7.1.5 Do the findings justify claims that ANPs have a positive impact upon children and parents?**

I asked SENCOs whether they agreed that the ANPs had supported them to meet children's needs effectively. The majority of SENCOs agreed that they felt that this had occurred. Baxter and Frederickson (2005) assert that the joint client of EPs and school staff are children. They argue that evaluation of EPSs should therefore 'go beyond the views of the school, to looking, with school staff, at outcomes for children' (p. 96). Although SENCOs may have perceived that they had met children's needs, the current evaluation did not directly measure outcomes for children. The findings of this evaluation suggest that ANPs may support school staff to meet children's needs effectively, however to justify these claims further research should evaluate outcomes for children. This could include collection of qualitative or quantitative data about all the children within ANP schools, and not just those discussed at meetings, to assess the wider impact of the ANPs. Claims that parents feel reassured about what is happening for their child as a result of the ANPs are similarly limited. A further avenue for future research would be to interview parents of children that had been discussed at ANPs to gain their viewpoints of the process.

#### **5.7.2 Reflections upon the impact of the research**

I embarked upon the research journey with specific aims. I hoped to gain a deeper understanding of my professional practice, as I believed this would help me develop as a practitioner. I also wanted to uncover ways in which the ANPs could be improved

and produce a piece of writing that was informative for other practitioners considering a similar model of service delivery. My approach to research could therefore be described as pragmatic. I will now discuss the extent to which I believe this piece of research enabled me to achieve my aims.

#### **5.7.2.1 Understandings of professional practice**

When I first attended ANPs in Autumn term 2013, I had misgivings (please see appendix 33). I felt that the meetings did not have a clear structure. I completed the literature review in October and November 2012. The experience was useful as many of the reviewed articles contained information that I found transferrable to my own situation. During this time, I was involved in meetings with other EPs aimed at refining the ANP process (please see the Introduction chapter for further details). Other practitioners' writings relating to group consultation influenced my input during these meetings. In particular Stringer *et al.*'s (1992) and Bozic and Carter's (2002) articles described a model of group consultation (based upon Hanko's collaborative problem-solving) that sounded very similar to the ANP meetings I had attended. Evans (2005) provided description of how her EPS had instigated group consultation as a mode of service delivery. During meetings with the other EPs this helped me to consider carefully our meeting 'structure' and how important it would be to have clear written ground rules. This led to the production of clear guidance on the meeting format (appendix 2, pages 7 - 10) which was distributed to all EPs running ANPs in February 2013.



I also found that my chosen methodology was extremely useful in developing my understandings of the ANPs. The most significant aspect of a realistic evaluation is that it highlights the importance of looking for explanations, in terms of context and mechanisms, for a range of differing outcomes. The findings I produced were broad and difficult to summarise, and this could perhaps be viewed as a limitation. In terms of my understanding of the ANPs, however, this was an advantage. Theory was produced regarding how the ANPs worked and grounded within current understandings of group consultation. I was able to gain a deeper understanding of how others' theories related to my own context. The realist interviews allowed participants to provide detailed and broad answers and this helped me to assimilate a range of perspectives into my own understandings of the ANPs. I believe that the realistic evaluation framework allowed me to develop practical theory - theory that would support my practice, theory that helped me to develop workable explanations of the ANPs.

#### **5.7.2.2 Impact upon professional practice**

Throughout my involvement in the research, from September 2013 until August 2014 (Please see appendix one for the research timeline) I discussed the ANPs informally with other EPs within the EPS. My discussions with them regarding the processes were inevitably influenced by the data I had collected and the research literature I had read.

I shared my findings with members of the EPS on multiple occasions. In July 2013, I shared my initial perspectives, based upon the SENCo interviews at a team meeting. I

shared a first draft of my findings with the PEP in September 2013 (appendix 27). This led to the development of an information leaflet for parents regarding the ANPs. In July 2014 I presented the findings of this research to members of my EPS as part of a whole team training day. I discussed my understandings of how the ANPs worked and recommendations on how the ANPs could be improved. In July 2014, I met with the PEP to discuss how my findings could impact the way ANPs would run from September 2014. We discussed the possibility that I might act as a 'process consultant,' visiting ANPs to provide guidance to other EP facilitators based upon the theories I had developed through conducting the research. I also plan to prepare a checklist relating to the contracting that should occur prior to and as an on-going part of ANP meetings. The research process has therefore, in my opinion, had considerable impact upon the development of the ANPs within my EPS.

### **5.7.2.3 Impact upon participants**

I believe that being invited to an interview, to share opinions about the ANPs, was valued by SENCo participants. For example SENCo four said:

'I hope that from your research that it sort of leads for further sort of support for individual schools ... saying it to an outside person who can get ideas from what other people are saying as well, I think it sometimes helps.'

SEnCo five said:

'Initially I thought, "ooh I don't want know if I want to be interviewed" and then I forgot about it, but then I thought, "well no, I really want to put my point

across because if I have got the grumbles I ought to be sharing them." And then I got the chance when I got your e-mail last week to contact you. So I was really pleased really when I saw that e-mail.'

Feeling that their voice had been heard may have had a positive impact upon SENCo participants. It may have made them feel that the ANPs were not just something that were being 'done to them' but something they could influence. I also shared my findings with SENCos in the form of a written report in November 2013 (Appendix 28).

## **5.8 Summary**

This chapter has discussed the findings of this qualitative evaluation. Phase one findings were represented in the Initial Programme Specification (IPS), a qualitative table providing Educational Psychologist's theories about how the Additional Needs Partnerships (ANPs) worked. Phase 2 produced a Programme Theory, which appeared, on the whole to confirm the IPS, as well as providing further specification of why, when and how the ANPs provided an effective EPS delivery. Phase 2 findings also provided details of times when the ANPs had produced negative or neutral outcomes, and reasons these had occurred. This allowed suggestions to be made as to how the ANPs could be improved. Next, in the conclusion, I will provide a summary of the implications of this evaluation to practice knowledge regarding group consultation.



## **6      Conclusion**

The aim of the research was to assist the development of my EPS as well as my personal professional development. This research was written in a style which both presents, and contributes to, 'theory,' taking into account the opinions of those who received EP services. I believe that in contributing to understandings and explanations of group consultation, my research supports the development of informed, reflective and critical EP practice. My research also promoted change in my EPS, in terms of improving practice and uncovering aspects of the ANPs that SENCOs found unfair or disempowering.

This evaluation offers further insight into the outcomes of group consultation. Previous research has reported that consultees felt supported, gained new perspectives, understandings and ideas, and developed professional skills as a result of group consultation. The current evaluation supports these findings. Furthermore, the current evaluation suggests that group consultation supported professionals working in education to feel that they were meeting children's needs and to feel supported in their work with parents.

This evaluation appears to support previous research findings that it is the structured group discussion that brings about the positive outcomes of group consultation. This is because group discussion involves the sharing of problems, provides space to reflect and learn from others, and provides opportunities to plan collaborate and network

with colleagues. In addition, current findings suggest that SENCo preparation and meeting follow-up, consideration of practical details and EP contributions promote effective working of ANPs.

Aspects of the context reported in previous literature as promoting group consultation were also found to promote effective workings of the ANPs. If the group included professionals with a range of expertise and experience, who trusted and supported one another, this was conducive to effective group consultation. In relation to the ANP model, if SENCos or parents had concerns about individual children or were dissatisfied with the previous time-allocation model, this appeared to provide a context that was conducive to effective working of the ANPs.

SENCo participants reported several limitations of the ANPs. During initial meetings, some SENCos were unacquainted, the process was unclear and agreed EP follow-up work did not always occur. The discussion that occurred during some group consultations was limited due to time constraints or low SENCo confidence or commitment. Clear contracting between group members before ANPs commence, and as an on-going process, could perhaps help mitigate these limitations.

Several experienced SENCos suggested that constraints upon EP time, school climate and resources, support from school staff and level of respect between members were all factors that could impact upon ANPs. Previous research literature also cites these factors as influencing the functioning of group consultation.

Several SENCOs reported that parents/carers were confused by the ANP model and found the system hard to navigate. This was because EPs did not become involved in working with every child and parents were less involved in the process. One avenue for future research would be to obtain parental/carer views of group consultation and measure outcomes for children in schools where group consultation has been implemented.

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