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Understanding Diversity in Educational Psychology Teams

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ABSTRACT Educational psychologists' work routinely involves facilitation of teams in which participants hold diverse points of view. In this article, the authors discuss diversity in team work and its place in the development of shared goals. They describe, as an example of educational psychologists' work team interaction, the structure and functioning of communities of practice. Particular attention is paid to the tension between commonality and diversity of team-member knowledge in determining the course of professional practice. The authors consider a particular aspect of diversity regularly encountered by educational psychologists: differing beliefs regarding the reasons for, and origins of, child behaviour. They suggest that educational psychologists can support effective interventions by recognizing, understanding and utilizing the diverse views of the people involved in their consultation work. A matrix of common perspectives of human development illustrates a range of diverse views and shows how fluid beliefs about the contexts of learning and behaviour problems influence interpretations of events and the nature of interventions. The authors illustrate, with reference to case examples, how the matrix can illuminate the nature of diverse viewpoints and support educational psychology teams to utilize difference to construct applicable interventions.

KEY WORDS: communities of practice; diversity; educational psychology; interdisciplinary teams

Teams in professional practice

Educational psychologists do not act alone in exploring learning contexts or in developing intervention plans. They work in collaboration with people who have an interest in students', or groups of students', learning and development (Christenson, 2004; National Association

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of School Psychologists [NASP], 2005; Power, 2003). Teams typically comprise students, family members, teachers, psychologists, special education coordinators and therapists from a variety of disciplines. These teams may include others, for example, personnel from government agencies, cultural advisors and school board members. Team composition is generally developed in response to the specific contexts of referral and is constantly changing as children develop, systems change and professionals are reassigned. Educational psychologists' work also involves participation in multi-disciplinary teams such as traumatic incident teams and professional committees. The education and well-being of young people are influenced greatly by the effectiveness of these teams.

The 1990s saw a proliferation of research and writing about teaming in the workplace. Article titles such as, 'Teams at Work: Seven Keys to Success' (Zoglio, 1994) and, *The Skilled Facilitator: Practical Wisdom for Developing Effective Groups* (Schwarz, 1994) abounded. Educational psychology embraced this movement, implementing the team consultation model that is commonplace today (see NASP, 2005; Rosenfield, 1992; Tilly, 2002). Research into the functioning of teams has identified a large variety of factors that enhance the group process. For example, Katzenbach and Smith (1993) acknowledged the complexity of team functioning and identified interacting factors including leadership, team balance, autonomy, shared understanding of goals, recognition, reward and feedback. The finding that diversity was an effectiveness factor challenged traditional thinking on teamwork.

Diversity in team processes

How do groups of people work effectively? One example of group functioning is the *community of practice*, first described by Lave and Wenger (1991) and further elaborated by Wenger et al. (2002). Lave and Wenger observed that groups developed distributed and individual knowledge through interaction that took place among members with varying levels and types of experience. The structure of and processes within the community of practice highlight the interaction between diversity, commonality, knowledge and practice.

Communities of practice are groups of individuals who voluntarily come together for a particular purpose and who share a specific body of knowledge. There are now many accounts of the usefulness and applicability of communities of practice in a wide variety of settings, including business, industry and education (e.g. Brown and Duguid, 2000; Buysse et al., 2003; Wenger et al., 2002). The presence of diversity is considered fundamental to the viability of the community of practice.

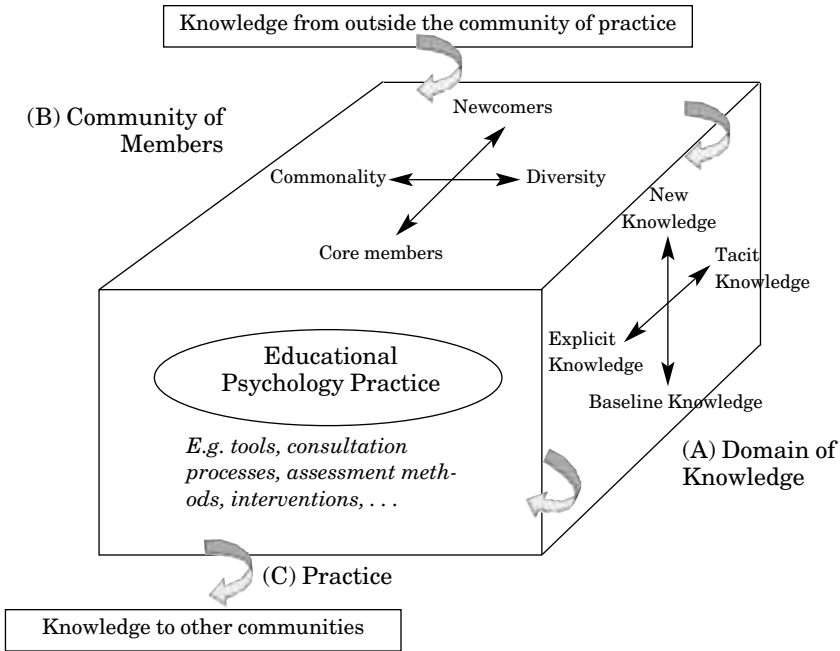


Figure 1 *The community of practice (diagram based on concept of community of practice as described by Wenger et al., 2002)*

The community of practice is envisioned as a three dimensional structure (see Figure 1). One dimension is the *domain* which holds the knowledge of the community. This knowledge binds the community together and is the core of the structure. The domain is dynamic and includes two essential forms of knowledge. These are the explicit knowledge, obtained through training and evident in documented policies and protocols, and the tacit knowledge, the more subtle understandings that can only be acquired through situated activity within the community context. Within the community, members constantly challenge and defend the knowledge. Newcomers to the community bring fresh knowledge and challenge established practices, while established core members of the community protect the integrity of practice and the most fundamental sets of knowledge. The domain is highly resistant to change but the ongoing challenges and dialogue give rise to gradual shifts in the baseline of knowledge, creating new knowledge that then characterizes the community of practice.

The second dimension is the *community*, the members. All members

make equivalent contributions as core, experienced participants, or as newcomers who operate at the periphery. A key aspect of the community dimension is the balance between the commonality signified by members' shared concern for the body of knowledge and the diversity that sparks debate and fosters the construction of new solutions. This debate serves to conservatively develop the domain of knowledge in a process of constant transformation. It is this ongoing transformation that maintains that community.

The third dimension is the *practice*, the actions that result from the community members' interaction in relation to the community knowledge. Each action taken within the community reflects the knowledge of the domain. From the theories held in the domain, principles for practice emerge, and these principles give rise to the development of specific methods, strategies and procedures. The domain influences what is done in practice and how it is done. Members' evaluations of the effectiveness or usefulness of community practices will serve to confirm or challenge items in the domain.

The community of practice model of group interaction reflects a rather flat management style and assumes that members have a largely intrinsic interest in its maintenance. It has an internal cycle of reflection and action that is boosted by the challenges of new knowledge gained through interaction with other communities. Educational psychology teams most often reflect the critical commonality and diversity of the community of practice. In most instances, team members expect to work collaboratively and have equivalent power. As the membership often represents various levels of experience or different types of knowledge, there is scope for misunderstanding. Psychologists require the knowledge, skill and commitment to ensure that the wide range of knowledge participants bring to the alliance is used to advantage and managed respectfully by the group.

The community is sustained through the transformative action of members. Lave and Wenger (1991) suggested that the development of new knowledge, and therefore the continuance of the community of practice, were powered by the triadic relations between members who brought different knowledge to their interaction. Wenger considered that diversity fostered essential tensions that, when well managed, could lead to good outcomes and continuing momentum of group cohesion. He viewed diversity as essential for teams who wished to avoid the negative outcomes associated with the dominance of one 'expert'.

Diversity and outcomes

Does diversity lead to better outcomes? Demonstrated effects of diversity in teams have been inconsistent. Mannix and Neale (2005)

reviewed a wide range of literature considering effects on team processes and outcomes and they concluded that there were no clear main effects for diversity. While diversity had contributed positively to a number of group processes, they also found that there were teams in health, education, business and industry that had struggled to take advantage of the opportunities that diversity offered.

This result had been signalled by Jehn et al. (1999) who observed that groups had often been developed upon the assumption that diversity itself would serve as a catalyst for change, that groups would capture the diversity stemming from differences in background, values and knowledge to make things happen. While groups are now seen as central in special education services, differences in perspective do present challenges. The interpersonal nature of team approaches makes them a haven for the expression of inevitable tensions. Membership of teams brought together to support the education of young people more often than not represents diverse backgrounds, different experiences and different views of the circumstances they share. However, for teams to work effectively, they must be able to work together. If diversity is to have a positive impact on the construction of solutions, then important aspects of difference in views must be understood and managed.

Types of diversity

Diversity can be construed in a variety of ways. Kravitz (2005) noted that diversity was sometimes operationalized in terms of factors, e.g. race, gender and age, and at other times focused on proportions of minority, irrespective of factors underlying the division. Diversity has also been perceived broadly as 'any attribute that another person may use to detect individual differences' (Williams and Reilly cited in Mannix and Neale, 2005). Jehn et al. (1999) explored the influence on outcomes of three types of workforce diversity; social category diversity, value diversity and informational diversity. They found that each of these types of diversity had a different effect on outcomes. Informational diversity positively influenced group performance, social diversity positively influenced member morale and value diversity decreased satisfaction, willingness to stay and commitment to the group.

Jehn and colleagues' findings have clear implications of for educational psychology work. Group members who come together in response to the particular learning needs of particular groups of young people or individuals must have a degree of commonality to work together. In part, this is fostered by the shared concern that brings them together in the first place. However, it is the development of new shared knowledge that will keep them there.

We propose that, to work effectively, team members must recognize, understand and value the diversity present amidst the group. The varying backgrounds and views of team members will inevitably determine the perspectives each brings to tasks. Educational psychologists who take a coordination role in diverse teams, or who contribute as participants, can help to facilitate the development of common ground, foster constructive participation of all members and utilize the synergistic power inherent in the interaction. But for this to happen, we need to understand the perspectives of other participants.

Locating problems and solutions: a matrix of perspectives

Educational psychology practice involves working with people whose range of values and beliefs about human development, learning and teaching is diverse. One type of diversity that educational psychologists encounter is that of the perspectives of participants on problems and solutions (NASP, 2005). This includes participants' notions of the sources and positions of problems and the nature of credible solutions. To understand the context of teamwork and facilitate effective interventions, educational psychologists must be aware of the various positions participants take on the referral matter.

Collaborative team work requires that members understand each other's perspectives and develop shared goals for intervention. Educational psychologists can facilitate this alliance by capturing the energy generated through creating a balance between commonality and diversity. The broad understandings developed may incorporate several views and lead to interventions that are acceptable to participants. Interventions that are acceptable to those who work with children on an everyday basis stand a greater chance of implementation and more chance of success (Han and Weiss, 2005).

Educational psychologists must identify participants' beliefs about the sources and positions of problems in relation to the context of learning as these views affect the way they expect to proceed with consultation, assessment and intervention. A matrix (Bowler et al., 2007) based on Dent-Read and Zukow-Goldring's (1997) reflection on the range of views represented in their account of ecological realism provides a framework to understand the various perspectives. The matrix helps to visualize a continuum from active to passive on two dimensions, the learner and the environment.

Figure 2 shows the various perspectives that participants such as parents, teachers, students and educational psychologists may take on the location of referral problems. Some may perceive the problem to be primarily located within the active child, while others may view the active environment as being the dominant influence. Those who see

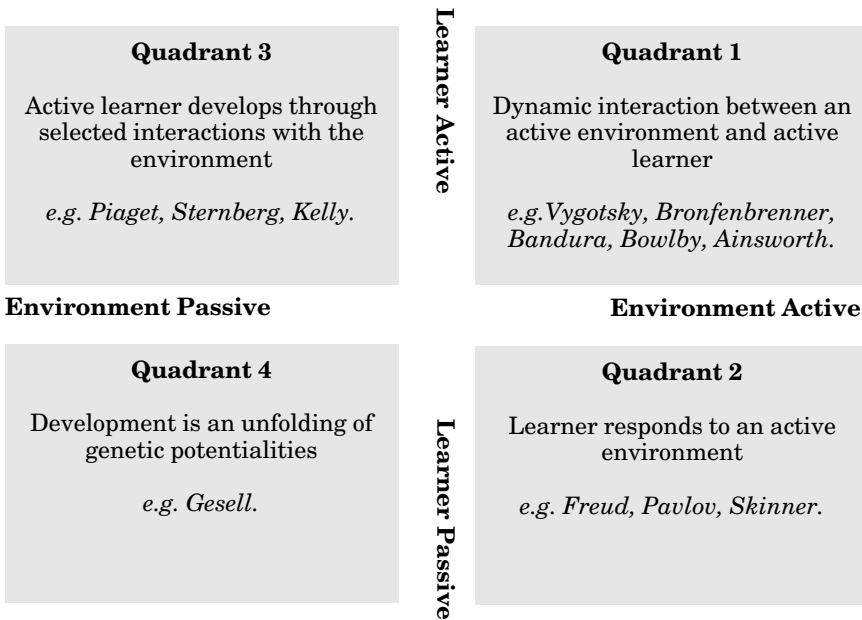


Figure 2 *Matrix of perspectives on the learner-environment relationship (from Bowler et al. (2007) based on concept described by Dent-Read and Zukow-Goldring)*

both the learner and the environment as active, involving reciprocal interaction will perceive a dynamic of circular causation. In cases where the learner and the environment are viewed as passive, the cause is attributed to a predetermined unfolding of events and development. Educational psychologists must be aware of where the problem has been placed by each participant to understand team interaction, the place of the problem in the lives of participants and the nature of workable solutions.

The location of the problem may be influenced by participants' beliefs about the ways in which behaviours are acquired and selected. Figure 2 suggests that each of the theories of human development gives rise to particular views of the locations of problems and solutions. For example, the works of Pavlov and Skinner have supported a view that the learner responds to an active environment and that the learner is a passive recipient of this action (Quadrant 2). On the other hand, Piaget explained that children actively construct their development as they act on their environment (Quadrant 3). Currently, educational psychology espouses a position in the first quadrant of the matrix. Influenced

by theorists such as Vygotsky, Bronfenbrenner, Dewey and Bandura, the practice of educational psychology purports to consider the reciprocal relationship between the learner and the environment, providing an integrated analysis of complex contexts (Annan et al., 2004; Cameron, 2006).

The positions taken by team members will influence their expectations of the types of interventions that will best address learning and behavioural problems. For example, a team may be considering a situation in which a child does not complete her school work. She may move about the classroom when she is expected to stay seated, prevent others from having turns at play and often fail to follow instructions. Team positioning on the matrix will be illustrated by the interpretations of this behaviour and will be reflected in the nature of interventions. In quadrant 1, the interpretation would focus on the interplay between the child factors and the educational environment and interventions would aim to achieve greater correspondence between the child's actions and the systems that influence, and are influenced by, the child's development. In the second quadrant, the reason for the behaviour will be interpreted in terms of environmental problems. Interventions associated with such interpretations will involve modifications of the environment, for example, changing classroom routines and rewarding acceptable behaviour. Behaviour interpreted from the perspective of the third quadrant assumes that the child selects her actions and manipulates a passive environment. The intervention in this case may involve direct counselling to alter her decision-making around a certain behaviour. In the fourth quadrant, the behaviour is considered to be beyond the control of the child or environment. The behaviour may receive a diagnosis as, in the situation discussed, ADHD, and the child may be medicated.

This fixed description has been presented for the purposes of clarity. It is a snapshot of the reality experienced in educational psychology teamwork. A dynamic view of the matrix illustrates the complexity and variability of interpretations of behaviour. Clearly, people's views of the situation will not always sit squarely within any one quadrant but will shift within and between quadrants. Views of behaviour on the active-passive continuum will vary across settings and time. While perceptions of educational events are influenced by participants' underlying beliefs about human development, they will also be affected by the particular circumstances for each participant such as the role they perceive they have in relation to the issue. For example, a teacher may view a child in her class as responsible for causing disruption and believe that she is choosing to act this way. She is 'misbehaving', a view represented in the third quadrant. However, this same teacher, who is also a parent, may place more responsibility for the disruptive

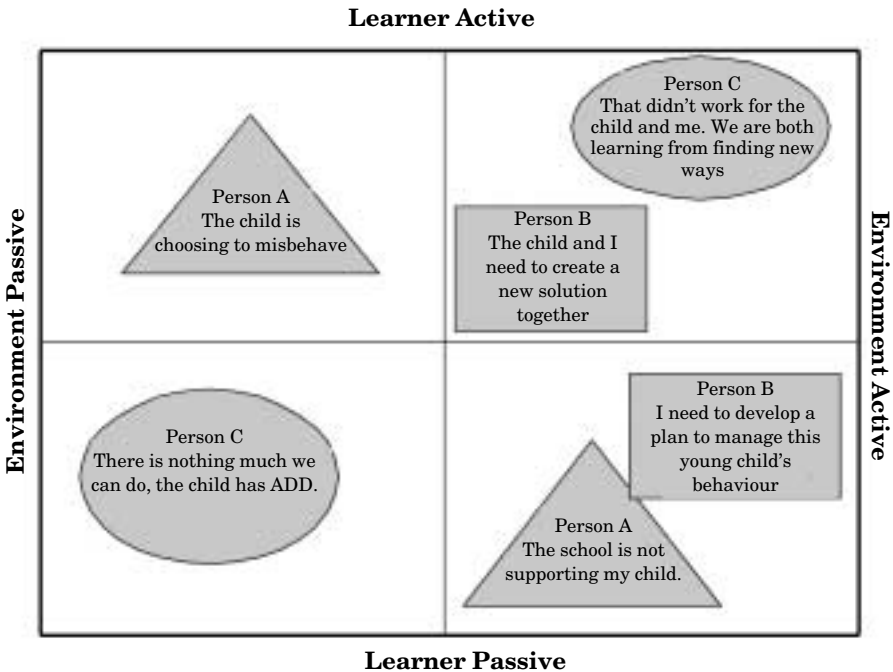


Figure 3 Diagram illustrating the fluidity of the matrix of perspectives on learner-environment relationships

behaviour on the educational environment when her own child's actions come into question. Her view, on the latter occasion may fall into the second quadrant.

The diagram (Figure 3) shows how participants take different perspectives in different situations. The example discussed is represented by person A in the diagram. A's views of two similar events fall into two quadrants, two and three. Similarly, Person B, who in most circumstances may take an interactive view, could find that she views the environment as predominantly influential in particular situations, for example, when children are very young. A further example may include that of Person C who takes an interactive view of one event but who may interpret another event as beyond the control of either the learner or the environment because certain diagnoses have been made.

The fluid matrix of perspectives in practice

Does this variability affect the usefulness of the matrix in developing understanding for educational psychology teams? What are of interest to educational psychologists in practice are the current views that participants are taking on particular problems in specific contexts. We suggest that the fluid matrix supports educational psychologists to develop understanding of the ways in which participants are viewing problems and solutions at the time and to appreciate any changes as they occur. Through dialogue, participants' views may become increasingly aligned, or otherwise. In circumstances in which views have remained, or have become, discrepant, educational psychologists require knowledge of participant perspectives and expectations in order to work toward interventions that are acceptable to all members.

When considering participants' views in relation to a problem, it is expected that educational psychologists will not view people as firmly aligned with one aspect of the matrix. Similarly, it would not be useful to make evaluative judgements about the particular perspective they take on a specific situation. Indeed, the matrix is intended to help psychologists appreciate the positions of team members and the reasons that circumstances might be construed in certain ways. It is a guide to help educational psychologists understand the ever-shifting context of teamwork in order to facilitate constructive dialogue between parties experiencing unique realities.

Participants whose views are respected are in a better position to respect the views of others. As illustrated in communities of practice, effective teams work collaboratively to develop a degree of unity (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger et al., 2002). In sufficiently unified teams, participants may examine the assumptions they bring to teamwork and safely challenge the views of others. Through knowledge gained from listening to participants' descriptions, suggestions and stories, educational psychologists may appreciate the nature and extent of shifting commonality and diversity amongst participants and facilitate constructive dialogue. The matrix also offers a guide for educational psychologists to locate their own view of each referral situation and to consider the implications of this filter for their participation.

Diversity will bring inevitable tensions that, through the process of reconciliation, may generate effective interventions. Acknowledging such tensions does not mean that they disappear and educational psychologists must develop, in training, the facilitation skills necessary to indicate respect for participants' positions. They must be able to acknowledge and appreciate the uniqueness of contexts and remain as impartial as possible while moving the consultation process forward.

Summary

Members of teams in educational psychology are brought together by their shared concern for the development and well-being of children. Team composition is characterized by diversity as members are selected on the basis of their ability to make particular and often complementary contributions. Recent research in the operation of communities of practice suggests that a balance of commonality and diversity is essential for the productivity and sustainability of groups. Diversity offers a context for dialogue with the consequent construction of relevant analyses and creative interventions. The effects of diversity can be influenced by the type of diversity as some forms, such as informational and social category diversity, have been found to more readily contribute to team effectiveness. Value diversity, however, offers additional challenges. Educational psychologists are usually members, and frequently facilitators, of multi-disciplinary teams which are characterized by their wide range of beliefs.

The goal of teamwork is to develop interventions through dialogue among diverse participants. To work effectively, educational psychologists must understand the perspective from which each member is viewing a particular problem, to understand this perspective in relation to the context in which each team participant interacts with the learner or a problem. Such understanding requires sensitivity and respect for a wide range of views.

One of the most common forms of diversity that educational psychologists meet is the variation in views on the relationship between the learner and the environment. Differences in learner-environment relationship views can present ongoing challenges, not only in team meetings but on a day-to-day basis. The matrix discussed in this article can support educational psychologists to understand the ways that others view the causal aspects and positioning of problematic situations and to appreciate that such views can change in relation to the context. Although there remains more to know about this form of diversity and its role in team processes, educational psychologists who have developed sound team facilitation skills in their work and who can identify the fluid positions of team members are well placed to work authentically, respectfully and consequently effectively.

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