The use of consultancy research in the development of Specialist Leaders of Education

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The argument

'System leadership', the offering of school to school support, now has a 10 year history of research and practice in English schools.

System Leaders of Education who offer such support are essentially consultants. Yet so far, consultancy research has not been used to help System leaders inform and reflect on their practice. (Could this have something to do with consultancy's bad press in the critical business literature?)

 So, we want to find out how such research might be used to inform practice and the design of professional development activity for the most recent tranche of 'system leaders', Specialist Leaders of Education, in the context of a Teaching Schools Alliance.

The research

Overarching question:- If we believe that education is a public service in a democratic society, what sort of system leader consultants do want in the future?

Stage 1

We produce a research agenda for the consultancy development of system leaders,

(Close, 2016)

Stage 2

We test out the agenda with a small group of Specialist Leaders of Education in a Teaching Schools Alliance.in the North west of England

Stage 3

We track a SLE learning set working with the agenda over a one year period in this TSA

Stage 1 - An agenda for consultancy development.
(Close, 2016)

Draws from consultancy research across the social sciences.

Scope rather than depth – provides literature signposts for further enquiry and conceptual frameworks for design of professional development activity rather than detailed exposition. (that comes later!)

The research provides the terms of reference for 'consultancy' within six areas of enquiry and propositions for action.

Stage 1:- terms of reference for consultancy development

System leader consultants have a critical understanding of consultancy skills, cycles and role tensions, the psychodynamics of the helping relationship – and of types of client , interventions and the nature of 'impact' and 'outcomes' in consultancy work.

More broadly, system leader consultants are politically astute and ethically aware. They can bring policy appropriate understandings of organisation, change and contracting to their work with individual clients and client organisations, and can contribute to wider policy debates around consultancy and knowledge production. System leader consultants challenge narrow market values in the central endeavour of redefining public worth in a marketised system.

An agenda for consultancy development (Close, 2016)

Areas of enquiry	Propositions for action that use literatures of…..
Contextual dimensions	
Values	**Organisation Development** to introduce the 'consultancy curriculum and ethical codes of practice.
Analysis	**Organisation, structural reform and network theory** to analyse client situations and consultant agency
Change	**Sensemaking, identity formation and loose/tight systems** to understand personal and organisational change
Operating Levels	
Micro	**Political coaching** to exert influence with clients
Meso	**Organisational contracting** to engage strategic partners
Macro	**'Consultocracy' and knowledge production** to question values, interests and knowledge claims of consultancy organisations

Stage 2 :- testing the agenda

Specific research questions

What are we learning from SLE deployment practice in the North West TSA?

What are we learning from consultancy research that can further inform the skills, politics and ethics of such practice?

How can we combine learning from this practice and research to create SLE professional development activities that are relevant to need, easy to organise and relatively low cost?

Stage 2:- testing the agenda:- design and process

Small interview sample of contributors provided both senior and middle level perspectives of SLE practice (Two gateway school Heads, one broker and 3 SLE's in a rural Teaching Schools Alliance in the North west of England).

Process :-A staged reading of consultancy research, interspersed with initial and follow up interviews .

Introductory paper circulated (Close, 2016). Face to face interviews on learning from SLE brokerage and deployment, plus contributors' feedback on 'entry points' to the introductory paper. Circulation of follow up readings that explore specific aspects of the general introductory paper. (Block, 2011, Close, 2010, 2013, Schein 1998, 2002).

Initial Interview checks and further telephone interviews about the follow up readings

Data compiled in a final report as a narrative discussion of potential ideas for professional development activity.

Findings from practice:- SLE deployments

1   The SLE role needs further promotion and explanation.

2   Learning from consultancy practice of SLE deployments is developing skills and sensitivities around client conversations, delegation, time management, coaching and facilitation, negotiation, setting agreements, working with multiple clients and designing deployments for impact.

3   These skills and sensitivities are generating suggestions for 'refresher   training' and wider understandings of ethics and principles in SLE work.

4   The model of brokerage has been key to the success of SLE deployments to date.

Findings from research : the consultancy readings

'Entry points' from the introductory research paper:-

System leader learning sets, consulting skills workshops, debates around measuring impact of SLE work, SLE briefing on funding regimes and Joint Practice Development initiatives, debates around intelligence gathering and 'knowledge mobilisation' and redefining public worth in marketised system.

From the follow up readings:-

Psychodynamics of the helping relationship, and being authentic', matching consulting skills skills to consultancy stages in the consultancy cycle

Senior level understandings of SLE relationships, organisational analysis and 'political coaching'in the current policy landscape.

Combining practice with research: a menu of SLE professional development activities

Action learning sets and consultancy reading groups

Skills in action 1- role play of consulting skills in action at each phase of the consulting cycle.

Skills in action 2- case studies of effective delegation and negotiation and creative ways of setting agreements .

Serving multiple clients - seminar discussion

'Wider picture updates' SLE work across the county, Joint Practice Development, CPD funding, and external consulting activity

The psychodynamics of the helping relationship:- reflective diary keeping.

Ethics workshops:- an SLE code of practice that builds on guidance in the CASL handbook.

Coaching partnerships that develop political and ethical understandings of SLE work.

Designing for impact: understanding personal learning and organisational change in SLE deployments.

Stage 3: future development – the SLE learning set

❑ System Leaders of Education bring consulting problems from deployment practice and consultancy readings to a learning set.

❑The researchers contract to facilitate the opening meetings and then hand over to members.

❑The researchers gather data via 'working notes', (Hirschhorn , 1991) over the course of the meetings and look for learning about consultancy supervision in three areas, 'restorative' (dealing with anxiety), 'developmental' (learning from application) and 'managerial (meeting functional targets). (Hawkins and Smith, 2007)

❑Learning from this interplay of psychodynamic, functional and political factors that emerge from problem analysis in the con sulting process is used to develop new leaning sets.

Project readings

Block, P (2011) Flawless consulting. chapter 1:- 'A consultant by any other name'. 3rd edition. San Francisco. Jossey Bass.

Close, P (2016) System Leader consultancy development in English Schools: a long - term agenda for a democratic future? *School Leadership and Management*. Vol 36. no.1. 113- 132.

Close, P and Raynor, A (2010) Five literatures of organisation. Putting the context back into educational leadership. *School leadership and Management*. 30 (3). 209-224.

Close, P. (2013) Developing political astuteness. A leadership coaching journey. *School Leadership and Management*. 33 (2) 123-140.

Schein, E (1999) *Process consultation revisited: Building the helping relationship*. chapter 4. 'The concept of client'. Harlow. Addison Wesley Longman.

Schein, E (2002) 'Consulting: what should it mean?' Chapter 2 in T. Clark and R.Fincham, eds. *Critical Consulting. New perspectives on the management advice industry*. Oxford. Blackwell.

Broader issues and some further questions

Do Specialist Leaders of Education have a future in English Schools?

How varied is brokerage and deployment practice in different parts of the country?

How are tensions being addressed between 'service' and 'market' issues in such practice?

Do we know other examples of research being used explicitly in the co-construction of professional development activity in school groups?

What counts as so- called 'Joint Practice Development' in this context?