'I'm just there to ease the burden'; the Parent Support Adviser role

in English schools and the question of emotional labour.

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Abstract:

In 2005, the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) announced a £40 million investment in a new school support worker role, the Parent Support Adviser (PSA), for 20 English Local Authorities (LAs). A pilot project ran from 2006-08, and resulted in the establishment of 717 PSAs in 1,167 schools. The national evaluation of the project forms the evidential basis of this paper, with interviews conducted with 69 PSAs, 85 PSA line managers, and 105 parents, and a data base recording casework with nearly 21,000 parents. This paper focuses on the nature of the PSA role as the first centrally funded parent support role in English schools. The theoretical framework provided by the concept of 'emotional labour', and the development of the concept represented by the 4Ps typology, provides the conceptual structure. This paper argues that although the characteristics of the PSA role appear to place it within the category of work requiring emotional labour, PSAs, and parents, regard that aspect of the role in a positive light. For the PSAs, there was little evidence that emotional labour necessary for the role of PSA led to dissonance between role and worker, or alienation from the product of PSA labour.

Introduction

In this paper we draw on data collected from a project funded by the DfES (later, the Department for Children, Schools and Families) which investigated the introduction of a new para-professional into the English education system, the Parent Support Adviser (PSA). The paper explores the development of this new role in the educational workforce with respect to the concept of emotional labour. This is a contested concept, but one that is seen to have particular applicability to service sector work. First, we present the background to the pilot to introduce PSAs into 20 local authorities (LAs). We then review the concept of emotional labour and its development in the form of the 4Ps typology (Bolton, 2000a), and argue for its relevance in examining the PSA role, using data from the three year government funded pilot. We report a combined methods study which produced data from PSAs, the parents with whom they worked and the head teachers of schools with which they were associated. We conclude by examining the claims made for the negative correlates of emotional labour, and the applicability of the 4Ps typology as evidenced by this emerging para-professional group.

This examination of the PSA role provides an additional contribution to the debate about the impact of emotional labour on workers engaged in this type of work, and places PSA work within Bolton's 4Ps typology. The argument here is that there are elements of PSA working that militate against negative impacts of emotional labour, and, indeed, provide positive occupational experiences for PSAs, and, in addition, that PSA work is characterised by the 'presentational', 'philanthropic' and 'prescriptive' categories of the 4Ps typology.

Government policy – parents and their children's education
The 1997 Labour government established universal principles for its future education policy with the 1997 White Paper, *Excellence in Schools* (DfEE, 1997). A key strand in that

strategy was the recognition of the importance of parental participation in their children's education. Parents were seen to have an essential part to play, in partnership with schools, to further government policy objectives to maximise the benefits accruing to school students from their schooling experience. *Excellence in Schools* laid the groundwork for a continuing series of initiatives that sought to enhance parental involvement in their children's education – a strategy that has strong foundations in the evidence relating to the role and importance of parents in their children's education. Parental involvement and student achievement are strongly related across student age ranges. (Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003, Carter and Wojtkiewicz, 2000). In addition, parental involvement with their children's education and achievement is positive across a wide range of indicators, from providing a secure home environment to engaging fully with their children's schools (Harris and Goodall, 2006).

The exact nature of parental involvement with their children's schooling is, however, a strongly contested area of debate, with a number of writers questioning the intention of government, and the vulnerable position of parents, particularly from those groups that have been characterised as "hard to reach" From a critical perspective, it has been argued that the concern of the 'New' Labour government was to continue the neo-liberal, Conservative re-framing of relationships between the state and the individual, and that the political debate was informed by a deficit model of parenting (for example, Crozier, 2000, Gewirtz, 2001, Vincent, 2001, Reay, 2008, Gillies, 2010). This critical reading of the Labour government's global approach to parents, children and families argues that the rhetoric of 'inclusion' was merely 'a smokescreen behind which the continued stripping of welfare protection together with the increase in punitive measures that fall disproportionately on those most in need' (Broadhurst, 2009, 126).

Critiques notwithstanding, the Labour government stated its commitment to parent focused policy in *The Children's Plan* (2007), where one of the five underpinning principles was that:

'Government does not bring up children – parents do – so government needs to do more to back parents and families'. (DCSF, 2007, 5)

The government argued that supporting parents to bring up children can take many forms and address a variety of purposes. Parents may need support to exercise their rights, for example in deciding on their preference for a school for their child. Parents are also important partners with the school to optimise their child's engagement, ensuring the child attends and is orientated towards learning and positive behaviour. Similarly, schools have responsibilities to optimise their collaboration with parents in order to achieve the best outcomes for children and young people.

The Parent Support Adviser (PSA) pilot formed part of a broader government initiative concerning parents, particularly those of children at risk of developing behavioural, emotional or social difficulties (BESD). Children who develop BESD during their early years are also at enhanced risk of their educational development being compromised, later mental health problems and early entry into crime.

In October 2005, the Practitioners' Group on School Behaviour and Discipline chaired by Sir Alan Steer presented a wide-ranging report, recommending that: 'All schools should establish by September 2007 a Pupil Parent Support Worker (PPSW) or other staffing structure to deliver this function.' (Recommendation 3.8.5b). This was followed, in December 2005 by the Department for Education and Skills' *Support for Parents: The Best Start for Children* which announced £20 million investment in the new Parent Support Advisers. It noted that:

'This new, preventative role will support children and families where there are early signs that they could benefit from additional help. Recognising the importance of

working in partnership with parents to improve children's lives, the first response will be to involve parents in identifying appropriate support for the child and family.' (DfES, 2005, para 3.38)

This same document also linked the PSA to the development of Extended Schools, stating that such schools 'will sit at the heart of the community providing parent support, employment advice and other services […] the Government will pilot a new type of role in schools – a Parent Support Adviser – to provide support to children and their parents at the first sign of need.' (DfES, 2005, para 5.40).

The new role of Parent Support Adviser (PSA) was announced in the Chancellor's pre-budget report, *Support for Parents: The Best Start For Children* (HM Treasury and Department for Education and Skills, 2005). This document placed PSAs within the Government's strategy to improve the life chances of children and young people and to deliver equality of opportunity, a strategy guided by:

'Three underpinning principles: rights and responsibilities: supporting parents to meet their responsibilities to their children; progressive universalism: support for all, with more support for those who need it most; and prevention: working to prevent poor outcomes for children, young people and their parents from developing in the first place' (p1).

The Parent Support Adviser pilot
The DCSF provided funding of £40 million over two years, from September 2006 – July 2008, to enable 20 Local Authorities (LAs) in England to recruit, train, and support with an appropriate infrastructure, PSAs as a new parent support role. The DCSF worked in conjunction with LAs, and with the national Training and Development Agency for Schools (TDA). The TDA's role was to allocate funding to LAs, develop an initial training package for

PSAs, along with the introduction of a Support Work in Schools (Parent Support) qualification. Initially, there were three models of PSA work recommended by the DCSF, being:

- Model 1: PSAs based in a single primary or secondary school, working solely with early intervention and preventative support for parents and pupils, including work on supporting parents at key transition points for their child.
- Model 2: Operating across a cluster of primary and secondary schools, focusing on offering parenting support courses and classes and one-to-one support for parents across the cluster.
- Model 3: Operating in one school (like Model 1) but also with a role supporting pupils who have been or are likely to be excluded.

However, these models turned out to be interpreted, at LA level, in a flexible fashion, and there was a degree of interchangeability and variety between them.

By the end of the pilot in March 2008, 717 PSAs had been appointed in the 20 pilot LAs, working with 1,167 schools. The PSA pilot was deemed to be a successful initiative, and additional funding, some £102 million, 2008 – 2011, was subsequently announced by the DCSF for the national expansion of the PSA role throughout England. The funding was provided through the Standards Fund, routed through the Extended Schools – Sustainability strand of the Standards Fund allocation. By the summer of 2009, there were 2,464 PSAs and paraprofessionals with PSA-type roles serving 10,709 schools in England, which had risen to 4,022 serving 14,576 schools in England by the spring of 2010 (TDA, 2010a). In 2011, the Coalition government indicated its continued support for the PSA role, and that of similar professionals working with families in and around schools, although the funding for

PSAs with the schools budget (from April 2011) is not ring-fenced (Ren, 2011). The provision of PSAs is, therefore, likely to be patchy across England.

The Parent Support Adviser role

The PSA role was the first centrally funded parent support role in English schools, although some local authorities had developed similar roles in the recent past, including Family Liaison Officers. It was envisaged as a new role designed to address specific issues in relation to parents, pupils, and schools. Although English schools have seen the development of a variety of non-teaching roles in recent years, and LAs provide a range of support services for schools, such as education welfare officers, and educational psychologists, the PSA role was breaking new ground in terms of scale, government involvement and dedicated funding for the pilot. The remit of the role was outlined in broad terms, and included one to one and group work with parents, work to assist transition for pupils at key stages of their schooling, work to prevent exclusions, and encourage attendance and engagement. The proximal focus of PSA work was seen to be with parents, with the distal focus being with the school pupils. That is, the PSAs were expected to work with parents, but the pupils were to be the ultimate beneficiaries. It was clear, from the outset that, in many respects, the newly appointed PSAs would have a degree of autonomy in defining the exact nature and boundaries of their role. Nonetheless, the core of PSA work was envisaged as working in partnership with parents and families. The PSA role was envisaged as one that would require high levels of personal, face-to-face interactions with the client group (HM Treasury & DfES, 2005). PSA pay structures were placed on the same level as that of Education Welfare Officers (EWOs), though other conditions of work, including contract length, were to be varied, depending on the way in which PSAs were organised at local level, for example, being employed by schools directly, or by LAs.

About Emotional Labour

Emotional labour, and the 4Ps typology

The concept of emotional labour can be seen to have particular applicability to the PSA role. The role was envisaged, from the outset, to involve a high level of interpersonal work, and to require a range of 'soft' skills, including the management of the emotions of parents. In addition, the relatively low salary and the labour constituencies from which recruitment was expected, such as teaching assistants, suggested that the PSA role would be dominated by women workers, which has been seen as a marker of the likely significance of emotional labour in the performance of an occupational role. The debate over the impact of emotional labour on those required to undertake such labour suggests possible negative, and positive, outcomes for such workers. Further, the contested nature of the concept of 'emotional labour' has given rise to attempts to develop additional and sharper analytical tools with which to explore this aspect of labour.

The concept of 'emotional labour' has become a contested concept, but one that is seen to have particular applicability to service sector work, where inter-personal skills have a key role. The defining characteristics of emotional labour have been identified as:

> 'They require contact with other people external to or within the organization, usually involving face-to-face or voice-to-voice interaction, especially in service work. Emotional labor also requires a worker to produce an emotional state in another person while at the same time managing one's own emotions.' (Steinberg and Figart, 1999a, 13).

Hochschild first drew attention to the emotional labour that was frequently required of service sector workers (Hochschild, 1979, 1983). Hochschild argued that in the emergent service sector of developed, western economies, workers were expected to express, and experience, certain feelings during their interactions with clients in the workplace. She illustrated her arguments by drawing on the worker-client experience among such groups as nurses and airline flight attendants. The institutional obligations that such workers were

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under, Hochschild argued, put them in positions were there was a dissonance between the emotions expressed and those that were experienced. Emotions were, therefore, managed in the sense that they were the product of organisational norms, and in the sense that the workers, in their interactions with clients, had to manage their own emotions. As a result of the latter imperative, workers were compelled to act (in surface or deep acting) required emotions, rather than giving expression to their genuinely held emotions, although, as part of the process of alienation, the worker could come to 'own' the emotions which they had been directed to display. The employee is, therefore, expected to take responsibility for the emotional well-being of clients, and to be able to deploy a wide range of inter-personal skills drawing upon the employee's own emotional, and empathic, resources. The potential here is for employees to suffer high degrees of alienation from their work, and to suffer from emotional and stress related conditions. This dissonance led, in Hochschild's analysis, to damaging psychological experiences for workers engaged in such emotional labour.

The changing employment structure of western economies, and the rise of female dominated service sector working focused on customer services, has a strong gender element. The decline of full time male employment in extractive and heavy manufacturing industries in developed economies from the late 1960s onwards, and the rise of service sector work, frequently characterised by low levels of unionisation, and higher levels of face to face customer service opened up employment that was constructed as being particularly suited to the type of 'soft' skills that were supposedly characteristic of women. Hochschild's original work suggested a gendered dimension to emotional labour, which subsequent work seemed to confirm (Erickson and Ritter, 2001; Meier, Mastracci and Wilson, 2006, Pierce, 1999, Pugliesi and Shook, 1997). For example, Pierce (1999), examined the role of paralegals in supporting lawyers in large US law firms, finding a gendered workplace where the largely female paralegal staff provided emotional and other support to the largely male lawyers. The emotional labour engaged in by women workers in these law firms served to reproduce the gender-segregated structure of those firms, adding a potential additional

negative dimension to the practice of emotional labour. These studies suggested that women were more likely to experience negative impacts of emotional labour than men, with women more likely than men to hide their true emotions, particularly agitation or anger, in their interactions with clients.

This view was questioned by Erickson and Ritter (2001), who argued that emotional labour was not a particular facet of certain service sector occupations, but that it was 'a general feature of contemporary work life' in western economies (Erickson and Ritter, 2001, 158). More recently, the applicability of the concept of emotional labour has been widened to include the relationships between co-workers, and not just between service sector employees and clients (Bryant and Cox, 2006). It has also been argued that the negative effects, including feelings of inauthenticity and burnout, were not gendered impacts of emotional labour (Erickson and Ritter, 2001). This does not, however, mean that women are not more engaged in emotional labour, or more, or less, effective at delivering emotional added value for firms. A recent study of schools in Texas suggested that 'organizations [schools] with more women at the street level [e.g., in the classroom] have higher overall organizational performance' (Meier et al, 2006, 899).

Much of the work on emotional labour has revolved around the degree to which those engaging in emotional labour experience negative impacts from the expenditure of that labour. However, there have been challenges to this negative conceptualisation. Research on the degree to which workers engaged in emotional labour experience a dissonance, or not, between emotions they are expressing and those that they are experiencing, i.e., the difference between display and feeling, has argued that the worker's level of identification with the labour being undertaken provides a key to understanding the impact of that labour (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993). Where workers strongly identified with the clients, there was less likelihood of emotional labour having negative impacts on them. Linked to this, Ashforth and Humphrey argued that certain personality types – the 'institutionals' – were

more likely to identify with an organization's clients than those possessing personalities identified as 'impulsive'. Ashforth and Humphrey's arguments have received additional support from work that reinforces the view that emotional labour does not, necessarily, have to be experienced in negative terms. Recent research with staff from two tourism organisations has also indicated that the effects of emotional labour are crucially mediated by the levels of dissonance experienced by those workers performing that labour (Van Dijk and Brown, 2006).

Other factors also appear to have a bearing on the negative or positive experience of engaging in emotional labour, with the frequency, duration, intensity and variety of this work all being important elements (Morris and Feldman, 1996). Personality types and strong identification with clients, allied to other aspects of emotional labour, such as variety, suggest that emotional labour can, in fact, be experienced in a largely positive fashion. This approach was stressed in an examination of the caring professions (Himmelweit, 1999), which argued that 'caring labour' which involved workers characterised by caring personalities, who were involved in long-term caring relationships with clients, were likely to experience their labour in positive terms. This approach to emotional labour stressed the personal importance of engaging in this type of labour to a range of workers in different occupations. Central to Himmelweit's argument was that those engaged in caring occupations were undertaking work in an employment sector that was not fully commodified, and that the motivations of workers engaged in caring occupations were not purely monetary. Further, caring labour was also deemed to involve the establishment of longer-term relationships between the carer and the cared for. This provided the distinguishing difference between, for example, the emotional labour of flight attendants and that of social care workers. Whereas the flight attendant is required to provide 'care' for a large number of people over a relatively short period of time, typically on a single occasion, a social care worker may possess a case load of clients with which the carer builds personal relationships over an extended period of time.

In his paper on emotional labour and call centre workers, Field reviewed work that stressed the perceptions of a variety of service sector workers in relation to the uses of emotion in labour (Field, 2008). Field referred to Colley's work on trainee nursery nurses (Colley, 2006) to argue that for some service sector workers, at least, the ability to utilise 'soft' skills involving feelings and emotions is regarded as an indicator of professional skill. Similarly, workers may feel that such skills reflect their own personalities and values. Therefore, emotional labour is not a contributory factor in the alienation of all workers from their labour. Field's own case study work with call centre workers also suggests that emotional labour needs to be seen through the constructions of workers involved in that labour.

Such developments in emotional labour research have led Bolton, who has made important contributions to the field (for example, Bolton, 2000a, 2000b, and 2009), to argue that the terms 'emotional labour', 'emotion work' and 'sentimental work' have 'been used so often to describe so many different forms of emotionality […] that they have lost any definitive meaning' (Bolton, 2000a, 159). Building upon the concept of emotional labour, Bolton offered a typology – the 4Ps - which consists of four types of emotion management: presentational, philanthropic, prescriptive, and pecuniary (Bolton, 2000a). Bolton has argued that:

> 'Each category recognises how an actor's emotion management skills are utilised in all aspects of organisational life: "pecuniary" (emotion management for commercial gain), "prescriptive" (emotion management according to organisational/professional rules of conduct), "presentational" (emotion management according to general social "rules") and "philanthropic" (emotion management given as a "gift"'. (Bolton, 2000a, 160).

This approach is not without its critics, and Brook has recently attempted to wrest the theoretical ground back to what he argues is Hochschild's original and negative conceptualisation (Brook, 2009). Bolton has responded to Brook's critique acknowledging that while 'emotional labour remains a useful description for a capitalist labour process that relies heavily on emotion work', there is a danger, nonetheless, that it can be used as an undifferentiating catch-all concept that fails to 'capture the complexity of emotion work in and out of different labour processes' (Bolton, 2009, 554). This reservation has also been made by Lopez (2006), in relation to nursing home carers, and he has argued that 'a narrow, tightly specified version of Hochschild's original concept, supplemented by other carefully specified concepts, was preferable to allowing the concept to expand so that it accommodates everything' (Lopez, 2010, 255).

Work in this field suggests, therefore, that the PSA role possessed, from the outset, elements that would inevitably require emotional labour from those recruited to the post. The impact in terms of the alienation of those workers from their product was less clear. Further, the widespread use of the concept of emotional labour suggests that an additional focusing, in the form of the 4Ps typology, might be useful in an analysis of the PSA role.

Methods

Evaluating the Parent Support Adviser pilot

The PSA pilot was evaluated by the Centre for Educational Development, Appraisal and Research (CEDAR), the University of Warwick. Details of the study are available in two interim and one final report (Lindsay et al, 2007, 2008, 2009), with particular discussion relating to the issue of the PSA role and the engagement of fathers to be found in Cullen et al (2011). The evidence base for this article was formed by data gathered from 12 case study LAs - of the 20 LAs involved in the PSA pilot. The case study LAs were selected mainly to ensure a reasonable mix by urban/rural and geographic location. Interviews were held over the period of the pilot with key persons during each of the three phases of the

evaluation. For this article, data were drawn from semi-structured, recorded, and transcribed interviews with PSA line managers, PSA operational leads, PSAs, and parents. The operational leads (PSA coordinators) were senior LA officers responsible for implementing the pilot. All operational leads (n=24) were interviewed at the end of the pilot (stage 3). Each PSA coordinator in the 12 case study LAs was asked to identify 5-10 PSAs at Phase 1. This was at a time when the PSAs had either not started to work or had just begun. LAs' PSA coordinators were asked to select the sample from across the LA so as to reflect the models of delivery. These PSAs provided the sample for Phases 2 and 3 also.

Parents were selected by the PSAs in the sample. PSAs were each asked to propose three parents: one where the PSA thought their support had 'worked well'; one where the PSA thought it had 'worked ok'; and one where the PSA thought the support had 'worked not so well'. From the parents proposed, the fieldworker for that LA selected up to 10 parents per LA, aiming for an overall sample across levels of outcome, types of problems, school phases and PSA models. The actual sample ($N = 105$) was biased towards those likely to have more positive views because firstly, PSAs identified more of these; secondly, those parents, where PSAs had indicated the work hadn't gone so well often did not keep interview appointments and/or did not return calls. The achieved sample was:69 parents for whom PSAs considered their support had 'worked well'; 26 parents for whom PSAs considered their support had 'worked ok'; 10 parents for whom PSAs considered their support had 'worked not so well'. This provides an unbalanced sample: nonetheless, the range does include those where PSAs thought the work had not gone well.

Quantitative data were collected using a PSA database and a survey of all, i.e., 603, line managers. The aim was to collect systematic data on all casework with parents and their children. The PSA database included demographic data including parental gender and ethnicity; specification of the child's problem and whether the child had special educational needs; description of the intervention undertaken; and outcome data including the PSAs'

judgments of the degree to which their aims had been met and both exclusion and attendance data. It was distributed to all LAs with a request that PSAs completed it by adding each new parent 'case' so that a cumulative record could be built up. Data collection began in February 2007 and a copy of the database was collected termly. The final data collection of each LA's total cumulative database was made at 30th June 2008. By that time data on 20,724 parents were available.

It is important to clarify that the database was not designed to collect data on all parents with whom PSAs worked. It was recognized from the start that PSA practice could vary. Much work was expected to be with individual parents, was relatively formal and could be seen as approximating to a type of casework. Such work would allow data to be collected formally. However, other work was expected to be much less formal, for example informal discussions, perhaps very brief, in the playground; or group activities such as information providing/sharing. Where such work occurred the collection of individual parent data for the database was either impractical, inappropriate or both. Consequently it is essential to keep in mind that the number of parents recorded on the database, although very substantial – 20,724 – represents a subsample of all those with whom the PSAs worked. It is not possible to estimate accurately the total number but it is evident from discussions with PSAs and coordinators that the total number of parents offered some support was several times greater than the 20,724 on the database.

Results

The PSA labour force

In the next section we describe the development of the PSA workforce and the PSAs' perceptions of their role; supplementing parents' perspectives, as gathered through the interviews. By the end of the first year of the PSA pilot, in August 2007, 717 PSAs were in post in the 20 pilot LAs, serving 1,167 schools. Of the 717 PSAs, 91% were women, 91% were 'White British', and 55% had an occupational background in education. Recruitment to

this new post was determined at local level by LAs in partnership with the schools

concerned. The qualifications of those recruited were very varied, with a minority having

qualifications to degree level, but others having no formal qualifications. Interviews with LAs'

PSA strategic leads, operational leads, and line managers indicated that the focus in terms

of PSA recruitment was more on personal qualities than on formal qualifications; this was

confirmed in interviews with PSAs. Qualities identified by PSAs themselves as strengths

they possessed that were relevant to the role included being 'patient', 'calm, even with angry

parents', 'not confrontational', 'diplomatic', 'juggling' (relationship home and school),

'empathic', 'approachable', 'easy to talk to', 'putting myself in their position,' 'good listener',

'open minded', 'valuing all people', 'caring about the community', 'honest – not frightened to

say if I don't know the answer' , 'confident', having 'basic counselling skills', 'really caring',

'reliability to do what I say I'll do', 'sense of humour', 'genuine'. Many felt their 'own life

experiences' were helpful, for example, having been a lone parent on benefits. One PSA

stated 'I am quite patient and I try not to judge people by the cover because the cover can be

quite rough. I try to look at the person and what they could be with different circumstances'.

These self-identified qualities match closely those identified in an emotional labour and job

content analysis undertaken in the US, which noted that such work involved 'courtesy and

tact, nurturance and reassurance, compassion, empathy, rapport, building trust, mediating,

advising, and counseling' (Steinberg and Figart, 1999b, 181). Further, this self-description

can be categorised within the 'philanthropic' and 'presentational' elements of the 4Ps

typology, being emotion management as both a 'gift' and according to general social 'rules'.

Building the PSAs' role

The TDA developed an initial training programme specifically for the new PSA role which

was delivered once they were in post. All LAs used the TDA materials but it was common for

LAs to tailor the training to their particular needs. For example, an LA might consider that a

particular topic (e.g. child protection) required more coverage. In addition, training had to be

'personalised' to the LA so that processes and structures could be made applicable to that

LA's circumstances; the objectives and practices of their service; the LA structures and services available; and to the prior experience and training of the PSAs themselves.

PSAs generally reported feeling a high sense of autonomy, which they welcomed, even though they also recognised the importance of school and LA steer. In addition to their work with parents, PSAs had to develop effective working relationships with those in other professional roles, for example those of education welfare officer, learning mentor, family liaison officer, and teaching assistant. The interaction between LA and school senior managers, and negotiations with other school-related professionals introduced an element of 'prescriptive' emotional work into the PSAs role, being 'emotion management according to organisational/professional rules of conduct' (Bolton, 2000a, 160).

The PSAs' views of their role

PSAs saw their primary role as working directly with parents. This included a wide variety of contacts and interactions with parents. Typically, PSAs would do general contact work in school playgrounds (this was particularly the case for PSAs working in primary schools, where it is more likely that parents will bring their children to school in person). They were available for consultations and undertaking intensive casework with parents, and offering group work with parents. In almost all this work, a central concern for PSAs was the development of their relationships with parents. They were keen to ensure that parents did not view them as just another type of school representative. An example of this concern came from a PSA who said:

> 'I try to make them [parents] feel relaxed, and [that] I'm not a teacher. I need to let them know I'm not there to judge anybody; I'm just there to ease the burden, the situation. If there's something I can help you [a parent] with, I will.' (PSA 1).

PSAs generally gave a positive approval of the effectiveness of their work with parents, about a quarter (23/105) of PSAs indicating that their work with parents in the autumn term, 2007, was 'very effective', while 46 PSAs rated their work as 'effective'. These perceptions were confirmed by the interviews with PSA line managers (see below).

In analysing the reasons behind their effectiveness, PSAs placed a strong emphasis on the skills needed to engage successfully with parents. The PSAs' descriptions of the strategies they deployed in their work heavily referenced skills that characterise emotional labour. PSAs were almost unanimous in attributing their success in engaging parents to two main factors: firstly, their own characteristics, style, focus and skills, and, secondly, parents' readiness to engage with them. PSAs discussed the importance of their approach to interacting with parents, emphasising people skills and reliability, being friendly and approachable, of having excellent listening skills, of not telling people what to do but rather making suggestions of different possibilities and options and of taking promised action or feeding back to parents what was preventing this from happening. PSAs referred to their care to adopt a facilitative role.

> 'I won't push. I sit and listen and go with their ideas whether they are likely to work or not, then ease them to try another approach. I am patient because if someone dictated to me I just wouldn't do it. Meeting and greeting in the playground each day is invaluable.' (PSA 2).

PSAs noted their intention to provide a parent-centred service, offering parents what they want, rather than what the PSA might think would be suitable, and taking time to build up relationships and trust with them. They also referred to personal skills such as being bilingual and the importance of ensuring the parents want to engage with the PSA – with implications for any referring agency, school or other. Home visits could also be helpful – in some cases essential.

'Seeing you at home, they don't see you as official. We can work within boundaries but I will advocate for parents if necessary. When I helped the school understand the home situation for one family they realized exclusion had been the wrong decision.' (PSA 3).

Personal style, attitudes and an ability to empathise and develop a trusting relationship, while maintaining professional boundaries, and being supportive in a non-collusive fashion, were personal qualities that they reported to be important.

'Down to earth attitudes, being flexible and listening to them – coming from [LA] is a big bonus!' Being relaxed, though I don't let them get away with anything.' (PSA 4).

They also identified what they tried to avoid:

'Not being judgmental and not having a go at parents.' (PSA 5).

Distance and independence from school and social services were also important to PSAs:

'It's my approach to parents, informing them that I'm not a teacher or a social worker, I'm wearing different hats.' (PSA 6).

Some felt that sheer delight in the availability of the new PSA service encouraged success in engaging parents. It was, however, important that engagement should be initiated with parents who wanted this – *'that's half my job done'* said one PSA. This was a significant consideration where parents are referred by schools or other agencies and referrers could take steps to soothe parental misgivings by informally introducing them to the PSA.

The parents' view of the PSA role

Parents were overwhelmingly happy with their experience of PSA work. They felt listened to, understood, and felt respected by their PSA. The data gathered from the parent interviews, showed that, for example, 87% of parents felt 'listened to' 'a lot' by their PSA, and 85% felt 'understood' 'a lot' by their PSA (Table 1).

These parents had been involved in face-to-face contact with a PSA on an individual basis, in some cases on a large number of occasions. The parents expressed satisfaction not only at PSAs' ability in finding solutions to problems that they and their children were having in relation to school, but also with other issues, such as housing questions, asylum issues, employment, health, and domestic violence. There was a clear sense that parents believed that PSAs were open to listening to parents' views of issues affecting them, and were perceived by parents as being an advocate for them within school structures. In this sense, there is a case for seeing the PSA role as possessing elements of the 'mutual reach' model of school-parent interaction proposed by Warin (2009) in opposition to the 'top-down' concept of parents who are 'hard to reach'. In addition, parents were forthcoming about personal and emotional aspects of their engagement with PSAs. For example:

> 'I was in tears and it was as if something had been lifted, and I felt: I can deal with this… She'll break the problems down and tries to get to the bottom of them… She related to everything and sympathized. She made me feel he's [parent's son] not abnormal. She's my safety net. As soon as I have a problem I can go straight to her. I was so stressed and she puts you back in control.' (Parent 1).

Parents reported that the PSAs' support enabled them to develop emotional strengths:

> 'I was so depressed and crying every day and couldn't cope. She [the PSA] has given me back my confidence. I'm not on my own and there's help. I was beating

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myself up and thought I'd let my son down. Now I feel stronger and more positive which is what my son needed all along. Knowing she's there, I don't need her so much. She doesn't solve the problem, she says I do.' (Parent 2).

The parents' own development also led to improvements in their relationships with their children:

'We get on a lot better. Me and my little boy were really not getting on very well at all at the beginning. We had a lot of issues and it has got 100% better. It really has.' (Parent 3).

These illustrative quotations from parents provide powerful examples of the ways in which parents experience the emotional labour of PSAs.

The impact of the PSAs

By the end of the pilot, PSAs had finished working with over 13,000 parents. They judged that their aims had been met at least partly in almost nine out of ten cases. This perceived level of success was supported by their line managers. Data gathered from the line managers' questionnaire (603 respondents) showed that, for example, over 80% of respondents commented with very positive judgements of a number of improvements. For example, 88% of line managers agreed that PSAs had contributed to improving relationships between parents and schools (Table 2).

Discussion

PSAs and emotional labour

One of the main policy underpinnings of the PSA initiative was ensuring children's engagement with their school, particularly, in relation to attendance and behaviour. Although there are targets relating to these areas for schools in England, they are aspects of

schooling that require a variety of inter-personal contacts between staff, pupils, and, above all, parents. Engaging parents in a wide range of ways, and on a wide range of issues was, therefore, central to the successful functioning of the new PSA role. The evaluation showed that the PSA role was dominated by women (91% of PSAs); was overwhelmingly a face-to-face role; and marked by the need to develop individual links with parents that often required high levels of interpersonal skills. As such, the role appears to be characterised by essential elements of Hochschild's model of emotional labour.

In their accounts of their own experiences of fulfilling the PSA role, the PSAs talked about their work in terms that closely match theoretical models of emotional labour. The evaluation from which this paper is drawn did not set out to measure PSA work against emotional labour theory, but the evidence generated indicated that the role was, in fact, one that required high levels of emotional labour on the part of PSAs. The PSAs identified the core of their work as involving face-to-face personal work with parents. This work frequently requires PSAs to deploy a variety of inter-personal skills that are seen to be characteristic of emotional labour. Further, the PSAs emphasised that their effectiveness in the role depended to a large degree on their own personal characteristics, their empathy with the position of parents, and their willingness to engage on a personal level with individual parents, often over a prolonged period of time. This self-description by PSAs of their job provides a strong indication that the role is one that hinges, for its success, on emotional labour. Further, the overwhelming dominance of women in the role provides additional support for the view that the PSA role is one that falls neatly into the classification of a service sector occupation requiring the constant deployment of emotional labour which is provided by a largely female workforce. The issue, therefore, is to what degree the PSAs experienced their emotional labour in negative terms, and what, if any, dissonance existed for the PSAs in their role?

The results indicated that, as reported by the PSAs, their roles were not experienced in a negative fashion. Further, there appears to be little, or no, alienation from the 'product' of their labour, that is, supporting parents. PSAs identified strongly with their role, suggesting that, typically, there was no dissonance between the emotions that they felt and those that they expressed and deployed in their interactions with parents. This supports the contention of Ashforth and Humphreys (1993) that the personality of workers engaged in emotional labour is of importance. In this case, the PSA respondents exhibited personality traits that underpinned and reinforced their identification with their role in parent support. There was, for these PSAs, no dissonance between feeling and display. They were, in fact, strongly committed to the support of parents.

The importance of workers' personalities and characteristics, over and above particular qualifications, in relation to the exercise of emotional labour, has also been stressed by Himmelweit (1999). Her examination of workers in 'caring' occupations suggested that building longer-term relations was important for workers undertaking emotional labour, leading to its being experienced in positive terms. In addition, she argued, the development of longer-term relationships was also of positive importance to the recipients of emotional labour, for example, older people receiving personal care. Further, Himmelweit suggested that the lack of the overt commodification of caring work additionally underpinned the provision of emotional labour being experienced in positive terms. In the case of PSAs, their experience of work with parents combines relatively brief interactions with parents, for example, signposting parents to additional services, with much longer interactions over time, for instance, working with parents to help them address their relationships with their children.

Bolton's 4Ps typology showed itself to be a useful additional analytical tool, enabling the categorisation of PSA emotional labour. That labour exhibited three of the 4Ps – prescriptive, philanthropic, and presentational, as PSAs responded to the requirements of their line managers' (either senior leaders in schools, or LA officers) steer on their role, PSAs' own

"gift" of emotional labour to parents with whom they had built up caring relationships, and emotion management according to general social 'rules'. Interestingly, the pecuniary element of the model was absent, with PSAs not managing their emotions for commercial gain. The key to the lack of pecuniary emotional organisation lies in the fact that the PSA role is part of a publicly provided service, and while PSAs are aware of financial imperatives within school budgets, for example, there is no overt commodification in the interactions between PSA and parent. The findings indicate that for these PSAs, the skills and personal qualities associated with emotional labour, and categorised according to the 4Ps typology, are not only central to the effective operation of the PSA role, but are also a highly valued aspect of the job, in the eyes of the PSAs and their clients.

Conclusion

This article has examined the role of the PSA in English schools, and, as such, is one of the first attempts to analyse this relatively new school para-professional. The nature of the role is such that it is typified by a good deal of personal, often face-to-face work with parents and carers. The role requires a high level of 'soft skills' on the part of the PSAs in their work with parents and carers. As such, the theory of emotional labour, and, more particularly Bolton's development of the theory – the 4Ps – represents a useful analytical tool. Emotional labour theory is a contested field, with much work stressing the negative aspects of occupational requirements to deploy emotional labour. The evidence presented here suggests that, for PSAs, whose work conforms closely to the 4Ps typology. The emotional labour aspects of the role provide a largely positive element of their work, experienced as being part not only of the role, but also of the skills that PSAs feel that they possess, and are necessary for the successful engagement of parents and carers in a process of 'mutual reach'.

Tables

Table 1   Parents' views of being with their PSA (%)

When with the PSA, how much do you feel:	Not at all	Not a lot	Quite a lot	A lot
listened to?	0	1	12	87
understood?	0	0	15	85
respected?	0	0	17	83
more confident to tackle problems?	0	5	27	68
better about yourself?	1	5	31	63

N = 105

Table 2   Line managers' judgments of the impact of PSAs (%)

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Not Applicable
Improved parents' engagement with their child's learning	2	9	58	29	2
Improved pupil attendance.	3	11	53	24	9
Improved relationships between parents and the school	2	8	49	39	2
Improved the situation for pupils 'at risk' because of their own and/or their parents' behaviour/attitudes.	2	9	48	35	6
Improved exclusion rates.	4	17	30	10	39
Made effective referrals to specialist services as appropriate.	2	8	47	37	6

N = 603

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