

ROLE CHANGE FOR SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGY: THE CHALLENGE CONTINUES IN THE NEW MILLENNIUM

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Calls for change in the role of school psychologists have appeared in the literature over a period of nearly 50 years. Evidence of change exists for some outstanding individual school psychologists and in a number of model programs, but not on a widespread basis. This paper discusses ideas for role change that have appeared rather consistently in the literature: an emphasis on indirect service, application of the science of psychology, an emphasis on prevention, systematic evaluation of services, involvement of various stakeholders, and consideration of diversity from a broad perspective. Hopefully the 21st century will bring more widespread implementation of these ideas because there is likely to be an even greater need for such services in the schools. © 2000 John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Good news regarding the field of school psychology. . . . “We see the evidence of meaningful progress throughout the country, both in outstanding school psychologists and in model school psychology service delivery programs that have succeeded in going beyond business as usual” (Conoley & Gutkin, 1995, p. 215). Quinn and McDougal (1998) noted evidence throughout the literature that school psychologists are able to eliminate old practices and incorporate recommended practices into their work. A number of model programs focusing on mental health in schools and communities, where school psychologists assumed critical roles in design, implementation, and evaluation, were described by Dwyer and Bernstein (1998) as “islands of hope” in the profession.

Yet, there is considerable room for improvement in the new millennium. We doubt there is another field where so many articles have been written, over such an extensive number of years by members of the profession calling for a change in the role. That observation alone is informative. Those in the profession have recognized for some time that we can be more effective in meeting students’ needs and solving problems in the schools. Numerous calls to move beyond the gatekeeping function of assessing for special education eligibility have appeared including the Thayer Conference in 1954, the Spring Hill Symposium in 1980, and many articles such as Bardon (1983), Batsche (1992), Cobb (1992), Conoley and Gutkin (1995), Forness and Kavale (1991), Meacham and Peckham (1978), Reshley (1988), Tapasak and Keller (1995), and Ysseldyke, Reynolds, and Weinberg (1984), to list but a few. The calls for change span nearly 50 years and cite a number of similar ideas. These ideas include a greater emphasis on indirect service, application of the science of psychology to define problems and design programs, an emphasis on prevention of problems, use of a systematic evaluation of services, involvement of various stakeholders in development and evaluation of services, and consideration of diversity from a broad perspective. These ideas are evident in the “islands of hope” programs (Dwyer & Bernstein, 1998) and have helped to advance the field during the 20th century. If implemented on a more wide-scale basis, they can further advance the field in the 21st century when the needs for such services are likely to be greater than before.

Bradley-Johnson, Johnson, and Jacob-Timm (1995) suggested that implementation of these ideas is to a large extent up to individual practitioners. “School psychologists must accept the responsibility for promoting change and providing a broader range of services. Our future depends upon it” (Batsch, 1992, p. 2). The responsibility of the university community for role change was stressed by Conoley and Gutkin (1995) as well. They noted that “school psychology will not change until the behaviors of its practitioners and university faculty change. The ball is in our court (and always has been)” (p. 214).

Indirect Service

The idea of spending more time in indirect service to students is one which school psychologists consistently indicate they endorse (Cheramie & Sutter, 1993; Hatzichristou, 1998; Stewart, 1986). Indirect service includes consultation, research, program development for systems change, and in-service training. There are too many children and adolescents in need of services for school psychologists to work with them on a one-to-one basis; instead we must attempt to change the behavior of those who work with the students daily. To effect changes within the system has longer lasting and more far reaching effects. We have not fulfilled our promise to children, families and schools because we have been providing direct rather than indirect services (Conoley & Gutkin, 1995).

The Science of Psychology

A consistent thread running throughout the calls for change is the need for a scientific approach to school problems. Nastasi (1998) refers to "action research" where research findings and theory are used to plan interventions, and the implementation and evaluation of these efforts are used to inform theory and serve as the basis for future research. Nastasi, Varjas, Sarkar, and Jayasena (1998) suggested that the scientist-practitioner model for school psychologists be expanded to include "school psychology practice as a research process" (p. 273) so that practitioners are not only using theory and research in practice but contributing to the literature as well. A renewed emphasis on the science of psychology was stressed by Bradley-Johnson et al. (1995). They noted that of school personnel it is the school psychologist who understands procedures for, and the importance of, systematic data collection and analysis, research design, and issues of reliability and validity of measurement. These skills can be beneficial to both regular and special education in helping to plan more effective data-based programs, modify programs to fit particular situations and individuals, and objectively evaluate program effects.

Emphasis on Prevention

An emphasis on prevention of academic and mental health problems is critical. Because of the relatively mediocre academic performance of regular education students in U.S. schools, results of objective evaluation and research efforts should be beneficial in program selection (Bradley-Johnson et al., 1995). Helping to ensure effective learning environments in regular education programs can go a long way in preventing mental health problems. Carnine (1992) noted, "Whereas medicine and engineering are characterized by a scientific perspective, education is characterized by dogmas and current fads. Rather than relying on a growing body of scientific knowledge based on carefully implemented research to construct tools, education typically relies on consensus. A scientific knowledge base to give the practitioner expertise and confidence is lacking" (p. 13). With knowledge of research and evaluation school psychologists can serve as a resource to both regular and special education personnel by providing a scientific knowledge base from which to evaluate curricular materials and teaching procedures and by making suggestions for data-based alternatives.

Program Evaluation

The importance of program evaluation appears often in calls for role change. University training programs can assist in documentation of the effects of intervention efforts in schools by ensuring that their graduates are skilled in program evaluation and by providing in-service training in this area for practicing school psychologists who do not have this background. Program evaluation is critically important for school psychologists to aid in the development of programs as well as to document effects. For example, understanding how to carry out a needs assessment can be very valu-

able in program planning. In guidelines suggested by Adelman and Taylor (1998) prioritizing interventions based on consumer needs rather than the predilections of service providers is suggested. A comprehensive needs assessment can be useful in this regard. An understanding of procedures used in formative and summative evaluation is critical to ensure effective programs. Skills in evaluation enable school psychologists to go beyond using a targeted skill level as the criterion for evaluating interventions to include consideration of both anticipated and unanticipated effects as well as input from multiple sources. Nastasi (1998) noted that formative research can aid in developing valid interventions for particular ecologies, and evaluation research can document effectiveness of interventions and advance our knowledge. Yet, in a study funded by the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) to document exemplary mental health programs involving school psychologists, Nastasi, Varjas, Bernstein, and Pluymert (1998) found that though many programs reported conducting program evaluation, less than half had written documentation of outcomes. The authors suggested that not having evaluation information for dissemination may be a result of limits on time, resources and skills. They concluded that this situation creates an opportunity for university-school collaboration to address the difficulties.

Work With Various Stakeholders

Rather than functioning as direct service providers, school psychologists must work with the adults who do work directly with the students. These adults (e.g., teachers, parents, administrators, and other school personnel) are often referred to as key players or stakeholders in order to emphasize the importance of their role in intervention. Their involvement from the initial stage of defining the problem, assessing the extent of the problem, planning intervention, implementing programs, and evaluating outcomes is invaluable. If they are partners in the process, the probability of success and maintaining gains is increased considerably. To enlist the assistance of stakeholders, school psychologists should avoid presenting interventions *to* them for acceptance and instead, develop interventions through dialog *with* them (Nastasi, Varjas, Sarkar, & Jayasena, 1998). This suggestion applies to writing individual psychoeducational reports as well. Once assessment is complete, and prior to writing the recommendations section of a report, school psychologists can meet with stakeholders to discuss a student's areas of strength and difficulty, address what has been tried, and together with the stakeholders work out a detailed set of recommendations to address problem areas. A psychoeducational report should serve as a written form of consultation (Bradley-Johnson & Johnson, 1998). Thus, recommendation sections of reports should be based upon a collaborative effort. Discussions involved in developing recommendations can accomplish many important functions that go beyond direct service. Such discussions may, for example, serve as an opportunity for teacher training, discussing recent research relevant to the case, helping in recognizing broader system problems that should be addressed, aiding school psychologists in understanding better the particular ecology in which they work, or providing new information on curricula or interventions to the school psychologist from the teacher. Not writing recommendations, or not writing them in conjunction with key players, is a valuable opportunity missed. During practicum and internship, university trainers can ensure that students use this opportunity so that it becomes a part of their repertoire prior to graduation.

Conoley and Gutkin (1995) suggested that university programs must create practicum and internship sites that match the philosophy of their training programs. This is certainly important, but it often takes time to develop a sufficient number of sites within a particular geographic region. In the interim, even though field supervisors may not model all desirable skills, school psychology students can still be required by university supervisors to use effective procedures such as graphing data to evaluate intervention and using teacher consultation in writing recommendations for reports. Graduate students then model skills for their field supervisors that can aid in the development of training sites.

Presenting alternative strategies to address student problems to school personnel who are unreceptive is difficult and contributes to professional burnout. As Conoley and Gutkin (1995) noted, adult-focused treatment is “the most central challenge to our field. Thus, science focusing on interpersonal influence with adults is imperative” (p. 211). Clearly research is needed in this area. If personnel are not receptive, however, alternatives including same-grade and above-grade tutors or use of volunteers might be considered in order to address children’s immediate problems while at the same time working on problems within the system.

The need for consultation and collaboration with community agencies is likely to increase considerably in addressing student problems in the 21st century, particularly at the secondary level. Such coalitions aid in financing programs and facilitate intervention by providing more family services than schools alone are able to provide. Also, consultation with medical personnel is likely to increase, especially for schools that offer medical, mental health, and social services (Reeder et al., 1997).

Diversity Broadly Defined

Finally, a consistent issue in calls for role change has been that of consideration of diversity from a broad perspective. Schensul (1998) suggested that school psychologists working in urban areas need to immerse themselves in the community in order to understand which services will be appropriate for a particular setting. This suggestion applies to rural settings also. With rapidly changing population trends in the United States, school psychologists in this century must be particularly “culturally competent” (Dwyer & Bernstein, 1998). We agree with Nastasi, Varjas, Sarkar, and Jayasena (1998) and Dwyer and Bernstein (1998), who emphasized the need to define diversity of culture broadly to include not only race and ethnicity, but also urban-rural residence, geographic location including the United States and other countries, age, gender, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, and specific family traditions. University training programs must prepare graduates to promote the academic success and mental health of all children.

In Conclusion

Progress has occurred in the 20th century in changing the role of school psychologists to better serve student needs. This progress has come slowly, considering nearly 50 years of calls for change in the literature. Unfortunately, the evidence of this change lies with only some outstanding individual school psychologists and in some programs that serve as “islands of hope” as Dwyer and Bernstein (1998) describe them. No doubt those school psychologists who have taken the initiative to go beyond “business as usual” paid a price in terms of personal effort and time. Hopefully, they were, and continue to be, richly rewarded by student success.

The challenge for the 21st century is for the field to move further toward more widespread efforts in role change. How best to implement the calls for change to emphasize indirect service, apply the science of psychology, emphasize prevention, use systematic evaluation of services, involve various stakeholders in the process, and consider diversity from a broad perspective will vary depending upon the needs of individual school districts and the personnel involved. To be successful in implementing these ideas on a wider scale will require the commitment and collaboration of university trainers and individual school psychologists.

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