

ADMINISTRATORS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE  
ROLE OF SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGISTS

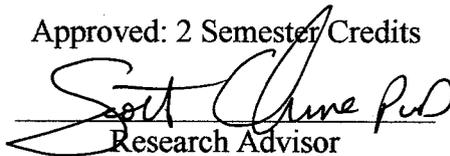
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ABSTRACT

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The role and function of school psychology is expanding. In response, this review of literature examined the attitudes of administrators regarding the role and function of school psychologists and what they most value in the role of school psychology. Although psychoeducational assessment functions continue to be most valued by administrators, they appear to desire more indirect functions such as counseling and consultation. Overall, administrators' perceptions are generally consistent with the role and function change the field of school psychology is experiencing. Administrators' desire for more indirect functions appears to be consistent with the expansion of role and function in school psychology as well. Due to a lack of literature on administrators' perceptions, there is still need for research.

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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

With the arrival of the new millennium, it has been stated that now more than ever school psychologists may be utilized to lead schools through their current difficulties and turn their challenges into opportunities for today's youth (Ysseldyke, Dawson, Lehr, Reschley, Reynolds, & Telzrow, 1997). Some of the current challenges school psychologists face includes a growth in student population, declining government support, and more difficult and challenging students. There is also a lack of consensus about the role that schools, as well as teachers, should play in the education of students. As a response to these challenges, schools are currently attempting to improve their efforts to reform the educational system (Ysseldyke, et al., 1997). Educational reform is a complex restructuring that can leave educators and administrators in a position of increasing demands.

School psychologists have experienced role expansion over the years. In order to meet the needs of today's youth and improve the efforts of ongoing educational reform, school psychologists now are being pushed to further broaden their roles in the schools (Ysseldyke, et al., 1997). Increasingly, school psychologists have been leaving their desks to act as front-line faculty members in the most challenging school situations (Ysseldyke, et al., 1997). According to Curtis, Hunley, Walker, and Baker (cited in Myers, 1999), they have also expanded their traditional roles to include both direct and indirect services such as individual and group counseling, teacher and parent consultation, and in-service education programs. These expanded functions are seen as beneficial, but also necessary for school psychologists to better help today's youth. According to Welch, Sheridan, Fuhriman, Hart, Connell, and Stoddart (1992), all

dimensions of the school psychologists direct to indirect continuum of functions are important.

Role expansion such as this creates questions as to how well administrators are utilizing their school psychologists and what roles of the school psychologist they most value. According to a 1991 article by Kramer and Epps (as cited in Myers, 1998), school districts are not always aware of the skills their school psychologists possess. In order to best utilize the school psychologist for the ultimate goal of success for all students, it could be suggested that all administrators gain an understanding of their school psychologist's skills as well as evaluate how he/she will be most useful to their school or district. Practicing school psychologists could also benefit from an understanding of what roles or skills school administrators most value. It has been stated in the past that the job security of school psychologists is at risk as long as the major reason they continue to exist is to perform the specific task of intellectual testing (Bardon, 1994). It was suggested that school psychologists work hard to establish themselves as a valuable resource. In addition, as a result of shrinking resources, public employees are continuously required to demonstrate the ways in which they are able to benefit the larger system (Ysseldyke et al., 1997). In this case, school psychologists have to demonstrate how they are able to benefit their district or school. In order to do this, an understanding of what is most valued by administration may be helpful.

Due to the lack of research in the area of administrators' perceptions, the current study is an attempt to take a look at what administrators value now that school psychologists' roles have expanded. The current research is also an attempt to benefit

school psychologists by giving them insight that may help them demonstrate ways through which they can be a part of the larger system and gain further job security.

#### *Statement of the Problem*

This paper will provide a review of literature and research regarding administrators' attitudes toward the profession of school psychology and what functions they value most in the role of school psychology and/or psychological services in the schools.

#### *Research Objectives*

The first objective is to find out what school administrators perceive as the role of current school psychologist. The second objective is to examine administrators' responses related to school psychologists' current roles in the schools to see if they understand the breadth of school psychologists' capabilities and if they are utilizing their school psychologists to their maximum potential. The third objective is to gain a better understanding of what role and what skills of school psychologists administrators most value.

### *Definition of Relevant Terms*

Administrators- Individuals in the position of Principal, Vice Principal, or Superintendent.

School Psychologists- A school psychologist practicing in a school setting, as defined by the National Association of School Psychology.

Data-based decision-making and accountability- School psychologists should have the knowledge of different methods for identifying a child's strengths, weaknesses and needs. School psychologists use these methods to collect data, make decisions about services, and monitor progress (National Association of School Psychology, 2002).

Consultation and collaboration- School psychologists should have knowledge of various consultation methods, such as behavioral, mental health, and collaborative. School psychologists should also have the ability to collaborate well with others for effective planning and decision making (NASP, 2002)

Prevention, crisis intervention, and mental health- School psychologists should have knowledge of social, biological and cultural influences on behavior. School psychologists provide/contribute to the promotion of mental and physical health of their students through prevention and intervention programs (NASP, 2002).

School psychology practice and development- School psychologists have knowledge of the history of their discipline as well as public policies, ethical, professional, and legal standards. School psychologists practice within these standards and have the knowledge needed to acquire professional development (NASP, 2002).

## CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Introduction*

This chapter will present a description of the current role of the school psychologist and how it has expanded, followed by what the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) suggest the roles of school psychologists should currently serve. In addition, the role that administrators play in the role and function of school psychologists is presented. The chapter will conclude with an overview of what the research states are the roles administrators most value of their school psychologists.

### *Historical Role of School Psychologists*

The field of school psychology has experienced many changes since its inception, including how school psychologists are trained, where they practice, and what roles and functions they possess. In the past, school psychology training programs were largely oriented toward educational and/or clinical psychology (Fagan, 2003). Training programs were not specialized for school psychology as a unique profession until the 1920's. Once regulated in the 1960's, the early specialized programs for school psychology still included traditional core psychology or core education courses with some specialty training in psychoeducational evaluation. The shift in training has changed so dramatically in the past fifty years that school psychologists are gaining a much larger breadth of knowledge including intervention, counseling, and consultation skills. The current entry-level expectation for school psychologists who desire to work in the schools is a specialist degree or its equivalent. This is twice the educational expectation than NASP published in their original training guidelines in the early 1970's (Fagan, 2003).

In addition to a change in training, the field of school psychology has experienced a change in where school psychologists primarily practice. In the 1890's to 1920's, in addition to working in schools, school psychologists worked in clinics and research bureaus that were affiliated with agencies such as universities or medical settings (Fagan, 2003). After the founding of Division 16 of the American Psychological Association, which was intended strictly for school-based practitioners, a new concept was formed that school psychologist's primary employment setting is the school. The number of practitioners working in the schools subsequently erupted from 5,000 in the 1970's to 25,000-30,000 in the year 2000 (Fagan, 2003).

Since this study focuses on the role of the school psychologist as it has changed, it is important to discuss the roles of the past. The past role of the school psychologist has been described by many as that of a "sorter and repairer (p.216)" for children with special need (Fagan, 2003). School psychologists would sort students into groups according to ability and then attempt to repair their disabilities by placing them into services, including academic remediation and/or counseling (Fagan, 2003). The scope of the school psychology role didn't extend far beyond assessment. Today, the trend appears to be changing away from such an emphasis on general cognitive or intellectual assessment and more toward functional assessment and intervention (Reschly, 2000). Trends in practice create question about the currently practiced role and functions of school psychologists.

### *Role Expansion*

Current research suggests that the role the school psychologist plays in the school is expanding, including more diverse functions than previous years (Cheremie & Sutter,

1993). Changes in today's youth have caused great concern. Educators are concerned about the outcomes of their students' educational careers as well as escalating violence in the schools (Ysseldyke et al., 1997). Families have become alienated from public school systems creating a lack of investment in their children's education (Ysseldyke et al., 1997). Challenges and concerns such as these have created new opportunities for school psychologists to utilize their knowledge of children, adolescents, and behavior. Their role has shifted from a traditional psychometric emphasis, to an emphasis on designing effective academic and behavioral interventions for students and teachers to use (Ysseldyke et al., 1997). Some have gone as far as to state that it is the ethical responsibility of school psychologists, as the most highly trained educators in the area of mental health, to be more involved in programs that are aimed at the bigger problems students face (Sheridan & Gutkin, 2000). In an attempt to reach all students and facilitate success, many school psychologists have broadened their roles to include collaboration with parents, teachers and community agencies. In addition, many are instrumental in advocating for equal opportunities for all students, including opportunities for inclusion (Ysseldyke et al., 1997). As the role of the school psychologist expands, it is important for others to understand these changes. In order to utilize school psychologists as a valuable resource, it may be beneficial for parents, teachers, and administrators to understand a school psychologist's potential.

According to a study conducted by Cheramie and Sutter (1993), school psychologists appear to be spending their time doing a variety of activities, with no one activity consuming the majority of their time. With the expansion of the school psychologist's role and differences in districts and administrative support, the role of the

school psychologist may vary among each school and district (Myers, 1998). For this reason, it could be easy to assume that there is confusion about what role the school psychologist plays in an individual school, as well as how his/her role could be expanded and strengthened. Practicing school psychologists, as well as their administrators, have become less clear about what school psychologists contribute to the education system (Ysseldyke et al., 1997). Traditionally, school psychologists spent the majority of their time testing students who were suspected of having disabilities. Currently, they are delivering a broader range of direct and indirect services, including consultation, counseling, and interventions. As consultants, for example, school psychologists are able to contribute their knowledge of problem-solving, learning concepts, child development, child and family relations, and intellectual and social functioning (Welch et al., 1992). Indirect services in which school psychologists could participate include research, program development, and in-service training (Bradley-Johnson & Dean, 2000).

### *Causes of Role Expansion*

Two major contributing factors in the role expansion for the profession of school psychology are legal requirements and funding mechanisms (Reschly, 2000). Government regulations and legislation have made a great impact on the direction of the field of psychology. In order to meet these new demands, school psychologists are forced to alter their roles as education specialists. In order for districts to obtain federal financial support for special education, they must comply with the federal legislation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). IDEA gives all students the right to a free and appropriate education at public expense (Reschly, 2000). As a result of this legislation, more psychologists were compelled to conduct evaluations and provide

additional services to students with disabilities. With IDEA also came the concept of “least restrictive environment”. This resulted in more students with disabilities placed in general education environments, pushing school psychologists to focus on developing interventions and support services. IDEA principles also include the Individual Education Program (IEP) which is the development of a detailed plan for each student receiving special education services. This created the need for school psychologists to focus on each child’s specific needs. School psychologists also started monitoring each child’s progress toward their IEP goals (Reschly, 2000). New mandates such as functional behavioral assessment (FBA), manifest determination, and inclusion have also caused school psychologists to broaden their roles to include development, implementation, and consultation, within these areas (Reynolds, 1984).

#### *Current Domains of Practice*

According to the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP, 2000), school psychologists should maintain the highest standards for educational and psychological assessment, as well as direct and indirect interventions, including therapy, counseling, and consultation. In 1997, NASP published *School Psychology: A Blueprint for Training and Practice II* (cited in Ysseldyke et al., 1997). This document advocated for role expansion of the school psychologist. The authors identified 10 domains of professional competency that a school psychologist should possess. According to Ysseldyke et al. (1997), school psychologists should be able to provide leadership and work in collaboration with others in the areas of (1) data-based decision making and (2) interpersonal communications, collaboration, and consultation. They should be able to demonstrate (3) effective instruction and development of cognitive and academic skills,

demonstrate effective instruction in (4) positive socialization and development of life competencies for students, and (5) facilitate school structure, organization, and climate. They should also be able to (6) facilitate prevention, wellness promotion, and crisis intervention, (7) develop and implement the required knowledge of child development and psychopathology for (8) home, school, and community collaboration, and (9) translate research into practice. All the while, school psychologists should be able to (10) demonstrate knowledge of and behavior within their legal, ethical, and professional guidelines. As is presented here, there are many areas or domains in which school psychologists could be viewed as a valuable resource (Ysseldyke et al., 1997). Although this document has been in circulation for more than 6 years, there are still questions surrounding the knowledge of these expanded roles by current practitioners and, even in the case where the knowledge is there, the current practiced role and function of school psychologists.

#### *Educator's Perceptions of School Psychologists*

It is valuable for school psychologists to gain insight into the perceptions of their role from other educators. The ability to compare perceptions about role and function of school psychology and the effectiveness of these functions with the educators they are expected to collaborate with could help school psychologists be more effective team members. For example, a pilot study conducted by Keith and Brown (1992) compared the perceptions of teachers and school psychologists with regard to interventions. According to the survey results, teachers surveyed in the state of Iowa believed direct interventions to be more effective than indirect interventions and preferred more time be devoted to their design and implementation. In contrast, school psychologists that were

surveyed viewed time spent on direct and indirect interventions to be equally effective. A contrast in perceptions such as this one could create barriers for collaboration between teachers and school psychologists. Also, according to the survey conducted by Keith et al. (1992) teachers appeared to perceive an increase on school psychologists' workload as having a negative affect on their effectiveness. The school psychologists surveyed; however, did not perceive an increase in workload as having a negative impact on their effectiveness. Regardless of whose perceptions are accurate, a school psychologist could benefit from knowing information such as teachers perceiving their workload as having an affect on their ability to be proficient.

In addition to valuing teacher's perceptions, it is also beneficial to gain insight into administrator's perceptions. According to a study conducted by Myers (1999), administrators, in this case special education directors in the state of Wisconsin reported a high level of involvement in the supervision and evaluation of their school psychologists. In addition, 80% reported having a high level of involvement in providing a direct effect on the role and function of their school psychologist. A reported limitation to this study was that building principals and superintendents were not included. With such a high level of involvement in supervision and evaluation, it is important that the administrator fully understands, as well as is satisfied with, the role and function of the school psychologist.

#### *What Administrators Value*

Along with the question of what administrators view as the current role and functions of their school psychologist, there is also question as to what roles or skills they most value. In a 1992 study conducted by Thomas, Orf, Levinson, and Pinciotti results

suggested that administrators' preferences are directly correlated with the current change in school psychologist's role and function. They concluded that administrators' support for role expansion was dependent on whether or not they perceived their school psychologist was spending the valued amount of time on psychometric activities. These psychometric activities mostly consisted of providing standardized testing for special education. In 1996, Levinson et al. concluded that administrators would still like to see more time spent on testing and working with special education students than any other role that was surveyed. Considering these studies were conducted years ago, role expansion may have changed what administrators now value most from their school psychologist.

Although research on administrators' perceptions and what they value is scant, a study conducted by Cheramie and Sutter (1993) indicated that administrators desire more involvement from their school psychologist in the areas of counseling and consultation. A later study conducted by Myers (1999) reported that administrators found four domains of their school psychologist's role and function to be most important. These domains were legal, ethical practice, and professional development; data based decision making and accountability; prevention, wellness promotion, and crisis intervention; and interpersonal communication, collaboration, and consultation. These results suggest that administrators are beginning to value indirect functions in their school psychologist's role. This is important information to gather as the role of school psychologists continues to evolve, including more indirect functions. The question still remains as to how much these roles are valued as compared to other roles. This is an important question to pose

considering the views of administrators can be very influential in shaping and supporting how school psychologists function within the school system.

In summary, the discipline of school psychology has struggled to define the roles and functions of school psychologists throughout the years. Conferences such as the Thayer Conference (1952), Spring Hill Symposium (1978), and the Olympia Conference (1981) have all been attempts to define the roles and functions of school psychology and address the future of the profession (Reynolds, Gutkin, Elliot, & Witt, 1984). NASP continues to do its part in creating structure for the role and function of school psychologists. As the profession grows and evolves, it is important that parents, teachers, administrators, and school psychologists have similar perceptions of what the role and function of school psychologists are and how they can best serve today's youth.

### CHAPTER III: SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

The purpose of this literature review was to discuss the attitudes of administrators toward the profession of school psychology and to find out what functions of the school psychologist's role they value most. Although definitive research on school administrators' perceptions is scant, it is clear from the literature that administrator's perceptions, although somewhat variable, are generally consistent with the change in role and function that the discipline of school psychology is experiencing. Additionally, a desire for more indirect services versus the traditional psychometric functions is present in the attitudes of administrative professionals.

#### *Limitations of Literature Review*

This literature review appears to have several limitations. While this researcher attempted to review all of the literature available on administrator's perceptions, the literature review is not exhaustive. Thus, this review may lack representation of administrators that were overlooked. Further, other areas addressed in the review of literature were not exhaustive, including the perceptions of other educators. Additionally, this researcher experienced difficulty finding current and valuable literature on the perceptions of school psychologists. Finally, this literature review is a summary of other's research and publication. No empirical research was conducted. As a result, it does not provide new information to the field of school psychology.

#### *Implications for Future Research*

Due to the lack of current research in this area, future research is needed regarding administrators' perceptions of school psychologists. Overall, the lack of literature, specifically current literature, on teachers', counselors', parents', and school

psychologists' perceptions creates a great need for research in these areas as well. Other specific contexts for additional study may include a comparison of educators' perceptions of school psychologists or a comparison of perceptions with role change.

### *Implications for Professional Practice*

With the change in role and function that the discipline of school psychology has been experiencing, it is important to survey what administrators' value in order to see if it is constant with the change within the profession as a whole. The information gathered by surveying administrators could be used to guide the future practice of school psychologists. As better informed practitioners, school psychologists could be more effective in the collaboration process. They could also gain insight that could help their proficiency in the areas of assessment, consultation, and the development and implementation of direct and indirect interventions. Sometimes knowing what others value or see as affective can help one gain a broader perspective. Understanding others' perceptions may also help school psychologists develop new strategies for changing others' perceptions. In this way, the information gathered could be used to better inform administrators and school psychologists of misperceptions that may present themselves.

### *Summary*

In summary the review of literature has created many questions about administrators' attitudes toward the discipline of school psychology and what functions they value most in the role of school psychologists. As the role and function of school psychology changes it is valuable to gain insight into how administrators' perceptions have changed as well. The information gathered could be used to help school psychologists be more proficient team players in the education process. It could also be

used to promote a change in perceptions. As educators, it is important that school psychologists and administrators work together for the ultimate goal of student success. As the importance for collaboration continues to present itself in education, it is necessary that the lines of communication remain open between all involved in the education process. Equally important is the need for others to view school psychologists as a valuable resource. As school psychologists begin to understand the perceptions of administrators, they can use this understanding to be more effective educators as well as gain a better sense of job security.

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