

School Psychology: An Essential Public Service in Canada

A Position Paper

DISCLAIMER

August, 2014: This work reflects the findings and recommendations of a Task Force of the CPA Section on Psychologists in Education (now the CPA Section on Educational and School Psychology) that looked at the future of publicly funded psychology services in Canada. It has not been endorsed as an official position paper of the Canadian Psychological Association (CPA).

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PREFACE:

This position paper is presented on behalf of the group of school psychology trainers and practitioners from across Canada who formed a subcommittee of the Canadian Psychological Association's Publicly Funded Psychological Services Task Force (see list in Appendix C) which was struck to examine conditions experienced by psychologists in the public service, as well as recruitment and retention concerns. The Task Force had three sub-committees: Health, Corrections, and Schools, and this paper is the product of the school psychology sub-committee. Given the heightened awareness of the importance of children's and youth's mental health challenges in today's society, and the fact that most mental health problems arise during the school years, the school psychologist's role in prevention, early intervention, and treatment of mental health problems is critical. Current issues, practices, and challenges are presented with a forward-looking problem-solving approach to ensure that the profession of school psychology is maintained as a unique discipline within training and educational facilities at the highest level possible required so that graduates are prepared to provide the prevention and intervention needed for students in the school system. This document is directed to the psychology community in Canada, trainers of school psychologists, employers, and practicing school psychologists. The intent of the document is:

1. To demonstrate why school psychology (the practice of psychology in public schools and other educational settings) is an essential public service, providing universally accessible school-based mental health and learning promotion to all children and youth in Canada, as well as early identification and timely intervention into problem areas to improve functioning and mitigate the risk of further difficulties;
2. To identify the requirements for education and credentialing needed to be a school psychologist¹ in Canada.
3. To discuss some of the challenges that school psychologists encounter while working in the public school system and to propose some guidelines for practice and advocate for solutions to improve the delivery of services provided by school psychologists, with an aim to improve recruitment and retention of school psychologists in the public service

¹ Throughout this document, the term "School Psychologist" is used; however it should be recognized that there are other titles used in some provinces to describe those qualified to be employed as school psychologists, such as Psychological Associate or Psychometrist.

1. School Psychology as an Essential Public Service

Psychologists in schools are an integral part of collaborative problem solving teams within their districts. They bring to the team their scientist-scholar-practitioner training, which emphasizes the need for evidence-based decision making, identifying a problem by quantifying it so that appropriate plans can be put in place and progress monitoring becomes a part of the solution. They have training in the assessment and diagnosis of a wide range of cognitive, learning, and mental health difficulties. Accordingly, they must choose, administer and interpret a wide range of tests and assessment techniques with increasing sophistication and relevance. This information enables them to provide and interpret the data needed to diagnose and formulate a student's profile of strengths and needs and to help design effective, evidence-based interventions and progress monitoring strategies.

Psychologists in schools bring specialized expertise in assessing and diagnosing mental health issues, program planning and evaluation, and system-wide prevention measures. School psychologists have knowledge of evidence-based interventions and treatments and their application with a school-aged population. In order to utilize fully the range of skills the psychologist offers to the educational community, equal emphasis must be placed on all the levels of service delivery that the psychologist is able to provide. Psychological assessment is a unique and essential function that only the psychologist can provide, however it should not and cannot not be the only role of the school psychologist that is utilized by a progressive school district concerned with ensuring the social-emotional health of its students.

School psychologists in Canada follow the service delivery model described in *Professional Practice Guidelines for School Psychologists in Canada* (CPA, 2007). This model describes 5 levels of service delivery: student-focused indirect intervention; student-focused direct intervention; school-wide intervention; district/system-wide intervention; and research. Within each of these domains, continuing professional training and ethical responsibility are essential.

The school psychologist constantly strives for a balance among a focus on primary prevention programs, systemic interventions, individual consultations, post-vention, and treatment for chronic and severe developmental problems. The breadth of practice speaks to the diversity of skills that the school psychologist brings to the educational system. As members of the school community, school psychologists play a critical role by virtue of their regular consultation and continuity of service that they provide, often as part of a multidisciplinary team. Acknowledging this unique role, school districts and administrators need to be cognizant of the requirements for appropriate policies and mechanisms to be put in place to allow for coordination of services by external providers with school psychologists.

In order for school psychologists working in the Canadian public sector to fulfill their roles effectively, several issues must be resolved that currently threaten the recruitment and retention of school psychologists in the school system.

2. Standards of Training and Credentialing for School Psychologists in Canada

School Psychologists in Canada are educated at the graduate level, either at the Masters or Doctoral level, in a program of Psychology, Educational Psychology, or School Psychology. In each case, practica and internships are required as a part of the educational experience prior to graduation. Most provinces also require a period of interim membership in the College of Psychology of that province, during which work experience is supervised and reported on by a practicing and licensed/certified/registered psychologist. At the end of the supervisory period, which can be as long as 3 years, the candidate presents themselves for oral and written examinations in most provinces prior to being granted licensed status.

Canada recognizes core competencies for professional practice in psychology as delineated in the Mutual Recognition Agreement (MRA). This document was developed in discussions hosted by the Council of Provincial Associations of Psychologists (CPAP) from 2001 to 2004. The MRA was adopted by all the Regulatory Bodies in Canada in response to the Agreement on Internal Trade in 2004. Appendix A details the Core Competencies expected of all psychologists in Canada. Appendix B demonstrates the operationalization of these core competencies for school psychologists, as defined by the School and Child Psychology program at the University of Toronto (OISE).

Currently, several models for entry to psychological practice exist in Canada, including differences in graduate degree obtained (e.g., Masters or Doctoral degrees granted by either departments of Psychology or Faculties of Education). However, psychology in most of Canada is a self-regulating profession, and as such, each provincial regulatory body assumes responsibility for the professional practice of psychology within the province.

There are still some provinces which exclude certain types of psychology practice from oversight by a disciplinary psychology regulatory body (e.g., public service positions, including school psychology), however these provinces require certification through a government body, e.g., the Department of Education. Ideally, all those working in psychology positions in the schools in Canada will be credentialed with the regulatory body for psychologists in the province in which they work in the same way that other professional psychologists in the province are. Oversight by the psychological regulatory body assures the public that the services being provided are safe and of sound quality. When working with the most vulnerable population in Canada, our children and youth, the importance of providing exemplary services is even more critical.

3. Working Conditions and Ethical Considerations for School Psychologists in the Public Schools of Canada

School psychologists adhere to the Canadian Psychological Association's *Code of Ethics for Psychologists*. In addition, they are bound to uphold a similar code as members of their local regulatory body. Accordingly, they respect four core principles: Respect for the Dignity of Persons; Responsible Caring; Integrity in Relationships; and Responsibility to Society. School psychologists have a duty to honour the CPA Code of Ethics and/or, where applicable, specific practice standards outlined or adopted by regulatory bodies overseeing their practice of psychology in a given province. Professional Codes of Ethics would supersede any employer or client requests that, although unlikely, might be in conflict with the principles of the Codes.

a. Appropriate Ratio of Psychologists to Students

In order to ensure that school psychologists are able to perform all the functions expected of them by a school district in a timely and responsible fashion, an appropriate ratio of School Psychologists to students must be maintained.

“Generally, the ratio should not exceed one school psychologist for every 1000 students. When school psychologists are providing comprehensive and preventive services (i.e., evaluations, consultation, individual/group counseling, crisis response, behavioral interventions, etc.), this ratio should not exceed one school psychologist for every 500 to 700 students in order to ensure quality of student outcomes.

Similarly, when school psychologists are assigned to work primarily with student populations that have particularly intensive special needs (e.g., students with significant emotional or behavioral disorders, or students with autism spectrum disorders), this school psychologist to student ratio should be even lower.” Model of Comprehensive and Integrated School Psychological Services (NASP, 2010).

b. Appropriate Supervision in the Workplace

Those working in the public sector typically experience two types of supervision: administrative supervision and professional supervision. Administrative supervision can be provided by other than someone in the same profession, and ensures adherence to agency mandates. However, professional supervision must be provided by someone of the same profession to ensure fidelity to the standards of the profession.

A common situation in the public school system in Canada, however, has teacher-trained administrators providing both administrative and professional supervision in the workplace for both licensure candidates and for those who are licensed psychologists. This situation often

leads to a misunderstanding of the professional roles and ethical responsibilities of the psychologist. It also leads to conflicts of interest and unnecessary limitations for the psychologist in trying to balance the needs of the client with the demands of the employer.

Within school districts, licensure/certification/registration candidates and licensed/certified psychological practitioners must be required to receive supervision by a licensed/certified/registered psychologist who understands their roles and shares their professional and ethical code of conduct. School districts must support structures that allow psychologists to practice with professional autonomy and receive appropriate supervision as mandated by their regulatory body.

c. Psychological/Psycho-Educational Reports, Storage, Access, Sharing

One of the functions of a psychologist is to perform a variety of ability, learning, personality, behavioural, and other types of assessments. Such assessments normally are documented by written reports.

Psychological/psycho-educational reports created by a school psychologist are written with the client in mind and are intended to provide the student, the student's instructional team, and the student's parents or legal guardians with an accurate description of the student's strengths and challenges relating to school performance. These reports are intended to be written in language that is easily understood by adult readers and free of jargon or unrealistic recommendations, while still reflecting accurately the information collected in the assessment process. School psychological reports must support the development of plans and programs to assist students' learning and functioning.

Although a copy of a formal psychological/psycho-educational report written by a psychologist might be placed in a student's confidential learning resource file or in the cumulative record, it cannot be released to a third party outside of the school district without parent/legal guardian (or student, if 18 years of age or older and able to consent). As well, psychological/psycho-educational reports in the student's file should be protected so as not to be available to anyone who might have access to the school or district files, although they should be available to the student's classroom teacher with psychologist consultation available, if requested.

Test protocols form part of the student's file, however test protocols are legally protected by the test developers, and, as such, are not available to anyone other than the psychologist who administered the test. Test protocols are, therefore, stored in a securely locked place, accessible only by the psychologists on staff.

Findings from a psychological/psycho-educational report must never be shared with teachers or presented at case conferences by anyone other than the psychologist who wrote the report, or if unavailable, the psychologist currently assigned to that school. The exception to this situation might be if a psychological/psycho-educational report comes from another district as part of the student file when a student moves. The school psychologist in the receiving district may be asked to interpret the report for the new staff to ensure the student's needs are met. In many cases, this will involve the school psychologist contacting the original psychologist to discuss the report and ensure clarity of understanding.

Varying opinions exist as to how long files should be maintained and the length of time that student assessment data remains valid. Whether or not to update a student's psychological assessment should depend on the need exhibited, the age at which the student was initially assessed, whether a full or partial psychological assessment is needed, as well as the type of change to be made. If the student is demonstrating evidence that their learning profile may have changed, if the student was young at the time of the first assessment, or if cautions to validity of the test results were made in the initial assessment, then reassessment should take place. Caution in using psychological information older than two years should be exercised. Older reports can provide valuable developmental information and should be used as background information for assessment of current functioning when the psychologist deems it appropriate in their professional judgment.

d. Psychological Test Usage

School districts must ensure that only qualified individuals be allowed to administer and interpret Level C tests to students in the district. Test manufacturers and distributors define "qualified individuals" as those people with masters or doctoral degrees in psychology or education who have appropriate course preparation in psychometrics and psychological assessment. This would include intellectual and neuropsychological testing, as well as some psychosocial, personality, and behavioural measures. To allow non-qualified individuals to view, access, or use these tests jeopardizes test security, standardized administration procedures, and correct interpretation of the data obtained in the assessment, which results in an ethical violation and a disservice to the student. Such practices also may have implications in terms of civil liability and violation of jurisdictional law regulating the practice of psychology, as well as being a copyright violation.

e. Office Space

As a condition of the Code of Ethics, school psychologists, like all psychologists, have a duty to protect client information. This protection would include the school psychologist having a private office to ensure secure telephone and face-to-face conversations with clients as well as

a private and secure filing system for client records, including test protocols, reports, and other personal notes which cannot be shared with other district staff members.

School psychologists have a particular responsibility to prevent inadvertent disclosure of private information. Unfortunately, this can occur easily if the psychologists do not have adequate office or secure filing space, leaving confidential materials vulnerable to be seen by people with access to temporary work and storage spaces.

EPILOGUE

“...School psychologists are the most highly trained mental health experts in schools. In addition to knowledge about prevention, intervention, and evaluation for a number of childhood problems, school psychologists have unique expertise regarding issues of learning and schools. It is [school psychologists’] ethical responsibility to become involved in programs aimed at problems that are broader than assessing and diagnosing what is wrong with a child. As the most experienced school professionals in this area, school psychologists must become invested in addressing social and human ills ... Although [school psychologists] will not ‘solve’ these ills, [they] must have a role in ameliorating their impact on the lives of children.” Sheridan, S. and Gutkin, T. (2000)

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APPENDIX A

Details of Core Competencies required by the *Mutual Recognition Agreement* of the Canadian Psychological Association for licensing of psychologists in Canada

1. **Interpersonal Relations.** Psychologists must be able to establish and maintain a constructive working alliance with their clients, and be sensitive to the needs of individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds.
2. **Assessment and Evaluation.** A competent professional psychologist draws on diverse methods of evaluation, determining which methods are best suited to the task at hand.
3. **Intervention and Consultation.** The competent professional psychologist engages in activities that promote, restore and/or enhance positive functioning and a sense of well-being in clients through preventative, developmental and/or remedial services.
4. **Ethics and Standards.** Professional psychologists accept their obligations, are sensitive to others and conduct themselves in an ethical manner.
5. **Research.** The competent psychologist has the skills necessary to conduct and evaluate scientific research.

APPENDIX B

Competencies of Graduating Students from the School and Clinical Child Psychology Program at OISE/University of Toronto

1. Students will acquire broad and general knowledge in core content areas of psychology including the history of psychology, cognitive-affective bases of behaviour, biological bases of behaviour, social bases of behaviour, individual differences, and human development.
2. Students will conduct original research to study both theoretical and applied questions in psychology.
3. Students will apply appropriate standards of ethical, legal and professional conduct in their provision of psychological services and in their research.
4. Students will conduct psychological assessments of individuals who have cognitive, academic, psychosocial, and behavioural difficulties, and become skilled in formulating and communicating a diagnosis.
5. Students will develop interpersonal skills and competencies necessary to provide consulting services to schools, mental health agencies, and families.
6. Students will develop interpersonal skills and competencies necessary to develop, monitor and evaluate psychoeducational prevention and intervention programs aimed at ameliorating learning difficulties.
7. Students will develop interpersonal skills and competencies necessary to develop, provide, monitor and evaluate psychotherapeutic prevention programs and interventions aimed at ameliorating social and emotional (psychosocial) problems.
8. Students will provide informed psychological services to a culturally and individually diverse population.
9. Students will acquire the knowledge and skills to become leaders in the field of school and clinical child psychology. To this end they will develop skills to supervise psychological research and school and clinical practice, and to advocate for policy and systems changes that improve the quality of life of children, youth, and families.

APPENDIX C

School Psychology Task Force Members for the CPA Task Force on Publicly Funded Psychology (listed by province)

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