Welcome to the first article in our new series, focusing on the school psychologist's role in providing intervention services in schools. The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP; School Psychology: A Blueprint for Training and Practice III, 2006) defines data-based decision making and accountability as a functional competency and a key component of school psychology practice. In their article, Dr. Barva (Registered Psychologist) and Mr. Colp (Provisional Registered Psychologist) discuss this area as critical to providing enhanced services to schools and cultivating new roles for school psychologists within Alberta. Enjoy!

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School Psychologists as Leaders Who Use Data to Cultivate New Roles within Inclusive Education

The practice of school psychology emerged in the early 20th century and was composed predominately of clinical or general psychologists who had little training in the field of school psychology. These professionals were based out of mental hygiene clinics and their work focused specifically on the identification and placement of students with learning and/or behavioural challenges. Specialized graduate programs of school psychology emerged in the 1970s, and school psychologist training had a clear presence in Canada by the early 1990s (Saklofske et al., 2007). Similar to other graduate programs in applied psychology, school psychology programs predominantly followed the scientist-practitioner model of training, and offered degrees at both the Master and Doctoral levels.

The scientist-practitioner model of training for psychologists, as it is commonly understood, emphasizes the equal blend of practice and research, in that psychologists must be able to apply scientific knowledge obtained from their own research or the research of others, to help inform their practice with clients. Indeed, as a practitioner, the ability to take a step back and explore client responses and behaviours from a scientific viewpoint is invaluable. From a program perspective, many school psychologists receive coursework in the areas of assessment, psychopathology, consultation, intervention, supervision, research methods and statistics. Recognizing the breadth and depth of training, it is not surprising that the role of school psychologists in education settings includes activities such as student assessment, staff consultation, therapeutic intervention services, parent training, and program development and evaluation, among others (Cole & Siegel, 2003; Fagan & Wise, 2007; Saklofske et al., 2007).

Given the broad scope of practice available to school psychologists, one would assume that most school psychologists would be satisfied with the duties they undertake. Unfortunately, this is not the case. School psychologists across Canada have highlighted that their ability to engage in roles beyond assessment have generally been limited by perceptions within the education system (Jordan, Hindes, & Saklofske, 2009). School psychologists are currently seen by school administrators as being vital to identifying underlying student challenges and needs through their work as assessors (Fagan & Wise, 2007). While flattering, this zeitgeist has cornered school psychologists into the role of assessment and, because of the strong demand for this service, allows limited time and resources to engage in tasks that demonstrate their other skillsets and expertise.

By not being able to showcase additional skills, school psychologists may be viewed as "non-essential" school personnel by educational organizations in times when education budgets are reduced (e.g., APA, 2012).

Recently, the Alberta Government released its' 2015-2016 budget which outlined a five billion dollar deficit. This financial obstacle has led to an overall reduction in funding to the education sector, which will undoubtedly impact the academic achievement and mental health of students across Alberta. The Alberta Government stated in their budget release that the financial burdens experienced by local school jurisdictions should not be felt in the classroom, specifically through the elimination of teaching staff (Alberta Government, 2015). This stipulation has put significant pressure on educational groups to manage with limited financial assistance and an ever-increasing student population. It is logical to assume that school psychologists will be one group, among others, who will be scrutinized for their contribution to the positive functioning of schools and districts in general. With this looming spectre, school psychologists must think critically about how to diversify their roles and move outside of the individual assessment box, improve their job satisfaction and improve their job security for the future. One avenue can involve redefining what "assessment" means and how it is incorporated into school psychology practice.

School psychology "assessment" within educational systems has traditionally referred to the procedure by which school psychologists perform individual student evaluations using a variety of norm-referenced and/or curriculum-referenced instruments (Fagan & Wise, 2007; Saklofske et al., 2007). Practicing school psychologists recognize that this conceptualization of assessment is narrow, and one that precludes other avenues of assistance that these professionals can provide. According to the National Association of School Psychologists, assessment can be defined as the process of gathering data or information to guide educationally relevant decisions (NASP, 2009). The process and products of assessments performed by school psychologists are intended to contribute to defining problems, accelerating learning, identifying student needs, and evaluating program outcomes (Ysseldyke et al., 2007). In gathering this data, school psychologists collect data from multiple sources (e.g., individual, classroom, family, school, and community characteristics) to inform decisions at various levels (e.g., individual, classroom, school, district, province, and national) in multiple settings (e.g., general and special education), using multiple methods (e.g., surveys, universal screening, observations, curriculum-based assessments, standardized testing; NASP, 2009).

While many school psychologists recognize the importance of implementing data-based decision making into their practice as scientist-practitioners, governments are resonating with this ideology in regards to how education is provided in their respective provinces. As an example, Alberta Education has expressed the need for school jurisdictions to utilize data to inform educational programs and policies to improve the welfare of their student bodies (e.g., Alberta Education, 2009). To move in this direction, some school jurisdictions have encouraged or required their local schools to begin recording various academic, behavioral, and social-emotional indicators (e.g., grades, provincial achievement testing, suspensions, mental health referrals, attendance, drop-out rates, etc.) and upload this information into electronic student information systems that will be used to inform practice (NASP, 2009).

Given their training and experience, the current climate of data-based decision making and educational accountability offers a unique opportunity for school psychologists to support schools and jurisdictions in collecting and utilizing data effectively. Within this broader realm of "gathering information", school psychologists are poised at the forefront to become data-based leaders of preventative and evidence-based intervention programming that occurs, not only at an

individual school level, but also within district and at provincial levels. To be effective and indispensable in school systems, school psychologists must utilize their skills beyond the individual child level and engage in dialogue in this larger forum – a conversation to which school psychologists have not always been invited. School personnel will need assistance in gathering and understanding the data they collect because, without proper guidance and training, these professionals can fall victim to overgeneralizations that can inadvertently negatively impact student outcomes (McLeod & Ysseldyke, 2008). While all school psychologists can foster and encourage data-based best practices in schools, a number of school psychologists also have specialized statistical expertize that will prove invaluable as school jurisdictions embark on data-informed practice and decision-making.

School psychologists have an opportunity to explore new roles and redefine what it means to be a psychologist within an educational setting. They have the potential to break the casted mold that has held them within a confined definition of assessment for the purpose of special education coding. As stated by Rosenfield and Nelson (2005), "there are few others with training, experience, and expertise in assessment, data-collection, and evidence-based practice comparable to that of school psychologists" (p.2), and they should be able to utilize these skills in collaboration with their educational colleagues to promote the positive success and welfare of all students.

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