

Getting Schooled

Welcome to Getting Schooled. Practicing in rural areas, while providing school psychologists with many rewards, may also come with several potential pitfalls. As we continue to explore issues in professional practice, Mr. Rob McGarva describes some of the unique challenges faced by school psychologists who work in predominantly rural areas, as well as highlighting some innovative solutions.

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Rural School Psychology

While rural school psychologists face many of the same challenges as their urban peers, there are some unique factors that require consideration. Relationships, interventions, and local culture are all aspects that influence professional practice.

Web of Multiple Relationships

One of the unique aspects of working in a rural setting is, understanding the multiple relationships that may exist. A great deal of literature has covered the ethics and practical issues for psychologists who work and live in small communities (Edwards, & Sullivan, 2014). Some consideration has also been given to professional peer relationships in rural settings (Malone, 2010). However, a more neglected issue is considering the multiple relationships, which may exist between students, parents, and school staff. When reviewing referral information and interviewing individuals you need to consider personal factors that may influence the person's perceptions.

For instance, a rural school psychologist could face a scenario where they see a child in grade three for behavioural issues, but find that the teacher is the principal's husband, the principal used to be married to the child's step father, the teacher assistant in the classroom is the child's aunt and the child's father is the brother of the school board chair. Although this description is fictional, similar complicated networks of connections are not unusual. In some cases, there may be obvious secondary gains that skew the views of those involved, but other influences may be subtler. These multiple relationships may further complicate how effectively strategies can be implemented, monitored, and coached.

Considerations for Interventions

Recommendations and strategy development are generally best done in consultation with all partners. There may be limited expertise within rural schools regarding certain interventions and recommendations are less likely to be implemented if it requires sending a staff member for additional training or purchasing new resources. A number of rural parents may also be anxious about driving to urban areas. It is important to examine whether there are barriers to implementing supports. In many rural communities there are

agencies that will help to transport people who are unable to drive to a city for appointments, but parents may not be aware of these options. Virtual options such as tele-psychiatry or online parent support groups may also be a more viable choice.

The clinician should also not assume that all services available in rural areas are inferior to urban areas. For example, my personal experience has been that the development of the rural clinic model by the Lakeland Centre for Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder has resulted in shorter waiting lists for assessment than at some city hospitals. Rural physicians are also more likely to screen pregnant women for alcohol use and to help them access resources (Tough, Hicks, & Clarke, 2008). This increased screening may be the result of familiarity with community alcohol use patterns.

Rural Cultures

Local cultures can influence the type of risk related behaviours amongst students. McInnis et al. (2015) found high school students in rural areas were more likely to report alcohol use and binge drinking. They also reported more likely to drive after alcohol or cannabis use. Counselling students to understand risk may mean knowing about a local bush party that occurs every May long weekend or appreciating that the student likes to drive all terrain vehicles with their friends. This local knowledge may be particularly essential when evaluating and supporting students with suicidal ideation. It may not be enough to reduce access to firearms within their home, when every residence in their neighborhood and the houses of all their friends contain guns.

Diversity in rural areas can be limited. Psychologist working in some rural communities may find that the population is not as ethnically diverse as it is in the larger cities (Irshad, 2013). In some rural communities, ethnic diversity may be a relatively new reality to which the local services have not yet resourced themselves to respond. As an example, the school psychologist may not be able to link a family in need of counselling services to a provider who speaks the language. This demographic reality may have critical impact on rural school psychologists' ability to locate or facilitate culturally responsive supportive resources for students and families.

This amplification of issues can also occur economically. Rural communities have a greater possibility of being dependent on one industry. For instance, the recent downturn in the oil industry is difficult for the entire province. In some communities, however, a majority of the population is dependent on this sector of the economy, which can translate into greater social issues or pressures on children. Similar concerns have been observed in the past with agricultural issues. Economic fluctuations with farming have contributed to farmers having a very high suicide rate (Mustard et al., 2010), with ripple effects in schools.

Local industry may also be related to other patterns observed in a rural school psychology practice. Although Alberta-specific research is lacking, studies in California have shown an increase in autism and other developmental delays amongst the offspring of women who live close to fields treated with agricultural pesticides (Shelton et al., 2014). Drop-

out rates from school may also be influenced by the perceived easy access to well-paying jobs requiring little education (Gunn, Chorney, & Poulsen, 2009).

Rural Solutions

As rural school psychologists are less likely to be able to specialize in an area of practice, they need to have appreciation of a broad range of concerns. Fortunately, technology has improved the professional development opportunities for rural school psychologists. A number of podcasts provide readily available knowledge, such as The Psych Files (<http://www.thepsychfiles.com>), Shrink Rap Radio (<http://shrinkrapradio.com>), School Psyched Podcast (<https://www.facebook.com/School-Psyched-Podcast-1494498527497140/>) and the National Association of School Psychology (<http://apps.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/podcasts/index.aspx>). Long drives in the country provide an ideal opportunity for auditory learners to take advantage of these resources. Other learning possibilities can be accessed through video conferencing. For example, KIDS Inc. offers an online program in School Neuropsychology (<http://www.schoolneuropsych.com>) that can be completed by licensed psychologists from anywhere in the world through monthly weekend seminars conducted over the internet, supplemented by two on-site trainings in Texas. They have recently added a new competency based training program in cross-battery assessment (<http://www.schoolneuropsych.com/xba/>).

While professional growth can be addressed through technology, a greater threat to remaining a professional psychologist seems to be the suitability to assume administrative roles. The personal experiences of some rural school psychologists consulted for this article was that career advancement in rural areas usually means moving away from direct work with children. Having psychologists in administrative positions is often desirable to the organization and profession because of the scope of knowledge they can provide. However, it may feel counter-intuitive to the individual and the reason they made their original career choices, as well as leaving gaps in service delivery that may be difficult to fill.

Rural school psychology provides the opportunity for a rich practice experience, but also several potential pitfalls. Many issues can be avoided by being conscious of the unique factors within each case and community. Technology can also be used to support professionalism and the delivery of services.

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A copy of the full reference list is available upon request.