

School Psychologists as System-Level Change Agents: Sometimes Being a Radical is Required

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School Psychologists promote and support the positive development of students within educational environments. To do so, they must navigate the federal and provincial laws, formal regulatory requirements, identified practice standards, codes of conduct, and ethical guidelines, and keep abreast of emerging research in order to maintain their professional status. The ability of school psychologists to perform their direct and indirect services within communities, while also adhering to their professional requirements, can sometimes be difficult. There may be scenarios in which decisions made by school districts, or other systems, emerge in direct conflict with the empirical literature, training, experience, or professional guidelines well-known to school psychologists. This represents a unique opportunity, however, in which school psychologists may benefit from increased reflection on what it means to be “student-centered” versus “system-centered” practitioners.

Student-centered school psychologists must navigate complex obstacles in a sensitive manner that preserves relationships and serves the best interest of students, educational authorities, and other systems. The following vignette exemplifies how easily some school psychologists may default to system-centered thinking in the face of internal or external pressure:

A student who is under the care of Child and Family Services presently resides in a foster placement. They display a profile that is consistent with children who have experienced neglect. For context, they have had multiple home breakdowns over the past three years. They currently attend a school that has been stable for the past two years. They have built positive relationships with same-age peers as well as adults.

As their current placement is breaking down and requires a move, questions have surfaced regarding the need to change schools. Their new placement would reside outside of their old school boundary. As your assigned client, the district requested a program plan be created to support the new school placement...

The support requested in the above vignette appears to be system-centered, and it may not reflect the developmental needs of the student. Indeed, there are complexities when students remain in schools that are outside their designated catchments (e.g., transportation, school funding). The emerging question becomes, “How are system-level complexities considered in relation to the individual needs of students?” Unfortunately, the needs of systems often override what school psychologists believe are in the best-interest of students. To provide student-centered consultation, they need a cognitive framework to reflect on the system-level influence impacting their clinical judgement, case consultation, and recommendations. Consider the following questions to begin your reflective process on what it means to be a student-centered versus system-centered school psychologist:

- What is in the best-interest of the student from a developmental perspective?
- What is the empirical evidence that substantiates my case formulation and recommendations?
- Am I aware of the internal or external beliefs influencing my student-centered consultation?
 - “The student was only in the school for a short period of time...”
 - “The student did not make any significant relationships...”
 - “I don’t have any say in where students are placed...”
 - “That is not my role...”

Now that we have explored how system-centered thinking can inadvertently influence our approach to consultation, there remains outstanding elements that must be considered in forwarding student-centered practice in our systems. It would be beneficial for school psychologists to identify the barriers, obstacles,

or knowledge gaps that are interfering with their individual and systems' ability to engage in this process and then advocate for their remediation or implement specific resources (e.g., conflict resolution training, coaching and leadership skills training). School psychologists also need to appreciate their level of education, training, and experience when providing student-centered guidance and consultation. School psychologists are often viewed as experts in child development and are sought for insight from those with less training and expertise who are involved in making critical life decisions for students. It is imperative that school psychologists be confident in supplying decision-makers with knowledge and a student-centered viewpoint, and not assume that such information or questions have been considered prior.

Sometimes the role of a school psychologist is to be a respectful change agent within the systems to which they inhabit. By positively encouraging change in existing views, habits, conditions, or techniques employed by their systems, school psychologists support the positive development of students. This approach or viewpoint may not always be popular and, on occasion, could lead to difficult conversations. However, if it is done in a manner that respects both the views and environmental challenges of system participants, innovative solutions are more likely to be realized. As advocates and champions of vulnerable students, school psychologists must be viewed as part of the whole-system solution.