Role of the School Psychologist

Perceptions of School Staff

MARLEY W. WATKINS, EDWARD G. CROSBY and JEREMY L. PEARSON
The Pennsylvania State University

ABSTRACT School psychologists often report that they would like to reduce their involvement in assessment activities in favour of an increase in other service delivery roles. Surveys of teachers and administrators reveal that they do not want a reduction in assessment services. Rather, they want more school psychology services of all kinds. In this study, 522 school staff from a suburban southwestern school district in the USA were surveyed regarding the importance of nine school psychology services. School staff gave 'very important' ratings to six services: assessment, special education input, consultation, counselling, crisis intervention and behaviour management. School-community liaison and parent education roles were rated as 'fairly important' and staff development was considered to be 'somewhat important.' School staff also wanted a school psychologist to be available on a daily basis at their schools. These results are discussed in terms of the 'paradox of school psychology' and the skills required of school psychologists who wish to deliver diverse school psychological services.

Numerous surveys have been conducted concerning the service roles and functions of school psychologists both in the United States (Hutton et al., 1992; Lacayo et al., 1981; Levinson, 1990; Reschly and Wilson, 1995, 1997; Roberts and Rust, 1994; Smith, 1984) and internationally (Zins et al., 1995). These surveys have been relatively consistent across time in demonstrating that school psychologists' actual roles are dominated by

Address correspondence to: Dr Marley W. Watkins, The Pennsylvania State University, Department of Educational and School Psychology and Special Education, 227 CEDAR Building, University Park, PA 16802, USA. Email:mww10@psu.edu

School Psychology International Copyright © 2001 SAGE Publications (London, Thousand Oaks, CA and New Delhi), Vol. 22(1): 64–73. [0143–0343 (200102) 22:1; 64–73; 016951]

assessment activities with other professional services (i.e. intervention, consultation, research, etc.) occurring much less frequently.

School psychologists have also been prolific in theorizing about roles and functions (Bardon, 1983, 1994; Cunningham and Oakland, 1998; Hyman and Kaplinski, 1994; Oakland and Cunningham, 1997; Saigh and Oakland, 1989; Shinn and McConnell, 1994; Stein, 1997; Task Force, 1994; Ysseldyke et al., 1997). More concretely, many surveys have asked school psychologists to identify both their preferred and actual service roles (Anthun, 1999; Carey, 1995a; Levinson, 1990; Reschly and Wilson, 1995; Roberts and Rust, 1994; Zins et al., 1995). These surveys have generally indicated that school psychologists wish to diversify their professional functioning by reducing the amount of time they spend in assessment activities and increasing the amount of time they spend in alternative service roles. Although empirical evidence is limited (Anthun, 1999), anecdotal accounts suggest that expansion of professional roles and responsibilities are a concern of school psychologists throughout the world (Oakland and Cunningham, 1992; Oakland and Saigh, 1987; Saigh and Oakland, 1989).

Although there appears to be both a theoretical and practical consensus among school psychologists that they should deliver more diverse services, there does not seem to have been a conspicuous reduction in the discrepancy between actual and ideal roles reported over the past decade (i.e. Smith, 1984 versus Hutton et al., 1992). It may be that school psychologists wish to modify their professional roles and functions, but the consumers of their services wish to maintain the status quo.

To investigate this question, the attitudes of school-based consumers of school psychological services have been investigated. Cheramie and Sutter (1993) sampled Texas special education directors. They found that these administrators were satisfied with school psychologists' involvement in assessment activities, desired more counselling and consultation services and wanted school psychologists to reduce their involvement in administrative and regular education activities. Surveys of regular education administrators indicated that they tended to value traditional assessment activities; desired additional counselling, staff development and preventative mental health activities; and did not wish school psychologists to perform administrative duties (Abel and Burke, 1985; Hartshorne and Johnson, 1985; Senft and Snider, 1980; Thomas et al., 1992). Although providing some tentative support for the hypothesis that school psychologists and school staff hold different views regarding actual versus ideal service delivery roles, these surveys must be accepted with caution due to age, geographic restriction and low response rate (e.g. only 17 percent in Thomas et al., 1992).

Sandoval and Lambert (1977) asserted that 'teachers are the best source of information about psychological services' (p. 173) so surveys of

teachers might provide more information. Early surveys focused on teachers' perceptions of school psychologists' competence rather than their service delivery roles (Dean, 1980). More recently, Abel and Burke (1985) questioned regular and special educators from an Arizona school district regarding school psychologists' competencies and functions. They found that teachers valued traditional assessment activities and wanted to retain those services, but also favoured hiring more school psychologists to increase intervention and consultation services. Abel and Burke suggested that teachers wanted *more*, not just different, school psychological services. This conclusion was supported by a survey of Illinois early childhood special education teachers and directors (Beauchamp, 1994) who primarily requested assessment services from school psychologists, but also suggested that other services be provided. As with administrative surveys, these teacher results should be accepted with caution due to age, geographic restriction and low response rate (e.g. only 25 percent in Beauchamp, 1994).

A more recent survey which investigated the role perceptions of 278 school staff from four Indiana school corporations was reported by Hagemeier et al. (1998). These personnel were satisfied with school psychologists' actual assessment activities but positive ideal–actual differences were reported for behavioural interventions, community organizational development, consultation with teachers, parent education, prereferral interventions and prevention activities. Similar results were found in a recent survey of Norwegian teachers and administrators (Anthun, 1999). When provided with a list of nine professional activities, teachers and administrators wanted school psychologists to expand their delivery of all nine services. As with Abel and Burke (1985), these school staff wanted school psychologists to maintain their current level of assessment activity *and* deliver additional diverse services.

Although based upon surveys with methodological weaknesses, these results are tantalizing in that they suggest that school psychologists and school staff hold different views regarding actual versus ideal service delivery roles. The present research was designed to investigate this hypothesis by examining the perceptions of a large sample of school staff.

Method

Location

The present study was conducted in a suburban school district located in the southwestern United States which employed a total of 1,220 staff in teacher (regular and special education), administrator and support (counsellor, speech therapist, nurse, social worker, occupational therapist, physical therapist) positions. The district's 16.5 school psychologists

served slightly over 23,000 students (87 percent white, 8 percent Hispanic, 2.2 percent Asian, 2.1 percent Black, and 0.7 percent Native American) in 21 school buildings. Of these students, 14.8 percent received free or reduced lunches.

Instrument

This study was implemented as an integral part of a program evaluation initiated by the district's school psychologists to obtain staff feedback on importance and need for school psychological services. Thus, design of the staff questionnaire and level of analysis was guided by program evaluation and privacy considerations.

The resulting questionnaire asked the respondents to 'please rate the importance of each school psychological role for you and your school' along a five point scale (1 = Very Important, 2 = Fairly Important, 3 = Somewhat Important, 4 = Slightly Important, 5 = Not Important) followed by a list of nine roles with annotated descriptions (See Table 1). Staff were also asked to specify the service intensity they desired for their school and were provided with an opportunity to comment on any item or concern.

Procedures

Questionnaires were distributed to all 1,220 school staff at their assigned schools. Completed anonymous questionnaires were returned to a central mailbox via intercampus mail. Utilizing this method, 522

Table 1 *School Staff Questionnaire Roles and Descriptions*

Role	*Description*
Consultation	Work with school personnel and parents to develop intervention plans and provide information.
Counselling	With groups and individuals.
Assessment	Comprehensive psycho-educational evaluations and other assessments to help in determining children's needs (may be required by regulation).
Special Education Input	Work with IEP team to assist in determining eligibility for special education services and plan an appropriate program (may be required by regulation).
School-Community Liaison	Facilitate coordination of services between school and outside agencies
Staff Development	Provide inservice training at the school and district level.
Crisis Intervention	Serve on crisis team and provide other intervention services in crises.
Behaviour Management	Aid in development and modification of student behaviour management plans for home and school.
Parent Education	Provide parenting classes and other training to parents.

questionnaires were returned (a response rate of 42.8 percent). This included 419 regular education teachers, 18 administrators, 52 special education teachers and 33 support staff.

Results

Using a multivariate analysis of variance, there were statistically significant differences between respondents in administrative, regular education, special education and support positions ($F = 1.96$, d.f. = 27, 1373, $p = 0.002$). Univariate follow-up tests revealed that regular and special education teachers reported differences in their perceptions of the importance of assessment and special education input roles, with special education teachers considering them more important than regular education teachers.

There was also a multivariate significant effect for elementary versus secondary level respondents ($F = 3.59$, d.f. = 9, 472, $p < 0.001$). Follow-up univariate tests indicated that elementary and secondary personnel differed on the importance of consultation, assessment and behaviour management roles with elementary staff perceiving all three roles to be more important than did secondary level staff.

Although statistically significant, the differences between regular and special education teachers and elementary and secondary personnel were small in magnitude and not practically significant (i.e. eta squared statistics for significant comparisons ranged from 0.008 to 0.035). Given that the differences among groups explained so little of the variance in the ratings, all additional analyses were conducted on the total sample.

Staff perceptions of the importance of school psychological service roles are presented in Table 2. Most ratings were highly skewed and

Table 2 *Staff Perceptions of Importance of School Psychological Service Roles*

Role	*Mean*	*Standard Deviation*	*Median*	*Mode*
Assessment	1.22	0.60	1	1
Special Education Input	1.30	0.65	1	1
Consultation	1.43	0.79	1	1
Counselling	1.67	0.96	1	1
Crisis Intervention	1.72	1.00	1	1
Behaviour Management	1.74	0.93	1	1
School-Community Liaison	2.23	1.02	2	2
Parent Education	2.33	1.15	2	2
Staff Development	2.63	1.17	3	2

Note: 1 = Very Important, 2 = Fairly Important, 3 = Somewhat Important, 4 = Slightly Important, and 5 = Not Important.

kurtotic, which suggests that medians, rather than means, may be the most informative measure of central tendency. Using this metric, it is apparent that respondents felt that five service roles were 'very important' and two were 'fairly important' while only staff development activities were considered to be 'somewhat important.' None of the nine service roles were perceived to be 'not important.'

Respondents were also asked how many days of school psychological services they thought their school needed per week (on an ordinal scale of 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and more than 5 days). Although there was a small difference between elementary (79 percent) and secondary (85 percent) staff, most of these respondents (82 percent) wanted five days or more per week of school psychological services at their school. This result was reinforced by open-ended comments, where 33 respondents indicated a need for more psychologists and an additional 65 reported a need for additional psychological services. Illustrative of those comments were 'we need more time' and 'provide all [nine enumerated] above services.'

Staff comments were generally philosophical. They acknowledged psychologists' heavy work load, expressed satisfaction with individual psychologists and sometimes articulated their frustration with the 'system' which produced the discrepancy between the services they wanted and those they received. Representative comments included, 'Our psychologist is overworked between several schools'; 'because of District Guidelines and the fear of law suits this [provision of counselling and consultation] does not happen' and 'it is a very secure feeling knowing I can go to our psychologist for any kind of help.'

Discussion

The service roles of many school psychologists are dominated by assessment activities, although school psychologists have consistently reported that they would like to reduce their assessment activities in favour of an increase in consultation, intervention and other diverse services. This decades long situation may persist, in part, because of environmental demands. Whereas school psychologists generally articulate a desire to provide *different* services, surveys of teachers and administrators have often disclosed a desire for school psychologists to continue assessment activities at their current intensity as well as provide a wide range of additional services. That is, school staff generally want *more* services.

This incongruity was corroborated by the results of the present study. School staff gave 'very important' ratings to assessment, special education input, consultation, counselling, crisis intervention and behaviour management roles. Consonant with previous research, staff also over-

whelmingly endorsed a need for more psychological services in terms of number of days of psychological service allocated to their school. Comments provided to open-ended questions also clearly illustrated these respondents' desire for more psychological services to be achieved by an increase in psychological staff, not by a decrease in the delivery of assessment services. Respondents often reported that their school psychologist was doing a good job with the time he/she had at their school but needed to be there more often so that more services could be provided. Similar comments have been noted in previous surveys of school staff (Abel and Burke, 1985; Brady, 1985; Hunter and Lambert, 1974). This demand for more services may create stress for school psychologists. For example, Oakland and Cunningham (1992) found that 78 percent of their respondents from high-GNP countries (versus 24 percent from low-GNP countries) perceived having insufficient time to conduct assigned responsibilities to be a major source of stress.

On the positive side, these results suggest that school staff value the school psychological services they receive and want more, not just different, services. This expressed need may allow school psychologists to gain support from teachers and administrators when they lobby for an increase in school psychological staff expressly targeted for delivery of additional services.

On the other hand, these results present a dilemma for school psychologists who wish to diversify their service roles, but whose existing heavy assessment schedule does not permit them to proffer new services without reducing their work load in another area. With approximately 50–60 percent of the average school psychologist's time being devoted to assessment related activities (Brown et al., 1998; Carey, 1995a), this may be a common situation. The problem is exacerbated by a tendency of teachers and administrators to underestimate the proportion of time spent by school psychologists in assessment activities (Abel and Burke, 1985).

This dilemma appears to be another facet of the 'paradox of school psychology' which declares that 'to serve children effectively school psychologists must, first and foremost, concentrate their attention and professional expertise on adults' (Gutkin and Conoley, 1990, p. 212). The present results, considered within the context of this paradox, strongly suggest that school psychologists may be unable to diversify role functioning without first positively modifying the attitudes and expectations of school staff (Dean, 1980; Pohlman et al., 1998). School psychologists may have to take a systems view of service delivery (Maher, 1979), recognize that truly effective school psychology services are based upon mastery of interpersonal influence processes (O'Keefe and Medway, 1997), view consultation as a fundamental, rather than supplemental, part of school psychology functioning (Anserello and Sweet, 1990) and

acquire the skills to implement diverse services in a real, but unaccommodating, world (Carey, 1995b).

The present results appear to be fairly robust given that they are congruent with previous research while using different measurement items and diverse school staff. Nevertheless, they should be accepted with caution due to the specific survey methodology used within a single school district in one country. These results may be most applicable to school psychologists working in developed countries who deliver services through a school system and less applicable to those school psychologists who provide services outside a school setting (Oakland and Saigh, 1987). School staff in countries which require school psychologists to have training as a teacher and to continue teaching part-time in the classroom may perceive school psychologists as well as their roles in a different light (Farrell and Lunt, 1994; Holowinsky, 1997; Poulsen, 1987). There may also be differences among school staff in countries in which school psychological services have historically been part of the educational system in comparison to those countries in which school psychological services have recently been established (Holowinsky, 1997). Future research should investigate these relationships with diverse settings and methods, taking into consideration psychologist:student ratios as well as historical training and service delivery patterns. It may also be possible to conduct analogue experiments to provide a more rigorous test of the 'more not different' hypothesis explicated in this study.

References

Abel, R. R. and Burke, J. P. (1985) 'Perceptions of School Psychology Services from a Staff Perspective', *Journal of School Psychology* 23: 121–31.

Anserello, C. and Sweet, T. (1990) In E. Cole and J. A. Siegel (eds), *Effective Consultation in School Psychology* (pp. 173–99) Toronto: Hogrefe and Huber.

Anthun, R. (1999) 'Quality and Improvement Potential in School Psychology Services', *School Psychology International*, 20: 163–75.

Bardon, J. I. (1983) 'Psychology Applied to Education: A Specialty in Search of an Identity', *American Psychologist* 38: 185–96.

Bardon, J. I. (1994)' Will the Real School Psychologist Please Stand Up: Is the Past a Prologue for the Future of School Psychology?', *School Psychology Review* 23: 584–88.

Beauchamp, K. D. (1994) 'Early Childhood Special Educators' Perceptions of School Psychologists' Roles in Their Programs', *Psychological Reports* 75: 307–13.

Brady, H. V. (1985) 'A Case Study Method of Assessing Consumer Satisfaction with School Psychology Services', *School Psychology Review* 14: 216–21.

Brown, M. B., Swigart, M. L., Bolen, L. M., Hall, C. W. and Webster, R. T. (1998) 'Doctoral and Nondoctoral Practicing School Psychologists: Are There Differences?', *Psychology in the Schools* 35: 347–54.

Carey, K. T. (1995a,) 'A National Study of the Role and Function of the School Psychologist', paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Association of School Psychologists, Chicago, Illinois, USA.

Carey, K. T. (1995b) 'Consultation in the Real World', *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation* 6: 397–400.

Cheramie, G. M. and Sutter, E. G. (1993) 'Role Expansion in School Psychology: The Need for Primary and Secondary Prevention Services', *Psychology in the Schools* 30: 53–9.

Cunningham, J. and Oakland, T. (1998) 'International School Psychology Association Guidelines for the Preparation of School Psychologists', *School Psychology International* 19: 19–30.

Dean, R. S. (1980) 'A Comparison of Preservice and Experienced Teachers' Perceptions of the School Psychologist', *Journal of School Psychology* 18: 283–89.

Farrell, P. and Lunt, I. (1994) 'Training Psychologists for the 21st Century', *School Psychology International* 15: 195–208.

Gutkin, T. B. and Conoley, J. C. (1990) 'Reconceptualizing School Psychology from a Service Delivery Perspective: Implications for Practice, Training, and Research', *Journal of School Psychology* 28: 203–23.

Hagemeier, C., Bischoff, L., Jacobs, J. and Osmon, W. (1998) 'Role Perceptions of the School Psychologist by School Ppersonnel', paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Association of School Psychologists, Orlando, Florida, USA.

Hartshorne, T. S. and Johnson, M. C. (1985) 'The Actual and Preferred Roles of the School Psychologist According to Secondary School Administrators', *Journal of School Psychology* 23: 241–6.

Holowinsky, I. Z. (1997) 'Partnership in Education: Local, National, and International Perspective', *School Psychology International* 18: 61–79.

Hunter, C. P. and Lambert, N. M. (1974) 'Needs Assessment Activities in School Psychology Program Development', *Journal of School Psychology* 12: 130–7.

Hutton, J. B., Dubes, R. and Muir, S. (1992) 'Assessment Practices of School Psychologists: Ten Years Later', *School Psychology Review* 21: 271–84.

Hyman, I. A. and Kaplinski, K. (1994) 'Will the Real School Psychologist Please Stand Up: Is the Past a Prologue for the Future of School Psychology?', *School Psychology Review* 23: 564–83.

Lacayo, N., Sherwood, G. and Morris, J. (1981) 'Daily Activities of School Psychologists: A National Survey', *Psychology in the Schools* 18: 184–90.

Levinson, E. M. (1990) 'Actual/Desired Role Functioning, Perceived Control Over Role Functioning, and Job Satisfaction Among School Psychologists', *Psychology in the Schools* 27: 64–74.

Maher, C. A. (1979) 'Guidelines for Planning and Evaluating School Psychology Service Delivery Systems', *Journal of School Psychology* 17: 203–12.

Oakland, T. and Cunningham, J. L. (1992) A Survey of School Psychology in Developed and Developing Countries', *School Psychology International* 13: 99–129.

Oakland, T. and Cunningham, J. (1997) 'International School Psychology Association Definition of School Psychology', *School Psychology International* 18: 195–200.

Oakland, T. and Saigh, P. (1987) 'Psychological Services in Schools: A Summary of International Perspectives', *Journal of School Psychology* 25: 287–308.

O'Keefe, D. J. and Medway, F. J. (1997) 'The Application of Persuasion Research to Consultation in School Psychology', *Journal of School Psychology* 35: 173–93.

Pohlman, C., Hoffman, L. B., Dodds, A. H. and Pryzwansky, W. B. (1998) 'Utilization of School-Based Professional Services: An Exploratory Analysis

of Perceptions of Mentor Teachers and Student Teachers', *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation* 9: 347–65.
Poulsen, A. (1987) 'School Psychology in Denmark', *Journal of School Psychology* 25: 223–33.
Reschly, D. J. and Wilson, M. S. (1995) 'School Psychology Practitioners and Faculty: 1986 to 1991–92 Trends in Demographics, Roles, Satisfaction, and System Reform', *School Psychology Review* 24: 62–80.
Reschly, D. J. and Wilson, M. S. (1997) 'Characteristics of School Psychology Graduate Education: Implications for the Entry-Level Discussion and Doctoral-Level Specialty Ddefinition', *School Psychology Review* 26: 74–92.
Roberts, A. H. and Rust, J. O. (1994) 'Role and Function of School Psychologists, 1992–93: A Comparative Study', *Psychology in the Schools* 31: 113–19.
Saigh, P. A. and Oakland, T. (1989) *International Perspectives on Psychology in the Schools*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
Sandoval, J. and Lambert, N. M. (1977) 'Instruments for Evaluating School Psychologists' Functioning and Service', *Psychology in the Schools* 14: 172–9.
Senft, L. B. and Snider, B. (1980) 'Elementary School Principals Assess Services of School Psychologists Nationwide', *Journal of School Psychology* 18: 276–82.
Shinn, M. R. and McConnell, S. (1994) 'Improving General Education Instruction: Relevance to School Psychologists', *School Psychology Review* 23: 351–71.
Smith, D. K. (1984) 'Practicing School Psychologists: Their Characteristics, Activities, and Populations Served', *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice* 15: 798–810.
Stein, B. (1997) 'Community Reactions to Disaster: An Emerging Role for the School Psychologist', *School Psychology International* 18: 99–118.
Task Force on Psychology in the Schools (1994) *Delivery of Comprehensive School Psychological Services: An Educator's Guide*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
Thomas, A., Levinson, E. M., Orf, M. L. and Pinciotti, D. (1992) 'Administrators' Perceptions of School Psychologists' Roles and Satisfaction with School Psychologists', *Psychological Reports* 71: 571–5.
Ysseldyke, J., Dawson, P., Lehr, C., Reschly, D., Reynolds, M. and Telzrow, C. (1997) *School Psychology: A Blueprint for Training and Practice II*. Bethesda, MD: National Association of School Psychologists.
Zins, J. E., Johnson, J. R. and Thomas, A. (1995) 'Characteristics and Activities of Practicing School Psychologists: Results of an International Survey', paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Association of School Psychologists, Chicago, Illinois, USA.