Are School Psychologists under-utilized as a resource when determining effective

interventions?

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A current state of affairs for most school psychologists in Canada today is the traditional service delivery model consisting predominantly of educational assessment and intensive intervention. This written inquiry aims to explore how a school psychologist can contribute beyond the traditional role in ways that tangibly impact all stakeholders within the educational system. A few domains of competence that a school psychologist brings with them are used as examples of underutilized knowledge that can directly impact outcomes at all levels of intervention, mainly to bridge the current research-to-practice gap for educators and administrators alike. The inquiry concludes by reflecting on the current efforts in school psychology in Canada to bring about regulation and standards of practice that mirror those of more established professions by way of systems of accountability and why this needs to move on par with the efforts to expand the role of school psychologists in their workplace.

Assessment and intensive intervention are traditionally seen as one of the essential roles offered by school psychology professionals due in part to the specialized nature of the task. Although observation, interviews and standardized testing remain integral to the role, a school psychologist comes with training and expertise that goes beyond the proverbial "testing closet" (Ysseldyke et al., 2009, p.192). Therefore, school psychologists are better positioned in a school-based setting to discern evidence-based practices and prioritize effective approaches to intervention. The call to expanding of the role of the school psychologist is as old as the profession and initially called for as a response to a much needed "science-practitioner model" in schools (Ysseldyke et al., 2009, p.180), a term coined at the Boulder Conference in 1954 to describe the outcome goals of psychology training programs.

The documents known as Blueprints (Ysseldyke et al., 2009, p.178) provide domains of competence that mirror those outlined in the Professional Standards of the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP)("NASP practice model," n.d.). These domains serve as a reference and a reminder that the call for school psychology to be more consultative in its service delivery echoes as essential but has seen little movement to this day. Understanding why school psychologists have seen slight role expansion moves beyond the scope of this paper; it has to do with a complex interplay of the stakeholders within the education system, the funding decisions at the district level and many policy-related factors around the categorization that the assess-test-place model contributes to.

Instead, of the many reasons in favour of an expanded role for the school psychologist, we argue for the utility of the competency domain of Research and Evidence-Based Practice in the NASP Professional Standards ("NASP 2020 Professional Standards," n.d.).

As school psychologists finish their training with a broad range of competencies, they are effective research consumers able to critically evaluate and synthesize current research helpful to schools and teachers when making important decisions regarding approaches to intervention. These skills make school psychologists valuable members of the interdisciplinary team and an indispensable source of up-to-date research that changes over time.

School psychologists are trained research practitioners able to discern effective practices and interventions, which can be a daunting task for those lacking such training, especially in education, where issues are complex. What complicates matters in Canada, in particular, is the way that teaching approaches are implemented. A provincial curriculum needs to be taught, but the individual teacher determines how it is taught. This, in turn, means that along with the autonomy on teaching methods comes the variability, by design, not only at the district level but

also at an individual teacher level, as to how various teaching strategies are applied. Because the Canadian model provides autonomy over teaching approaches, the emphasis on evidence-based decision-making when choosing intervention approaches is something that school psychologists can be involved in by way of consultation with educational staff to ensure that what is taught to students aligns with evidence-based outcomes.

This writing looks at reading interventions, primarily because they are an important research area with varying, sometimes conflicting, approaches today in schools. For this reason, a school psychologist could provide essential value to a multidisciplinary team as a trained research practitioner, able to discern evidence-based effective practices and interventions. Consuming research can be a daunting task for those lacking such training, especially in education, where reading and comprehension are complex.

Identifying the type of interventions used by a school system is one of the easier challenges; to start, it does not take much searching online to identify which reading interventions are currently in use in various school districts, to then evaluate those interventions against the current body of evidence.

Sometimes we may be asking the wrong question. For example, Reading Comprehension is recognized as complex and multidimensional, often questioning whether it is possible to teach it in the first place or whether one primarily teaches the parts and the comprehension emerges as a result (Catts & Kamhi, 2014).

Other times it may not even be a specific intervention, but rather the approach itself that can be questioned for certain outcomes; an example is a meta-analysis where the pre-intervention and post-intervention data is compared as it relates to reading growth, questions the effects of

these interventions on reading fluency, to find that there was a negligible relationship, if any, with reading growth (Scholin & Burns, 2012).

Often it could be the intervention itself that lacks sufficient evidence. Orton Gillingham multisensory approach (Gillingham & Stillman, 1997), for example, is among the commonly used interventions in British Columbia in a number of districts that the writer is aware of. However, a meta-analysis that looks at Orton Gillingham for example revealed few published studies, questioned the methodological rigor and deemed the findings inconclusive on the effectiveness of the program (Ritchey & Goeke, 2006).

On occasion the issues may arise in the implementation of said interventions. As discussed earlier, teachers may not have the specialized training to implement specific strategies due to the complex nature of some interventions. Teachers seem to be at least partially aware of the gaps in knowledge. A study looking at the self-efficacy of recent graduates reveals that self-efficacy rating drops in teachers after their first year in-service (Clark, 2020) relative to their pre-service ratings. The study also found that self-efficacy increases after discovering the gaps in knowledge.

It is also possible that gaps in knowledge may remain undiscovered. For example, a survey revealed that most teachers and educators define *phonemic awareness* as a sound-symbol relationship (Walker, 2003), which is incorrect. For this reason, it is school psychologists themselves, equipped with knowledge on the science of reading, yet close to the front-lines, observing teaching practice, that can identify whether current methods of instruction and intervention are in line with current research. As such, school psychologists can be crucial as resource beyond the traditional role as assessment and intervention specialists. A school psychologist can inform the administration and teaching colleagues on the major decisions

related to instruction and interventions that shape the lives of the children and youth, particularly in the areas lacking a research base that continue to be used in our schools.

These are only some of the arguments that are competence domain related, namely speaking to the research-to-practice gap that would be an appropriate entry point for school psychologists as science practitioners. By engaging at tier 1 level, as facilitators of this bridge, school psychologists would be an essential consultation service as part of the universal model designed to intervene and address interventions before they reach a more individualized level (Ysseldyke et al., 2009). The intensive interventions and assessments, when done exclusively, often occur at the expense of the much-needed indirect interventions that could ameliorate the ensuing crisis due to less than adequate prevention programs upstream. All intervention needs to support what goes on in the classroom, otherwise it is meaningless. Interventions and the classroom have to work in tandem. Supporting teachers with more effective evidence-based practices is bound to then translate into higher quality **tier** 3 interventions as well.

Lastly**,** for the purposes of this writing inquiry, the underlying assumption is ~~**that**~~ that school psychologists are well-equipped, accountable and effective, as per domains of competence, in critically consuming and synthesizing research. Admittedly research indicates that variability exists among school psychologists on the application of scientific thinking and research (Andrews & Syeda, 2016) and efforts are made to address this (Andrews et al., 2013). In line with these concerns is the recognition of the need for skills at the pre-service as well as in-service levels of training for school psychologists that would prepare them for the expanded role (Ysseldyke et al., 2009, p.194).

In closing, this writer acknowledges legitimate concerns around the consistency of adherence to scientific practice across the multidisciplinary team, school psychologists included.

With that in mind, some of the effort driven by the need to establish standards of practice for school psychologists, and the models proposed to improve consistency among school psychology practitioners could be extended to teachers and administration by way of mutual incentive, where competent, evidence-based practitioners could help bring about change in their respective institutions so that they meet their outcomes, which then positively reflects on all stakeholders by demonstrating competence and accountability through measurable outcomes of the team they are a part of. Such aligned incentives can also be reflected in the competency checks, where effectiveness is evaluated in part by the joint outcomes within the district or relevant institution.

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