

PRACTITIONER PAPER

System approaches to school psychology (or why school psychologists shouldn't see kids)

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Abstract

In a world where the only constant is change, schools are faced with the need to adapt creatively to changing societal demands, parental expectations, and children with increasingly diverse needs. Lasting and effective change can only occur with systemic and organisational change, and this essay argues that school-based psychologists are an invaluable, but potentially overlooked, resource in driving and supporting effective, evidence-supported, organisational change in schools. It is suggested that this can occur best when school-based psychologists are able to move away from direct service models that treat individual children to a systemic model that supports whole-school change.

Keywords: school psychology; system intervention; systems theory; indirect service

There is an axiom that the only constant is change. If this is true, the challenge is to decide what needs to change and how to effect change for the better. This is no less true for contemporary schools and education systems, with the need to change and adapt to differing populations, shifting curriculum and societal demands. In order to be effective, change cannot be a simple adaptation of the current processes and practices. Change must be as substantive, as the changing demands on schools are complex. This essay argues for the necessity of system change in schools. It also argues for the important role that school psychologists can and should play in driving and supporting organisational change in schools, especially through a change in the practice of school psychology.

Organisational Change

At its most basic level an organisation is a system that consists of a coordinated group of people who work together to achieve a specific aim, often the production of goods or services (Muchinsky & Culbertson, 2016). Organisations vary greatly, and various researchers have investigated the way the structure of an organisation impacts its performance, as well as how the structure of an organisation both shapes the way the organisation fulfills its purpose and itself is shaped by the way the organisation achieves its goals. As Lunenburg (2012) notes, an organisation's structure gives the organisation the form by which it can achieve its goals and at the same time is frequently based on either the product the organisation produces or the function the organisation seeks to provide.

On a general level, an organisation's structure shapes the provision of tasks, use of resources, and organisation of teams in order to best enable success in production or operation. Any changes and improvements in the way that an organisation delivers its product can be either shaped or

hampered by its organisational structure; therefore, organisations need to face the reality that organisational change in order to respond to societal, environmental and economic changes is a necessity rather than an option. Since the 1980s, the demand for organisational change has 'accelerated to rates unparalleled in history', and while organisations have always faced change, the past three or four decades have seen 'an ever-growing and expanding need for all organisations' to change or fail (Muchinsky & Culbertson, 2016, p. 264).

The societal changes that have necessitated organisational change have been faced not only by profit-seeking organisations, but also by service providers such as governments, health and welfare providers, and educational institutions. Schools might be perceived as relatively stable institutions and potentially untouched by changes in economics and wider society; however, just as with any other organisation, schools are faced with changing demands and challenges of increasing complexity. The last 50 years of education in Westernised countries has seen what has been described as a fundamental transition with the number of students seeking and attaining secondary graduation having doubled, and those seeking and attaining tertiary education having tripled (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2011). Schools face increased numbers, an increasing range of students from diverse backgrounds, demands to be responsive to a range of economic pressures, and changing demands from both students and parents (Beare et al., 1989). The presentation of students with more demanding learning and behaviour needs, as well as mental health issues and exposure to adverse or trauma events, has dramatically increased (Crockett, 2004). Changes in societal expectation and government legislation make demands of schools in ways not encountered 50 years ago. With few exceptions, schools operate in essentially the same ways and within the same organisational structures as they did at the turn of the last century (Dimmock, 1993), and the need for schools to change the way they operate is significant.

Organisational Change in Schools

Given the changes in demands faced by schools, it would appear clear that the need for change in schools is as great, and potentially even greater than for some other organisations. It is insufficient to merely 'do more of the same', and therefore it is important for school leaders to be able to utilise and enhance specific resources in order to effect system change in schools as they respond to increasing and changing demands. It may be the case that the very way that schools are structured and run needs to change. This whole-of-system change is advocated by authors who stress the necessity of organisational change in schools and who highlight the reality that schools remain locked in organisational structures based on 19th century educational theory, with an unmalleable structure that is both resistant to educational reform and uncondusive to reform and change (Beare et al., 1989; Ogawa, 2015).

Within the Australian schools context, far greater control has traditionally been exercised by independent schools than by government or public schools; however, a general shift in governance that includes greater school-centred control is widespread in Western countries, with more responsibility for managing the school itself being pushed to the principal, while curriculum and broader policy remains controlled centrally (Beare et al., 1989; Hallinger, Murphy, & Hausman, 1993). While centralised control and system-wide change may not be possible in the short term, school-based change, localised changes and innovations in teaching practice, greater involvement of parents, teachers and students in school-based system change, and localised innovation and school improvement are all very possible (Hallinger et al., 1993; Hord & Poster, 1993). While changes may best be effected by whole-of-system change, there are clear opportunities for school-based structural change. What cannot happen, however, is that schools, and those who work in them, remain blind to the need for change.

The Role of School Psychologists in Schools

School psychology as a field is faced with the demand to adapt in the face of change just as schools are. While the areas of competency that have been identified for school psychologists may include system-orientated interventions alongside assessment and intervention (National Association of School Psychologists, 2010), it would appear that in practice, school psychology is heavily weighted towards individual interventions. Indeed, the very structure of schools, which conceptualise and deploy school psychologists as service providers, shapes the practice of school psychology. D'Amato and his colleagues (D'Amato, Zafirios, McConnell, & Dean, 2011) identified two major themes in the practice of school psychology: individual assessment and consequent recommendations for curriculum modification, or advice about differing learning needs of children; and mental health interventions in which the school psychologist works in an applied capacity to provide mental health services and early intervention programs in schools. A literature search in ProQuest and EBSCO for the subjects 'school psychology' and 'Australia' published in the last 12 years revealed fewer than 40 articles. Of these, only one focused on whole-school universal initiatives, while most focused on clinical interventions for specific populations or individual issues, including depression, bullying, strengths-based student counselling and careers counselling. This suggests that, at least to some degree, practice in Australia is dominated by issues and direct service interventions to address specific issues and that there is a need for more focus and research in the area of school and system change.

D'Amato et al. (2011) describe the activity of the psychologist working in schools as being inexorably linked to the fundamental purpose of schools. Therefore, assessment and education planning is designed to advance learning, just as remedial and early mental health interventions are designed to enable the child to overcome whatever mental health obstacles to engagement and academic achievement may exist. While direct intervention with students who have specific learning or mental health challenges is important, in a changing world, the skills and work of the school psychologist must also be seen as wider than a student-specific limited focus, with the capacity for the school psychologist to impact factors that arrest or could advance learning or wellbeing beyond individual factors and beyond direct service (individual student) intervention. In a similar way, school psychologists should be seen as able to address system-level barriers to learning and implement system-level changes to advance learning.

While school psychologists do provide effective direct service interventions, D'Amato and his colleagues highlight the importance of the school psychologist in providing consultation and indirect service, a role they suggest is 'extremely distinctive' to the school psychologist (D'Amato et al., 2011, p. 29). While in Australia there is a range of clinical professionals in a position to provide direct services to students, school psychologists are uniquely positioned to provide system-change support in schools. D'Amato et al. (2011) argue in favour of a shift toward increasing indirect service that is designed to be able to service all students indirectly rather than specific individuals directly, and in this way they have the capacity to impact the school system that surrounds the children. In a similar way, Bell and McKenzie (2013) note that school psychologists have long had the capacity for consultation, and that this capacity for consultation must expand beyond supporting individual students to grasping the increasing opportunities for consulting to change systems. Eckersely and Deppeler (2013), writing about the practice of school psychologists in one Australian state, similarly argue that a combination of evidence-based interventions and system reform is essential for the future practice of school psychology.

School Psychologists as Change Agents in Schools

Increasingly, it is being argued that the practice of school psychology must include system-focused intervention as an essential component both for the effective practice of the discipline and for effective impact in schools (e.g., Bemak & Chi-Ying Chung, 2008; Moy et al., 2014). It cannot

be the case any longer that school psychologists merely deliver direct services such as assessment or mental health interventions, regardless of how effective these interventions may be. It is clear that the increase in demand for service, as well as the cost of service provision, means that traditional models of direct service in schools will be neither cost-effective nor sufficient. As Bradley-Johnson and Dean (2000) bluntly put it, there are simply 'too many children and adolescents in need of services for school psychologists to work with them on a one-to-one basis' (p. 2). In order to have greater and farther-reaching impact, change cannot be limited to individual students served through direct intervention, and school psychologists must be open to including both individual- and systems-based changes models.

Shriberg and Fenning (2009) offer a number of case studies to highlight the role that school psychologists can and must play in exercising both situational and transformational leadership within the school, and in driving and sustaining organisational change. This rests on the inherent capacity of the school psychologist to generally work transformationally rather than transactionally, through the very nature of their work as being interpersonal and relational. Similarly, Lam (2004) notes the capacity for the school psychologist to deliver transformational leadership organically within the school environment. The capacity of school psychologists to be change agents is highlighted in some detail by the United States' National Association of School Psychologists (2010), which highlights the competencies that school psychologist already have in consultation, systems therapy and assessment, and knowledge of and skills in the implementation of strategies to effect system change, even if these competencies are underutilised in contemporary practice.

School psychologists should position themselves to both advocate and drive system change if for no other reason than a failure to do so is a failure to fulfill the essential role of school psychologists in schools. Curtis, Grier, and Hunley (2004) argue that school psychologists must move away from direct service-delivery models to system-focused change models if they are to be able to have any sort of meaningful impact on the lives of students in their schools. Change for students and within schools should include systems-based change models, both in the way schools operate and in the exercise of the discipline of school psychology. In this light, the responsibility for change within the discipline of school psychology and to the systems within which school psychologists operate must be the responsibility of school psychologists themselves.

Pathway for Change

It is clear that schools are faced with the need to change, including in the ways that they operate. Change is also needed in the very way that school psychologists work in schools. An intentional shift in practice away from individual service to indirect service models, and specifically to adopt an educational psychology-based, system-focused practice is offered as an effective way to change both practice and school systems. 'Systems theory' here is used to describe how the world is conceptualised as interrelated and interdependent, stresses the fundamental nature of relationships, and recognises that change in one part of a system changes other parts. It does not seek to align itself with specific system models, but rather merely draws on the general understanding that effective intervention can be found to be located in the interrelated systems that sit around the child.

While it is beyond the current work to detail system-based educational psychology practice, a system-based practice drives and enables a shift from a position that sees a presenting issue as a child's internal deficit to be named or solved through direct intervention, to a position that sees an issue which sits within a system where solutions can be found. System-based service delivery is framed by the understanding that change for a young person in addressing behaviour, learning or emotional issues will come from a change in the various systems that surround that child (Forman & Selman, 2011). A systems-based change model enables change to be considered at the individual

level as well as classroom, subschool or whole-school level; however, in systems-based models, change is not driven by individual assessment or direct service but by changing the systems in order to advance outcomes. As Forman and Selma (2011) note, the 'core of systems-based service delivery is the recognition that in order to prevent and treat the academic, social, behavioural and emotional problems of children and youth, the various systems that surround them must be the targets of professional practice' (p. 644). In this way, school psychologists have the potential to effect change not through a focus on the student, but through an understanding of and working with the components and processes of the systems that affect students' lives.

Internationally, significant change has been made in school psychology practice by adopting such a systems-based model. For example, widespread changes in educational psychology practice have been made in recent years in the United Kingdom, moving from a model dominated by individual assessment to one focused on consultation and systems intervention (e.g., Wagner, 2000, 2016). While individual assessment and planning (or 'statementing') remains an important component of educational psychology practice in the United Kingdom, across increasing numbers of local education authorities a consultation/systems model is the primary model for service delivery, and one which has been shown to be more effective (Dennis, 2004; Wagner, 2016). Similar efforts can be observed in the United States (Forman & Selma, 2011).

More traditional applications of individual assessment models are based on identifying the deficit inherent in the child by the provision of a diagnosis or identifying of a disorder. It is significant that an educational psychology practice that is informed by systems theory is a model that better enables a strengths-informed practice and moves away from a deficit-driven theoretical position. In exploring the potential of educational psychology systems-informed practice in the United Kingdom, Pellegrini (2009) characterises this distinction as a move away from a 'within-child' model of conceptualising difficulties (p. 271). While system-based efforts have been driving a shift in educational psychology practice to a systems-based model for over 30 years in the United Kingdom with great success (Wagner), in Australia little research has been offered for such a fundamental change in practice.

While it may be beyond the capacity of school-based psychologists to change entire educational systems, there is clear capacity for them to advocate for change at this level by shifting to a system-oriented practice at school level. It is clear that schools specifically, and entire systems generally, are faced with a need to change to better respond to the needs of both children and society more widely. The increasing demands and paucity of resources also demand a shift away from individual responses. It is argued that as experts in behaviour change, both at individual and systems level, school psychologists are ideally positioned to respond and to drive effective change in schools first of all by changing their own practice and thereby changing schools.

Conclusion

It is clear that schools face increasing demands, both from external pressures arising from changing societal expectations, changes in curriculum and economic demands, as well as from internal pressures that arise from increased behaviour, learning and mental health problems presented by students. The fundamental aim of schools is academic achievement, and this is under as great a scrutiny now as has ever been the case, with widespread practice of mandated external standardised assessments of students and their academic progress and skills. It is clear that how schools respond to changing needs and demands must be more than cosmetic.

There can be no doubt that both direct and indirect interventions are necessary for students. A young person struggling with a mental illness or with suicidal behaviour needs direct intervention and clinical support. The question is how this support might best be provided, and, who is best positioned to provide this support. While all psychologists have skills in intervention and in behaviour change, school-based psychologists are uniquely placed to easily move towards a

systems model that enables wider and more effective change for both individual students where this is necessary, as well as in entire classes, years, schools, and potentially education systems. International experience points to the efficacy of such changes in educational practice, and the demands on resources in Australia as well as the need for change towards more effective models of intervention suggest that it would appear that such changes to school psychology are timely here too.

It is clear that real effective change will be supported or hampered by the organisation's structure, and that real change requires widespread structural and system change. Schools that are organised according to essentially the same model that may have served them 50 years ago will struggle to be effectively responsive. It is clear that increasingly schools are being faced with the need to reorganise and change at a systemic level.

A number of writers have argued that school psychologists are well positioned to drive and support institutional change in schools. While there are barriers that will impact the degree to which their contribution is heard and they are able to contribute to effective change, these barriers are not impossible to overcome. Indeed, there are some schools that have embraced these possibilities, and there are some school psychologists who have pressed this possibility. The challenge to argue in favour of systemic change based on sound theory and empirical evidence is very much with the school psychologists themselves, despite the resistance that this may bring. It begins with a shift in individual practice to a more system-based model that challenges and supports system change in schools. As Lam (2004) argues, there are three essential conditions for changing schools: the drive of transformational leadership, a change to positive school culture, and effective structure or system change. School psychologists are in the position to positively impact across all three areas.

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