

WEARING MANY HATS

The Roles of the School Psychologist

I've been told that you should be able to explain your career to a stranger in the time it takes to ride an elevator for a few floors. I have been working on my school psychologist "elevator speech" for years now, and I think I need to be in a high-rise elevator in order to fully explain my duties. That is because school psychologists may be responsible for many different tasks, and their roles vary considerably from school to school, district to district, and state to state. I have finally settled on saying, "School psychologists are like if a teacher and a psychologist had a baby. We do interventions to prevent school failure, test struggling students to uncover reasons for learning problems, and provide them with appropriate interventions. Those interventions could involve special education services, counseling, or consulting with teachers and parents to help students with their areas of need." Then, inevitably, someone responds with, "Oh, so you're a counselor?" Sigh. It really is a difficult profession to explain.

In general, school psychologists have four main "hats" they may wear in the schools: assessor, consultant, prevention and intervention specialist, and counselor. Each graduate school program places different emphases on these roles, but once you are working in the schools, you are often expected to fulfill many, if not all, of these roles in some capacity. There will also be unofficial roles in your job as well, depending on your school sites. These could range from supervising traffic during afternoon dismissal to serving on

administrative committees. This chapter outlines the four most likely roles of the school psychologist and helps you identify chapters in this guide that will help you improve your skills and bolster your effectiveness in each role.

ASSESSMENT

Assessing students is often seen as the primary role of the school psychologist, though this varies among districts and schools. Historically, school psychologists came on the scene in 1975 as a part of the first special education law, PL94-142. Under this law, school psychologists were identified as the professionals responsible for testing students to evaluate their school functioning related to special education disability criteria. Even now, for many school psychologists, assessment of students suspected of having disabilities and of those students already in special education continues to be the primary role in many districts.

In graduate school, the first courses I completed were in psychoeducational assessment, which covered the history of tests and how to administer them, and in applied statistics, which covered in part how to interpret the information that the test administrations produced. It was exciting learning all the new tools, practicing administering IQ tests (mostly on the children of professors and friends), and perfecting the art of the standardized assessment. I remember borrowing my first testing kit, then housed in a 1980s-style briefcase that weighed almost as much as I did. I felt so fancy clicking it open and administering the tests with my brand-new stopwatch that I had rigged to be nearly unnoticeable by removing its beeper. It was so exciting.

Ten years later, the luster and excitement of administering these tests has faded, my iPhone has replaced my cute little timer, I've ditched the circa 1982 briefcase, and I've administered IQ tests so many times that I have them memorized. I would estimate that I have given the same test about seven hundred times since becoming a school psychologist. Although this has the potential to become extraordinarily boring, one thing that keeps it fresh is the challenge of figuring out how to help a child learn more easily and efficiently. Each child is like a puzzle, and each test we give is a piece of the puzzle in understanding how the child learns best and what gets in the way of learning. No two children approach testing the same way. You can learn a lot about kids just from their reactions to the words, "Today we are going to do a series of activities to see how you learn best!" From "Go away, I'm not special ed!" to "Yay! Let's go!" you can learn a lot about students that the numbers won't be able to tell you. There are many tricks of the trade for making the evaluation process meaningful, in terms of both the numbers you get and of the qualitative observations of how kids tackle problems. Chapter Six outlines how to gain information from your assessments that is useful for helping students, their parents, and their teachers.

Your testing caseload will vary tremendously according to the size of your school district, the area of the country in which you are employed, the type of setting in which you work (rural, suburban, or urban), and the policies of each school district regarding your responsibilities in general education (intervention and prevention) and special education. As a school psychologist, you are often assigned both new referrals (often called "initials") and legally mandated three-year assessments (often called "triennials" or "reevaluations").

Each of these assessments has its own legal timeline for completion, which is an added pressure for a school psychologist. The first year I was employed by a large urban school district, I was assigned three schools of approximately five hundred students each. The list of mandatory three-year evaluations I had to complete that year numbered about seventy-five. In addition, I was employed only three days per week! I couldn't fathom how I would get through it all within the timelines, and many of the cases were already overdue when I walked in the door my first day. Even without any new referrals, I felt that my caseload was almost impossible if I wanted to do a thorough job with each student.

I learned more about the dramatic differences in caseloads through my blog, *Notes from the School Psychologist* (www.studentsgrow.blogspot.com). I asked the online community of school psychologists who follow the blog to report their testing caseloads on the blog's Facebook page. The reported yearly caseloads for full-time psychologists ranged from 4 to 120, with the median at about 60. One of the main factors that determined caseload was whether or not the district had adopted the Response to Intervention (RtI) method of identifying and responding to learning difficulties, which heavily emphasizes prevention and early intervention. Regardless of your caseload and whether or not your school has adopted RtI, in Chapters Four and Five you will learn more about how to infuse a preventive model of intervention into your daily work to reduce the amount of time you spend doing individual assessments.

Another key factor in determining caseload is school placement. School psychologists at the elementary level tend to have more initial evaluations, and school psychologists at middle and high schools tend to have more triennial reevaluations. Psychologists assigned to preschool diagnostic centers, bilingual assessment teams, charter school teams, and nonpublic school teams tend to have the most restrictive roles; evaluation responsibilities make up nearly all of their daily activities.

Your role may also be more complex if your student population has a high proportion of students learning English as a second language, if your school has a large homeless or transient student population, or if a significant number of students qualify for free and reduced lunch due to living in poverty. In these schools, assessment cases tend to be lengthier, and they are more challenging in terms of teasing out environmental and situational factors that contribute to learning and emotional challenges. Chapter Six details these specific roles within school districts. One of the great things about school psychology as a profession is that there are opportunities to mix it up in terms of the ages and types of students you will see.

In assessment-heavy school placements, one of the most challenging aspects for all psychologists is completing quality assessments within legal timelines. Fortunately, there are a few things that will help you streamline this process. Chapter Three will help you with a structure to organize and effectively complete your assessments within timelines.

CONSULTATION

One of the services that principals, teachers, and parents value the most is consultation with you. Once you establish yourself as a resource, you will have plenty of "customers" knocking on your door, calling you for advice, or e-mailing you about their concerns for

their students. In my experience, I often get a ton of little notes in my school mailbox with requests to talk about particular students. Given all the other obligations you have and the limited time available to talk to teachers during the day, you will probably find it challenging to carve out quality time to consult about students. At times it can feel as though you're doing "psychological triage"—sorting all the calls, notes, e-mails, and requests by urgency of need.

School psychologists are expected to be knowledgeable in many areas, including but not limited to child development, disabilities, assessment, teaching, parenting, learning, special education law, general education law, discipline, district procedures, classroom management, relationships, intervention, prevention, data analysis, crisis management, and counseling. Tall order! I remember when I was in my school psychologist internship, people would come to me all the time with really difficult questions that I would have no idea how to answer. Even now, after nearly ten years of experience, I still get stumped by some of the situations that arise.

Learning to be an effective consultant is not about knowing all the answers. In many ways, it's about knowing the right questions. Effective consultation also requires an understanding of the relationships between you, the consultee, and the student or students in question. Despite its complexity, consultation offers many rewards. When you effectively consult with a staff member about how to work with a child in need, you educate him or her on working with similar children down the road, and all the kids in the teacher's class benefit from the new knowledge. Depending on your graduate school program, you may or may not have been explicitly taught how to consult, especially how to consult with staff who seem unwilling to consult with you. There are many different models of consultation as well, and finding one that is a good match for you is important. Chapter Eight discusses how to be an effective consultant, and Chapter Eleven talks about ways to use consultation in crisis situations.

PREVENTION AND INTERVENTION

Even before special education law first introduced the term *Response to Intervention (RtI)* in the revision of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 2004, school psychologists understood the importance of prevention in increasing positive student outcomes. Whether or not your school has existing structures to support prevention and early intervention activities, you can often carve out a role for yourself in providing prevention services. The benefits of dedicating your time and energy to prevention include reducing your assessment caseload and keeping students from falling so far behind that they give up.

School psychologists will often face discrepancies between research-supported best practices and the realities of the school district policies and legal guidelines regarding eligibility for special education services. Many times I have heard myself say ridiculous things, such as "He is below grade level, but he's not far enough behind to be considered disabled, so he doesn't qualify for services." What? That doesn't make sense. The idea behind early intervention and prevention is that kids receive targeted services *before* they fall behind or give up on school. A student shouldn't be forced to fail in order to receive much-needed assistance.

The school psychologist plays a key role in developing appropriate interventions for struggling students. Since the change in IDEA law, there are more and more opportunities to prevent students from struggling in the first place. Your role will depend on what your district's policies and funding structures are, and whether your state or school district has adopted RtI. Unfortunately, it is still the case that many school psychologists are put in the difficult position of adhering to policies that don't make intuitive sense and aren't backed up by the robust research on the power of prevention and early intervention. Some school districts have followed the research about prevention and adopted an RtI model of service delivery. The general concept of RtI is that prevention and early intervention are better than remediation—financially, ethically, and practically speaking. However, the traditional role of the school psychologist has been to intervene when things become so difficult for a student that a disability is suspected and special education may be warranted. This “wait to fail” model is not supported by research or common sense. School psychologists are often in need of practical suggestions on how to navigate a useful course between best practices and district policies. Chapter Four talks about ways to infuse a prevention model of delivery into your day-to-day work schedule, and Chapter Five details the array of school psychologists' roles in RtI.

COUNSELING

When I first heard about the profession of school psychology, I had this fantasy of sitting in a cute little office full of play therapy materials, sipping herbal tea and waiting for little friends to come by for a warm, cozy session where we talked about feelings. Doesn't that sound great? Little did I know, most days would involve my frantically trying to prioritize and tackle my to-do list, which grew exponentially by the minute. I never thought my only counseling time would be spent doing crisis counseling. Colleagues across the country have reported on the Notes from the School Psychologist Blog Facebook page that they are not even *allowed* to do counseling at their school sites. So sad! Counseling is one of the most rewarding parts of my job because it allows me to have direct, ongoing contact with the students. Carving out this quality time can be a challenge, though.

As I became more efficient with my other obligations (assessment, report writing, attending and leading IEP meetings), I liberated more of my time to devote to counseling. I started a few counseling groups at lunchtime so that I could provide direct services to students and feel more preventive. Your counseling caseload will likely vary by school site, funding structures, physical space, and district priorities. Counseling might not even be a permitted role for you, or you may not have the training to feel comfortable with a counseling role. In some states, school counselors are responsible for counseling services, particularly at the elementary school level. In other states, there is a distinction between school psychologists and school psychologist examiners, and only the school psychologists can do counseling. It should be noted, however, that counseling is not for everyone, even if you are permitted to do it. For those of you who share my love of counseling and are permitted to do it in your current role, Chapters Nine (individual counseling) and Ten (group counseling) discuss in detail the counseling roles you may assume.

As a note of encouragement for those who enjoy the counseling role, when I changed districts, there was funding in place for two full days a week of counseling and prevention activities. I finally got to talk about feelings with my little friends on a regular basis, just as I had imagined. Sure, I shared my cute little office with three other people, I had to buy my own therapy supplies, and there was no electrical plug for a teakettle for my herbal tea, but I still love the regular direct contact with students.

PULLING IT ALL TOGETHER

Reading the list of all of our responsibilities as school psychologists can be daunting. That list is not even exhaustive! There are days when I am alternately on yard duty, consoling crying teachers who want to quit, getting icepacks for kids who have fought on the yard, searching for a lost file, tracking down paperwork, fighting with Human Resources about inaccurate pay, putting on parent education nights, attending school events, driving to a school to test a kid who won't work with me, driving to a child's home to locate a parent to sign documents, or even searching for a stapler or a functioning printer. These are the days when I feel stretched in too many different directions to be functional or efficient. The good news is that most school psychologists love the excitement, challenge, and ever-changing environment, and often thrive in the chaos. We adapt, learn amazing executive functioning and planning skills, and feel empowered to make a difference in the lives of our students.

We also need strong, reliable coping skills to manage the stress and chaos. You cannot help others effectively if you do not have a deep bag of tricks for managing your own stress. Burnout in this profession can be high, and, as for any job, you need to learn how to tackle the daily stressors and cope with the challenges of the job. It is often the challenges of managing your time, enforcing emotional boundaries, and dealing with bureaucracy that cause burnout rather than the direct work with the children. Chapter Three details practical tips on taming the "Bureaucracy Monster," and Chapter Twelve discusses the importance of self-care in becoming an effective and emotionally healthy school psychologist. You might want to bookmark those chapters!

Key Points

- As a school psychologist, you will wear many hats and have many different roles. Your roles are often defined by the school district, school site, or state in which you work.
- The four main roles of a school psychologist are most likely to be assessor, consultant, prevention and intervention specialist, and counselor.
- Graduate school programs emphasize different roles, and your training and confidence in serving in each role may vary.

- Once you are employed by the school district, you will be expected to fulfill many different roles, often dictated by district procedures and priorities. It is important to keep in mind that your role can change from district to district as well as from school to school.
- Navigating multiple roles can be stressful. You need both practical skills as well as coping skills for managing stress.
- This guide offers information about all four roles, and you can choose to read the chapters most germane to your current job description. You can also read chapters about roles outside your current job description to help you open a dialogue with your supervisor or site administrators about expanding your role.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are the current roles of a school psychologist in your school or district? How are they defined? Is there flexibility in roles, or are they prescribed for you?
2. If you are not yet working in a school, which role is most appealing to you? Which is least appealing? Why?
3. How do you set role boundaries at your school site? It can be challenging to say no to extra duties, especially when you are a new employee or your duties are ill defined at your school site. What are some strategies for defining your role without appearing rigid or unwilling to take on more work?
4. At times, a school psychologist's roles are defined by those of his or her predecessor. How do you renegotiate your role with employees at your new school site?
5. In which of the four roles do you think you need the most support in developing your skills? What supports are available to you for professional development and practical advice?
6. If you were in an interview for a job in a school district, what key questions would you ask about roles expected of school psychologists?

