

**ENHANCING THE EXPERIENCE OF
CHILDREN AND YOUTH IN
TODAY'S SCHOOLS**

**THE ROLE OF PSYCHOLOGY IN
CANADIAN SCHOOLS**

**THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE
SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGIST**

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Title: **ENHANCING THE EXPERIENCE OF CHILDREN AND YOUTH IN TODAY'S SCHOOLS:
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ISBN #: 1896538754

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THE ROLE OF PSYCHOLOGY IN CANADIAN SCHOOLS

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THE UNIQUE ROLE OF THE SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGIST

School psychologists are licensed professionals with unique expertise in student learning and learning difficulties, child development, behaviour problems, school curriculum and school culture. The school psychologist addresses many aspects of the lives of Canada's children and youth. These professionals work closely with teachers, school administrators, parents and students to improve students' functioning in the school, home and community.

School psychologists bring their unique professional training and skills to the educational system to provide both psycho-educational and clinical services to students and their families. They work closely with school staff and school districts to diagnose problems, develop and evaluate effective programs and interventions, and provide consultation services to the broader system at large.

Another important aspect of their role is to help identify students who are experiencing serious mental health problems or psychological issues related to chronic illness, disability, family violence, divorce, etc. The psychologist can assist in early identification, provide services directly to the student, support teachers and administration, assist parents and/or link with the appropriate external agencies or professionals.

In addition to providing direct student-focused services, school psychologists are an excellent resource for schools, teachers and parents in providing in-service education on a variety of school-related problems and issues, such as classroom dynamics, parent/family co-operation, student development and learning, testing (psychological, educational, achievement, provincial), behaviour management, and parenting skills. Similarly, psychologists assist teachers in working with groups of students on personal/social skills such as conflict resolution, bullying awareness and prevention, learning strategies, and stress management. They also advise and support teachers in developing and delivering programming for students with exceptionalities, such as special educational behavioural needs or giftedness.

The school psychologist is an integral part of the school district student services team as well as the total school district organization. They act as resources by engaging in planning, implementing, delivering and evaluating prevention and intervention programs for the full spectrum of learning, behavioural and mental health problems affecting schools, including violence prevention and crisis response planning. School psychologists provide collaborative consultation to district level staff and community stake-holders such as health practitioners, government and service agencies, professionals and support groups to assist with the design and delivery of meaningful programs for individuals and the total student body.

The school psychologist constantly strives to effect a balance across many areas such as primary prevention programs, systematic interventions, individual/family and/or system consultations, postvention interventions (e.g., after traumatic events), and treatment for chronic and often severe learning, health and developmental problems. This breadth of practice speaks to the diversity of skills and strategies that these professionals have to offer the educational system.

School psychologists:

- Strongly endorse early identification and intervention to enhance learning, to reduce unnecessary suffering and to minimize the long-term consequences of learning and behavioural problems.
- Consult collaboratively in a problem-solving mode with teachers, parents, administrators and others involved in the life of the student to develop achievable and appropriate recommendations and plans.
- Bring a psychological approach to the analysis of student learning and behaviour problems that is scientifically based and relevant to those situations that affect the classroom and student on a day-to-day basis.

- Conduct psychological assessments to diagnose students' cognitive and learning styles, behaviour problems and psychological/mental health problems to assist in educational planning.
- Support students, parents, teachers and administrative staff in the implementation of educational or behavioural plans.
- Maintain effective professional relationships with professionals and agencies in the community to ensure that services are delivered to students and their families in a timely, effective and comprehensive manner.
- Maintain regular and direct contact with students, teachers, parents and the community.
- Understand educational policies and the educational environment and use this understanding to make psychological interventions and recommendations both relevant and useful to the student and the school.
- Serve as a psychological resource to the whole educational community by providing direct support to staff, keeping them aware of best practices and current research on psychological and developmental issues, and providing a psychological perspective to decisions about curriculum development and program planning.

PSYCHOLOGY IN THE SCHOOLS WORKS!

The appropriate use of psychological services in schools enhances learning, reduces distress and lowers the overall costs of interventions for children and youth. For example, psychological services are central to the:

Early identification and remediation of students' learning, behavioural and psychological problems to avoid the development of more serious long-term consequences (e.g., slowed academic progress, behavioural problems, disciplinary interventions, early school leaving).

- Provision of effective and timely school-based services that can reduce the strain on and the costs to the school system and costs in other sectors such as health, social welfare and criminal justice.
- Provision of support to teachers, administrators and parents to help them enhance the social and learning environment of the classroom and the school.
- Provision of program development and program evaluation support.
- Identification of mental health and psychological components of health problems so they can be addressed quickly or referred to the appropriate professionals. Psychologists provide a valuable link between these professionals, the student and the school.
- Provision of consultation services to school and district staff concerning their psychological/mental health issues (e.g., stress, burnout, anxiety, depression) and referrals to the appropriate services available in the community.

CURRENT BARRIERS:

School psychologists are challenged in their attempts to provide the services recommended by best practices in the schools due to factors such as:

- Over-reliance by schools on an older 1970's model of school psychology (refer, test, place), which places heavy demands on the psychologist's time for few students and leaves many students' needs unaddressed.
- Recruitment and retention issues for school psychologists due to job satisfaction issues related to the aforementioned reliance of schools on an older model of school psychology. Research suggests that school psychologists want to be more involved with students, teachers and families. For example, those who have broader and more varied professional opportunities report job satisfaction levels much higher than those whose role is restricted to testing.
- Limited visibility and professional isolation in schools due to the low numbers of psychologists in many school districts.
- Often school psychologists are not included in school district staff meetings and planning processes with the result that their unique contributions to the system are not realized.
- Frequently a lack of appreciation for the important contributions of school psychology results in limited hiring and/or frequent lay-offs when psychologists are not part of the teacher complement of the school district.

SOLUTIONS:

- Embracing a broader view of the contributions of school psychologists will increase their value to schools.
- The broader professional role will increase job satisfaction and assist with recruitment and retention.
- Timely access to psychological services increases the quality of education.
- Timely access to psychological services relates in no small measure to the psychologist/student ratio and the job expectations of psychologists.
- Timely access to psychological services must be provided to all of Canada's children, regardless of their income. Affluent Canadians have greater access while less affluent Canadians all too often have little or no access. Government action to address this serious problem is required.
- Early identification and intervention are essential to limit difficulties and to maximize the potential of students and the educational environment.