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Integrating School-based Family Counseling into School Psychology Practice

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Authors' contributions

This work was conceptually developed by both authors. Author JN conducted the literature review and wrote the first draft of the manuscript. Author LDM reviewed the manuscript and provided feedback. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Mini-review Article

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ABSTRACT

Aim: To integrate theoretical and applied knowledge regarding the benefits and limitations of school psychologists incorporating school-based family counselling into their practice.

Study Design: Critical literature review paper.

Structure of Paper: First, a brief rationale for delivering counselling to families at schools is given. Second, a description of the role of school psychologists is offered, based on the guidelines of professional psychological organizations in the United States and Canada. Third, the benefits and limitations of school psychologists incorporating school-based family counselling into their practice are discussed. Lastly, recommendations for promoting a role expansion for school psychologists in the school system are provided.

Key Findings: The literature presents controversial arguments for school psychologists performing broader roles. On one hand, they have ethical responsibility to become involved in interventions and programs aimed at addressing problems that are broader than merely assessing and identifying children with special needs. However, other factors including the setting in which school psychologists work, the shortage of professionals, the overlap in roles with other qualified practitioners within the school, and the lack of training and experience in family counselling, present as barriers for school psychologists'

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practice in school-based family counselling.

Conclusion: To better support and promote students' success across environments, school psychologists are encouraged to address the potential impacts that family problems may have on their children. Schools may be an optimal environment for families to access mental health services. The complex nature of each individual's professional training and area of competence, the variance in expectations and requirements of school districts, the feasibility of including such services into their workload, and the slow progress in changing and expanding the role of school psychologists are some of the variables that must be taken into account when considering integrating family counseling into the role of school psychologists.

Keywords: Family counselling; school psychology; school intervention; mental health.

1. INTRODUCTION

The role and function of school psychologists have significantly developed and expanded over the past decades. In the early 20th century, school psychologists were restricted to conducting psycho-educational assessments for special educational class placement [1]. Overtime, these professionals became increasingly involved with direct or indirect prevention and intervention strategies aimed "to address student learning, social-emotional development, behavioral performance, instructional methodology, school practices, classroom management, and other areas salient to school-based services and improving student outcome" across diverse settings [2, p.1]. Despite the evolution in the direction of intervention and consultation, school psychology practice continues to be mainly associated with assessment-related duties. Such practice may be restricted to conducting formal academic assessments due to the shortage of practitioners in this field, the high demand for assessment and identification of students with special needs, and the overlap with other psychology-related professionals [1,3].

There is a high need for students and families to receive mental health services [1]. To promote students' wellbeing across various settings, the breadth and depth of school psychologists' training and knowledge in assessment, intervention, research, and evaluation may put school psychologists in a unique position to work in collaboration with teachers, families, community health professionals, and/or social service agencies [4,5].

As schools and families are the primary agents of education and socialization of children, collaboration between school and home is essential for students' optimal school functioning [6,7]. Given the significant association between family processes and children's school performance, schools have been increasingly encouraged to promote the participation of and collaboration with parents and families [8,9].

Variability of children's academic progress may be accounted for by mental health interference. Epidemiological estimates suggest that 20% of children and youth suffer from serious mental health problems and need social services [10]. Unfortunately, many mental health concerns remain undiagnosed. Findings from school-based studies indicate that more than 70% of children who experience significant emotional disorders do not receive mental health services [11]. While school psychologists could help address such issues in the school system, their training and resultant role in K-12 schools remains focused on academic performance.

Moreover, review of the literature suggests that to better support students' emotional, social, behavioural, and academic needs, school psychologists are encouraged to address the potential impacts that family problems may have on children's functioning [12,13]. Some authors argue that parent and family interventions have become an accepted and appropriate practice among school psychologists [8]. Yet, such practices have not been widely implemented by these professionals in the school setting [14,15].

As a means to support school mental health, a number of state/provincial, national, and international initiatives have emerged during the past decade [16]. Extensive review of the literature conducted by the School-Based Mental Health and Substance Abuse (SBMHSA) Consortium investigated the effectiveness of a range of school-based mental health and substance abuse programs [16]. Findings revealed that "specific school-based strategies for mental health promotion, prevention, and treatment of internalizing and externalizing disorders" have enough evidence to support their implementation in school systems [16, p.7]. In particular, the most effective approaches for preventing and treating internalizing and externalizing problems in individual and group settings was school-based behavioural and cognitive-behavioural interventions [16]. In contrast, conflicting evidence on the effectiveness of school-based treatment for substance use problems was reported.

Both parents and teachers acknowledge the importance of school-based mental health. A recent state-wide survey conducted in the United States (U.S.) with 1,028 parents and guardians of children and youth ages 6 to 26 years investigated parents' perspectives about mental health in schools [17]. Results from this survey indicated that the majority of parents provided support for school-based mental health service delivery and viewed schools as positive environments to address their children's mental health needs [17]. When investigating teachers' perspective on issues related to student mental health and wellbeing in schools, a Canadian national survey revealed that, according to teachers, mental health problems in children and youth is a major challenge faced in the public school system [18]. A number of barriers related to the significant need for more resources, especially associated with the shortage of qualified professionals in the area, such as school psychologists, and a lack of awareness and stigma about mental illness were reported as roadblocks to students' access to mental health treatment [18]. Teachers expressed that to become more involved in the process of addressing mental health concerns in schools, they needed more assistance from school-based professionals with expertise in mental health [18].

To address the ongoing necessity of combining mental health and school systems to support and improve students' development and wellbeing, the "expanded school mental health" (ESMH) framework has been developed [19]. Using this framework, programs that collaboratively engage community-based services with school-hired staff (e.g., school psychologists, school counsellors, social workers) and families have been created in schools to promote mental health and provide intervention to students in general and special education [19,20]. Researchers at the Center for School Mental Health have developed a set of ten principles for best practices in ESMH [20] that emphasize the need for ESMH services to be "accessible, strengths-based, evidence-based, culturally-informed, coordinated, collaborative, and guided by quality improvement activities" as well as to involve families in mental health promotion, early intervention, and treatment [19, p. 12]. One of the challenging goals of using this framework, however, has been finding effective and sustainable ways to expand or build school personnel's role and/or programs that are already in place in schools to meet students' needs [21]. In particular, school psychologists have a long history of trying

to expand their traditional role and professional practice associated with academic assessment to broader types of intervention, including school-based family counselling [1].

Our paper will investigate the challenges school psychologists may encounter when providing counselling services to families in the school setting. The intent of this paper is to provide effective and sustainable alternatives to build and expand school psychologists' role in the school system. This critical review of the literature was based on a search for research articles, meta-analyses, and other review papers that targeted school intervention, school-based mental health service delivery, school psychology, and family counselling. This paper is organized as following: First, a brief rationale for delivering counselling to families at schools is given. In the second section, a description of the role of school psychologists is offered, based on the guidelines of professional psychological organizations in the U.S. and Canada. The third part discusses the benefits and limitations of school psychologists incorporating school-based family counselling into their practice. The final section summarizes the advantages and disadvantages of these professionals assuming such roles.

2. WHY IS SCHOOL-BASED FAMILY COUNSELLING IMPORTANT?

Despite the high prevalence of mental disorders in children in the U.S. and in Canada, 75% to 80% of affected children do not receive specialized services [16,23]. Atkins and colleagues [24] emphasize the urgent need to improve access to services and involve more families in mental health treatments. Schools are the most common site of service delivery for children with mental health needs [25]. Schools display a number of optimal characteristics that can facilitate the access to such services, including the higher rate of treatment adherence and attendance, the reduction in distance and travel barriers, the more positive association of receiving services in a less stigmatizing environment, and the visibility and accessibility to different professionals who are able to follow students across the years [26,25]. In addition, parents are significantly more likely to be involved in school-based services than in clinic-based services [24].

Research supports a partnership between family and school, and this collaboration has beneficial effects on students' behavior and learning [15,27,28]. Family involvement in their children's education predicts school success [29,30,31]. According to Star Snyder [3], "The connection between families and school yields a rich representation from family therapy, school counselling, school psychology, and education literature supporting the idea that schools must serve not only students but students' families as well" (p. 4). To facilitate family-school interventions in the areas of "parent/family education, involvement, and consultation, family-school collaboration/partnership, family systems therapy, and early childhood family focused interventions" [32, p. 508], it is suggested that school-based mental health professionals such as school psychologists, school counsellors, and school social workers be trained to deliver school-based family counselling and adopt a family systems approach [7]. Embracing a family systems approach implies that the student's problem behaviour or poor academic performance is not necessarily or solely inherent to the child, but rather is the outcome of problems occurring at home [3]. For example, evidence indicates that parental and family history of substance use not only predict, but also is more influential and persistent on adolescents' substance use behaviour than peer and neighbourhoods [32]. In particular, alcohol is the most common substance used among youth from developing countries [33]. The detrimental impact of alcohol use on adolescents' functioning and its negative consequences on the public health system and the economy have been documented in the literature [32,33]. With the goal of delaying alcohol onset, decrease its use among young people, and prevent misuse and abuse, researchers have

investigated the effectiveness of family-focused substance misuse preventative interventions delivered at schools [28,34,36]. Results from a randomized prevention trial conducted with 667 families of grade six children from 33 rural schools suggest that family-focused preventative intervention reduce “early adolescent aggression-hostility and late adolescent alcohol problems” [28,p. 2137]. Including families in the treatment of their children may promote positive changes in this system that will be beneficial to both parties served by the school personnel [37]. Even though more studies on the effectiveness of school-based family interventions and clinic-based family counselling for school problems are needed, a large number of studies highlight the benefits of school-based family interventions [13].

3. THE ROLE OF SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGISTS

School psychologists are professionals trained at the graduate level in science and practice of psychology with children, families, and the schooling process [38]. Their knowledge and skills are grounded in the “foundations of learning, behaviour and individual differences, assessment and intervention, research methodology, and program evaluation” [4, p. 2]. School psychologists perform different roles in their field in addition to working at public and private schools. For example, school psychologists may individually serve families in private practice or conduct research and/or teach at universities. They can also work at mental health centres, community-based day-treatment or residential clinics and hospitals, or juvenile justice centers [National Association of School Psychologists; 39]. Overall, these professionals are considered key members of multi/interdisciplinary teams in community-based as well as school environments.

School psychology shares professional interests with counselling, clinical, educational, and child and adolescent psychology. However, one of the main differences between these psychology professions is that school psychology focuses on applying psychological knowledge and methods to solve problems related to schooling and learning [13]. Because mental health difficulties can impact one’s behaviour and learning in school or vice versa, school psychologists have training and experience in both mental health and educational issues. They are trained to provide a broad variety of services that address the whole child or adolescent across settings, including school, home, and community [4,40].

Prevention, consultation, collaboration, intervention, and research are key components of school psychology training [39]. For example, given significant concerns with students’ dropout rates or expulsion from school due to problem behaviour and/or substance use/abuse [41,42], school psychologists can play a key role in implementing dropout and drug use prevention programs for at-risk students [43]. According to the American Psychological Association [APA] and the National Association of School Psychologists [NASP], school psychologists work at the individual and system levels to create and implement programs designed to promote positive learning environments. For example, they may provide training to parents and teachers about effective behaviour management and teaching and learning procedures [14]. In addition, APA emphasizes the significance of school psychologists conducting an ecologically valid assessment and program evaluation to address students’ needs and to improve school, home, and school district-wide support systems.

4. ADVANTAGES OF SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGISTS CONDUCTING SCHOOL-BASED FAMILY COUNSELLING

School psychologists are mental health professionals who support children and adolescents to overcome barriers to success in school, at home, and in life [39]. Given the high incidence of mental health issues in the school population and the limited access to community-based services, school psychologists are in a good position to help prevent or reduce children's mental health needs [3]. To improve students' functioning across environments, the collaboration between family and school is necessary [44,45]. Review of the literature points to the positive effects of partnerships between home and school on children's behaviour and academic success [27]. For some authors, school psychologists are the ideal professionals who can help bridge the gap between parents and educators [7,46]. To foster relationships between school and families and to maximize the positive influences of these systems on students, school psychologists are encouraged to adopt a systems perspective, which include taking a family-systems approach [3,47,46]. Family interventions such as parenting techniques, communication training skills, and family counselling are seen as effective alternatives to bridge such gaps [47,48].

While research suggests that the role of school psychologists is beginning to change in the direction of providing more intervention and functional assessments to children and their families, the need for special services eligibility determination or administrative assessment continues to determine the areas in which school psychologists spend most of their time [1]. A study conducted by Bramlett and colleagues [49] revealed that 370 NASP members spent 46% of their time conducting assessments, whereas 16% of the respondents' time was spent on consultation, 13% interventions, 8% counselling, 7% conferencing, 3% supervision, 2% in- servicing, 1% research, 1% parent training, and 3% other activities. These findings suggest that the role expansion beyond assessment continues to be a common concern by leaders in school psychology [49]. For a substantial change to happen, Saklofske and colleagues [50] point to the need for a shift in training, practices, perceptions, and policies regarding school psychology.

Research indicates that school psychologists wish to be more relationally involved with students, teachers, and families. In fact, school psychologists who have broader and more diverse professional opportunities report higher levels of job satisfaction than those whose role is limited to testing [4]. Review of articles in the family therapy and school counselling/school psychology literature points to a significantly higher involvement of school counsellors and school psychologists with families than of family therapists with schools [12]. To enhance the partnership between school psychologists and parents, it would be important to establish a "two-way communication" system where mutual, specific, and measurable goals and outcomes would be developed, data collection would be shared, and school-family consultation would occur on a regular basis [6,43,51,p. 2].

It seems obvious to combine the willingness of school psychologists to become more involved with students, teachers, and families with the benefits of implementing family interventions at schools [6]. The product of this blend would be the incorporation of school-based family counselling into school psychologists' practices. Despite the support for such practices, a number of barriers still impede school psychologists to perform this role.

5. LIMITATIONS OF SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGISTS CONDUCTING SCHOOL-BASED FAMILY COUNSELLING

According to Fagan and Wise [1], most school psychologists are equipped to provide some individual and group counselling services. However, the amount of time school psychologists spend conducting such activities is significantly influenced by (a) the setting in which they work, (b) the shortage of professionals, time, and schedule flexibility, (c) the presence or absence of other qualified professionals within the school and community, and (d) their training, experience, and interest in counselling.

5.1 Setting

According to the most recent membership survey conducted by the NASP Research Committee members, even though 83% of school psychologists in the U.S. work at public schools and their practice is largely related to school success, promotion of optimal functioning beyond the school setting is also part of their mandate [52]. One of the reasons for the high incidence of school psychologists in the school system is that most schools do not require these professionals to have doctoral-level degrees in order to practice. Masters degree training, involving less time and costs than a doctoral degree, is encouraged in school personnel and rewarded with salary increases. Additionally, school law requires students to have Individual Education Plans (IEPs), where school psychologists have expertise. Thus, it is expected that schools will continue to be the primary employment setting for school psychologists [1]. It is worth noting, however, that their roles and functions within each school may vary depending on the expectations and demands of the system. Issues of power and authority have a significant influence in the population in which school psychologists serve and the types of services they can deliver. To avoid misunderstandings, it is important for school psychologists to understand the “dynamics of the school system, its policies and procedures, and the place of school psychology in the context of teamwork” [1,p. 73]. Thus, conducting family counselling in the school setting may not be an appropriate practice for school psychologists if, for example, the school prioritizes testing over interventions.

5.2 Shortage of School Psychologists

An additional shortcoming for school psychologists incorporating school-based family counselling into their practice is the shortage of school psychologists in the school system and their heavy caseloads. Although NASP [39] recommends a ratio of one school psychologist for every 1,000 students, the student-school psychologist ratio in the U.S. is approximately 1,500 students per school psychologist (ratios vary dramatically between states) [53,54], and in Canada, the ratio is unknown. As most schools still rely on the traditional model of school psychology (i.e., refer, test, place), practitioners often spend a substantial amount of time with few students at the highest level of needs and are unable to address the needs of many other students who are not considered high priority [55]. The low number of school psychologists in many districts decreases their visibility to the school population and may result in professional isolation in schools [56]. Furthermore, the feasibility of implementing psychosocial interventions in addition to conducting a high number of psycho-educational assessments is a formula for rapid professional burnout. As noted, the shortage of school psychologists has a significant impact on their professional practice.

5.3 Overlap with Other Professions in Psychology

The practice of school psychologists can be similar to that of other professionals specialized in psychology [38]. A common goal of school, clinical, counselling, educational, and child and adolescent psychologists is to apply psychological knowledge and procedures to solve school and learning problems [14]. A central difference between these professions is the setting where they work; most school psychologists and school counsellors work directly in schools. School psychologists are trained in assessment, school law and regulations regarding schools and children with disabilities, and have a broad understanding of the dynamics of the school system [39]. Because school psychologists may overlap duties with school counselors and very often with school social workers in the school setting, they are encouraged to work in collaboration with these other professionals (e.g., co-leading social skills groups, mutually serving on crisis support teams, attending meeting with families together) [39]. While school psychologists place greater emphasis on special education and may have more training in behavioral analysis, mental health screening and diagnosis, and specific disability areas, school counsellors usually serve the total school population regarding a variety of issues, including family and academic problems, career planning, and course scheduling [39]. On the other hand, school social workers are typically heavily involved in facilitating school-based or school-linked services for families. Often school psychologists' primary responsibility is to provide services to students at risk of failure or who have disabilities. If school psychologists are primarily expected to serve the special needs population, little room is left for them to provide other types of services to the broader school population.

5.4 Training

The literature in school-based family counselling highlights that practitioners who wish to deliver counselling services to families in the school setting must have appropriate and sufficient training in family systems approaches and school structure and organization [3]. These professionals should receive training in how to interact and collaborate with families and the school personnel, how to facilitate and mediate interactions between home and school, and also enact change within systems. These service providers should be competent to implement evidence-based methods and programs and have opportunities to explore personal experiences and backgrounds to identify biases [57]. Nevertheless, receiving training in school-based family counselling is not enough; supervised practice is also essential [58]. The core courses for graduate students in school psychology programs rarely provide supervised coursework and practicum experience in specific counselling practices such as family therapy, marital counselling, group work, and individual therapy [1,59]. School psychologists who wish to deliver counselling services to students and/or families are advised to seek further training opportunities in counselling through taking additional counselling course credits during training from universities' counselling departments (e.g., counselling psychology, family science, and social work), attend annual conventions and summer conferences, and gain experience in this field during practicum and internship (e.g., observing actual sessions or co-leading groups with supervisors) [39]. Conoley and Gutkin [60] attribute responsibility to the university community to change the role of school psychologists. According to the authors, school psychology will only change if the behaviours of its practitioners and university faculty change first.

6. CONCLUSION

The advantages and disadvantages of school psychologists incorporating school-based family therapy into their practice are equally compelling. By having a solid understanding of the benefits of counselling families in schools, the services that school psychologists are trained to offer, and the main issues that often influence and, especially, limit their practice, the school psychology field is able to trace the progress toward role expansion, including the delivery of counselling to students and their families in the school setting. The literature presents controversial arguments for school psychologists performing such roles. On one hand, school psychologists have the ethical responsibility to become involved in interventions and programs aimed at addressing problems that are broader than merely assessing and identifying children with special needs. Taking a systemic, ecological approach that values the collaboration between families and schools is one of the key components for successful results. However, a number of factors including the setting in which school psychologists work, the shortage of professionals, the overlap in roles with other qualified practitioners within the school, and the lack of training and experience in family counselling, present as barriers for school psychologists' practice in school-based family counselling.

The literature points to a common fact: to better support and promote students' success across environments, school psychologists are encouraged to address the potential impacts that family problems may have on their children [12]. Schools may also be an optimal environment for families to access mental health services [13]. The complex nature of each individual's professional training and area of competence, the variability in expectations and requirements of school districts, the feasibility of including such services into their workload, and the slow progress in changing and expanding the role of school psychologists are some of the concerns that must be taken into account when considering integrating family counseling into the role of school psychologists.

7. RECOMMENDATION

There is no simple and easy solution to expanding the role of school psychologists in schools. According to McIntosh [61], "legislative, economic, training, and service parameters, to mention a few," must be taken into account in order to address the shortage of school psychologists and, consequently, facilitate their role expansion. We suggest that for school psychologists to have a broader role in the school system, practitioners should spend less time on academic assessment and more time implementing interventions, providing consultation, and/or counselling services to students and their families. We propose a few alternatives to foster the practical expansion of such roles. First, the number of professionals specialized in school psychology should be higher and, consequently, the ratio of school psychologist-student lower. For this to happen, it is necessary that school psychology programs hire more faculty members to support the enrollment of more graduate students per year. Nonetheless, there are several barriers to the recruitment and retention of school psychology faculty, including "(a) the retirement of a number of individuals trained in the 1960s and early 1970s, (b) the increase in training standards, (c) the feminization of the field (i.e., a greater percentage of women being trained as school psychologists), and (d) the demands of the professorate (e.g., publishing) and the lower level of remuneration compared to applied positions in many parts of the country (U.S.)." [62,p. 452]. To address some of these barriers and stimulate interest of doctoral school psychology graduates in academic

positions, it has been suggested that graduate programs offer financial support and mentoring.

Given the current disproportional ratio of time devoted to testing, another alternative we suggest is for school psychologists to find a more efficient way to assess students. We propose that undergraduate and graduate students receive an intensive and supervised training in administering tests (without interpreting the results) and conduct part of the assessment for school psychologists. Indeed, there are controversies regarding the possibility of students helping school psychologists meet the high demand for assessment; nonetheless, such alternative could balance the ratio of time spent on assessment versus time spent in other areas such as consultation and counselling.

Mautone and colleagues [63] offer other strategies for supporting the role expansion of school psychologists and, more specifically, for increasing their involvement with families. First, the implementation of a pre-referral process that addresses students' academic and behavioural difficulties before referring them for formal assessment, would allow school psychologists to spend less time determining special education eligibility and have more time available to collaborate with families. Second, school districts could provide professional development workshops for school psychologists and other school personnel focusing on practical strategies to partnering with families. At the school level, it is suggested that the school staff include in their staff meetings ongoing discussions about the importance and benefits of family-school collaboration. In addition, school psychologists could be given the opportunity in schools to alter their role by helping coordinate parent-teacher organizations, providing workshops to school personnel on home-school collaboration and to families on parenting skills or home interventions for behaviour and academic challenges. Third, it would be necessary for school psychologists to have a family-friendly and private space to meet with families. Finally, the authors suggest that school principals advocate for school psychologists to serve only one school within the district. Indeed, the public school system would have to invest money in contracting additional school psychologists to serve more schools and to meet the demand for psycho-educational assessments.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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