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# THE PROBLEMS AND POTENTIAL OF SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGY IN 1969[1]

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*Summary:* Throughout the history of school psychology, questions have evolved about its role and function, its training, and its potential. Local and state groups have reflected some pride over what has been accomplished in their geographic areas but have also clearly been concerned about difficult local problems and the future of school psychology. Discussion of who and what the school psychologist is or should be has gone on too long: a majority opinion should formulate national guidelines for the profession.

No specialty in the fields of mental health and education has the potential school psychology has for making significant gains in this country's number one health problem: emotional illness. The word potential must be emphasized; school psychology has to date not been successful in meeting the country's needs.

Trachtman (1966) wrote that "the educational setting in which the school psychologist works is potentially the most fruitful, the most vital, the most rewarding domain which psychology can enter . . ." In this regard, he discussed what seem to be both the potential and the challenge of school psychology:

1. For a major segment of the community, the school psychologist may be the only psychologist ever encountered personally.
2. He is probably the only psychologist working with such a broad developmental span and such an unselected population of children.
3. He has indirect access to the most influential adults in the lives of children—their parents—and direct access to the second most influential group—their teachers.
4 He can develop close working relationships with all levels of the educational hierarchy.
5. His role in the school system can bring him into close contact with community groups, agencies and institutions providing specialized and complementary services to children and adults.

Trachtman and others included primary and secondary prevention, and the development of a nomenclature system based on educational processes and goals, on developmental tasks and stages, and on the social and interpersonal functioning of individuals. The school psychologist, then, has the outstanding professional opportunity of being directly involved with the problems of living and learning. He also has the widest, most direct array of resources available for prevention and correction: the home, the school and the community.

Historically, school psychology has consisted of isolated islands of development around the country. Statewide professional groups have been formed to promote school psychology but have been limited by the lack of local resources and support, and by the local approaches and attitudes. Questions have evolved in each isolated area pertaining to the role and function of the school psychologist, his training, and the potential of the profession. Local and state groups have reflected some pride over what has been accomplished in their respective geographic areas but have also clearly indicated concern about difficult local problems and about the future of school psychology in face of the rapid progress of surrounding specialities in education and psychology.

The only national organization which might have helped school psychology was somewhat out of touch with the field because of its restrictive membership requirements and its dominant interest in other areas of professional and academic psychology. National conferences failed to set up

[1]Taken from a speech delivered to the National Invitational Conference of School Psychologists, Columbus, Ohio, March 1968.

meaningful machinery for continued deliberation of issues and problems. The American Psychological Association, though sponsoring two national conferences on school psychology, did not pick up where these conferences left off; the APA did not pursue these issues, eventual resolution of which would finally bind school psychology together. Despite the urgings of several persons within the Division of School Psychology, APA for various reasons was immediately unwilling and eventually unable to meet the needs of practicing school psychologists.

Some recent developments within APA, however, indicate its growing acceptance of school psychology as a valid professional entity within psychology. The Education and Training Board has agreed to undertake the accreditation of training programs in school psychology at the doctoral level. The American Board of Examiners in Professional Psychology has voted to grant the Diplomate in School Psychology with appropriate examinations.

These good and needed developments have been accomplished by the many hard working members of the Division of School Psychology. There remain, however, at least two very important impediments toward the development of APA as a force for school psychology.

First, according to the September 1, 1966, Report of the Committee of the Division of School Psychologists to establish liaison with state, local and regional groups, "it is estimated that 75% of the school psychologists throughout the country are not affiliated with the American Psychological Association." The reason for this, of course, is the membership restrictions relating to the doctoral degree. Change in this area would require a basic alteration of the APA bylaws; to many, this seems unlikely. The practicing school psychologist, therefore, belongs to other organizations, which he sees as more welcoming and perhaps more meaningful. With such a low percentage of school psychologists in membership, APA may have difficulty in speaking for school psychology across the country.

The second obstacle to APA's becoming a force for school psychology is its conservative posture on legislation and professional promotion. The APA does not usually initiate recommendations or plans; it sometimes reacts to the initiative of others but does so in a general and conservative manner because it represents such a wide variety of specialities and philosophies. This approach will not serve school psychology in a time when the aggressive initiative of organizations like the American Personnel and Guidance Association and the Council for Exceptional Children gain such important advantages as NDEA and Title VI for the professional growth and development of their specialties.

The need for and value of mental health services in the schools is becoming more and more apparent to legislators and other leaders in government and to educational agencies, as the attention which the Gibbons Bill (HR 7403 and HR 11322) received in Washington in 1965 and 1966 indicates.

The type of child development specialist whom the Gibbons Bill proposed was not related to professional school psychology. This bill proposed to spend thousands in training, fellowships and salaries for a new mental health specialist. Perhaps this support did not go to the several thousand school psychologists already in the schools because leaders and planners in mental health, government and education could see no recognizable national goals or even identity in school psychology.

Regarding financial support to school psychology, the proceedings of the Bethesda Conference on Problems and Issues, 1964, stated that "it has been difficult for governmental and other agencies in a position to support training in mental health professions to

know what to expect of school psychology since, from their perspective, no firm trends have been discernible" (Bardon, 1964). Unfortunately, this is still the attitude of funding agencies toward school psychology.

Looking at school psychology nationally, certain characteristics seem quite apparent:

1. It is an established profession in many states, but it is composed of poorly communicating independent groups.
2. It has developed so unevenly in different states that the national view of the profession is confused and disorganized.
3. It has tremendous potential in an area of national concern and need, but it is without a general purpose or goals.
4. It is practiced largely by non-doctoral individuals, in need of national identity.
5. It needs financial support to fulfill its potential, but is without a spokesman in contact with legislative and funding agencies.

Discussion of who and what the school psychologist is and who and what he should be has gone on for several years. It is time for discussion to lead to consensus, time for a majority opinion to formulate national guidelines for the profession. Meaningful consensus on the several issues plaguing school psychology can only come through a formal structure which actively encompasses a large majority and which provides the machinery for reaching and maintaining agreement.

School psychology needs a clear and realistic definition of its competencies, its limitations, its potential, and its needs in relation to national concerns in mental health and in education. Then it needs to bring this definition, supported by thousands of school psychologists, to the direct attention of national leaders in government, education, and mental health.

School psychology needs a national, cohesive professional identity. It needs a sense of overriding continuity which will provide leadership, guidance, and support to its state and local development. School psychology needs to recognize and use its experienced professionals to assist the efforts of its members and thereby build the solid strength so necessary for a profession's survival and growth. Finally, school psychology needs a national, efficient network of communication.

School psychology does not need a prominent division in its national ranks. A separate professional activity need not mean an uncooperative schism among those who would represent the best interests of school psychology: such a negative turn of affairs would undermine the basic interests and general welfare of all concerned. Just as consensus is vital, so is collaboration with each entity which provides leadership and support.

Liaison, communication, and cooperation will enable us to fulfill our needs in the most efficient, complete and professional manner possible.

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UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES. HR 7403 and HR 11322. Bills introduced by Sam M. Gibbons, 1965 and 1967.

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