

SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGIST AS SERVANT: IMPLICATIONS FOR ASSUMPTIONS AND PRACTICE

Amidst an uncertain economic landscape, those of us who find ourselves gainfully employed should be careful to not take such good fortune lightly. After many years of hard work and sacrifice, delayed gratification and numerous applications of the Premack Principle, alas, we have found ourselves doing that which once upon a time was only a dream. Congratulations, you are a school psychologist! Of all the professions in the world, and of all the available career possibilities in the fields of psychology and education, through a myriad of paths, school psychology became your choice. But what does this mean? What will your contribution be as a professional? What will your legacy be as a school psychologist?

Each day, school psychologists have the pleasure of being involved in work that has the potential to change the course of history. Having the opportunity to engage with young people and those who are charged to shape their social, emotional, behavioral, and academic development is both humbling and, at times, overwhelming. At the risk of sounding cliché, the reality remains that the youngsters whom we serve today will one day be faced with the challenges of civic leadership within our communities, the fiscal responsibility of our local and national economies, the weight of fostering a climate of respectful and inclusive politics, and the social well-being of our global society. For these and a host of other reasons, the work of school psychologists transcends a job. The untold benefit of our contribution for generations to come speaks to the importance of school psychologists as more than scientists and practitioners. Although profoundly understated, school psychologists are perhaps best understood as servants.

SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGISTS SERVE: CHILDREN, FAMILIES, SCHOOLS, AND COMMUNITIES

Within any industry, the success of a business enterprise is inextricably connected to effective customer service. The fields of psychology and education are no exception. For the school psychologist, who is the customer? In terms more familiar to the social sciences, who is the school psychologist's client? To whom should our efforts be focused to ensure consumer and client satisfaction?

School psychologists serve a variety of individuals and audiences including parents and families, children and students, other education professionals in schools and school systems, and communities. As each consumer has different expectations of school psychologists, the effective clinician is one who has developed the ability to tactfully negotiate the diverse needs that simultaneously face him/her from each of his/her clients. While there are a myriad of ways in which this can be accomplished, I encourage you to consider how basic assumptions will inevitably impact your practice.

While completing my graduate training at Lehigh University, one of my practicum rotations was spent in a diverse urban school system. Working with a very experienced school psychologist, I learned one of the most valuable lessons of my budding career. My supervisor, George Grim, shared that he approached his work from the premise that all parents want the best for their children. This simple statement challenged my thinking and continues to impact the work that I do each day. Assuming that parents—although they might not attend every conference, school event or meeting—are unequivocally invested in their children's success helps to guard against preconceived notions based on their observable behavior. Especially

when working with culturally and linguistically diverse populations who might also be forced to contend with the burden of limited financial resources, the sensitive and effective school psychologist initially frames families' absence from school happenings as having nothing to do with their lack of interest in their child's education but rather a function of the competing demand to provide the most basic of human needs—food, clothing, and shelter. This same rationale is also applicable to the manner in which school psychologists serve teachers and administrators. Assuming that these dedicated individuals have chosen a profession to work, tirelessly, with young people, while also accepting far less compensation than they deserve, the interpretation of their behavior becomes quite different. For example, could it be that seemingly aggressive teachers—who want every child evaluated for the presence of an underlying disability because they do not automatically respond to their instructional methods—might not be trying to circumvent the need for intervention and differentiated instruction, but genuinely believe that they are acting in the best interest of their students?

As school psychologists, we are trained to consider multiple sources of data to formulate the most accurate conclusions. Such consideration, no doubt, involves an awareness of our own, albeit subtle, preconceived notions that ultimately impact the manner in which we interact with our clients. For this reason, instead of criticizing and discounting parents and teachers for behaviors or perspectives that might not be in total agreement with what we have come to acknowledge as “best practices,” why not help these individuals—who also have a vested interest in young people's success—to more effectively help children? In the same manner that several individuals discussing a child are often communicating the same message but no one is listening, the school psychologist as servant, and even advocate for children, seeks to identify common ground between themselves and their clients, which ultimately has the child's best interest as priority.

SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGISTS SERVE: IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Consider the truth of the familiar adage: “[Insert your clients here] don't care how much you know until [insert your clients here] know how much you care.” Despite our extensive training and expertise in child and adolescent development; social, emotional and behavioral functioning; academic and cognitive skill development; and preventive mechanisms for a host of academic and behavioral difficulties, the contribution of these skills to our clients—children, families, schools, and communities—pales in comparison to our first commitment, which is to serve.

No doubt, these ideas about service might resonate with your personality. In fact, you are a school psychologist because you are likely intrinsically motivated to help others. But practically speaking, you might also be wondering: “How can I serve in a manner that is not only feasible and realistic given my other responsibilities of evaluating and observing students, designing effective interventions, attending numerous meetings, and completing Functional Behavior Assessments?”

As a school psychologist, I encourage you to spend the necessary time learning the culture of your school(s). Given the diverse school jurisdictions represented across the Commonwealth, no doubt, to have a meaningful presence within your school(s) takes an investment of time and concerted effort. Especially for those of us who are not based in a particular school and must effectively manage our time across multiple assignments, the role of

school psychologist as servant might not be achieved at once. But be encouraged. As you didn't finish graduate school in a single semester and all of your evaluations will not be completed by the end of the week, know that if you desire to become a servant, you will get there—one day at a time, one school at a time, and most importantly, one child at a time.

Personally speaking, I have the privilege of serving three schools in Loudoun County, Virginia. Through spending time in each of these settings, I have learned the unique needs and organizational and cultural dynamics of each building. As you develop a presence in and around your school(s), you are communicating a powerful message to students, faculty, staff, families, and the larger community: you are invested in their children. Further, your presence makes you accessible and affords you the opportunity to become involved in activities—some directly related to your work and others that are not. For example, being available to supervise students as they arrive on buses or leave with their parents communicates to staff that you are a team player and not above these duties. It also provides you with invaluable, yet informal, face time with families whom you are likely to meet, at some point, in a more serious setting to discuss their child's academic or behavioral challenges. As the term psychologist is already intimidating for some, and laden with somewhat threatening misconceptions, especially within certain cultures, your informal introduction to parents as “the young lady or young man who greets my child every morning” helps to diffuse anxieties associated with your role. If even in a small way, for parents, rather than being perceived as the mental health professional who is going to tell me about my child's problems, which are a result of my poor parenting skills, you become more of an ally who is supportive of their efforts to raise a healthy citizen.

The lesson from Mr. Grim remains true: assume that all parents [and everyone who works with young people] want the best for their children. But while this is true, it also cannot be ignored that there are circumstances in which parents and others might be misguided as to what the best looks like, in practice, for their children. Certainly your expertise can be instrumental in helping to correct some practices that are less than ideal for children. But this perspective and information will be better received—caring about what you know—after you have shown that you care. In fact, after knowing that you care, rather than being the one to suggest intervention strategies to parents and teachers, they are more likely to ask for your input: “[insert your name here] what do you think about this situation in my classroom? What do you think I should do?” Because they know you care, parents and teachers are not only more likely to ask for your expertise, but they are also more likely to trust and try your suggestions.

Never underestimate the time spent serving and establishing the necessary rapport and trust of your clients. It is a worthwhile investment that will yield dividends untold. Suffice it to say that you will be better positioned to effect change on the behalf of children, your number one client.