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ABSTRACT

Virtually every educator espouses a model of human learning that has evolved from or has been influenced by the research of psychologists. It seems that psychological knowledge has and will continue to hold an indispensable place in American education. The question of importance is whether school psychologists can elevate their status from one of helper to leader and become equally indispensable. Issues or problems that affect virtually all educators and students are the assessment of learning or performance, the development of understanding and respect for individual differences, and the capacity to motivate and regulate one's own work efforts. School psychologists are often the most knowledgeable and skilled assessment personnel in the schools, yet it is often the case in schools engaged in reforming their assessment and instruction practices that school psychologists are rarely seen or heard. School psychologists can provide continuing professional development for teachers in the area of assessment, can take leadership in the development of Individual Educational Programs to ensure they include information on accommodations that a student will need to fully participate in a large-scale assessment, and can provide much needed leadership in educational assessment by facilitating communication among the many educational stakeholder currently interested in assessment. (JBJ)

Chapter Twenty

Assessing Learning of All Students: Becoming an Essential Service Provider Once Again

Stephen N. Elliot

Volumes have been written about psychology and schooling and thousands of professionals apply psychological knowledge and science in America's schools daily. In addition, the vast majority of America's primary educators have taken courses in educational psychology, human development, or learning psychology; consequently, most teachers have been exposed to summaries of psychological research in domains such as motivation, cognition, problem solving, social relationships, emotional development, individual differences, interpersonal communications, and measurement of human performance. As a result, virtually every educator espouses a model of human learning that has evolved from or has been influenced by the research of psychologists!

Psychology is alive in schools today, and although somewhat invisible at times to many educational stakeholders, it has long been intertwined in the delivery of effective instruction for all students. It seems that psychological knowledge has and will continue to hold an indispensable place in American education. The question of importance in this chapter is whether psychology's most visible and direct manifestation in schools, school psychologists, can elevate their status from one of "helper" to "leader" and become equally indispensable. In theory, school psychologists have the opportunity to impact the education of all students, and they do so in some schools. Unfortunately, however, not in enough schools. In practice, most school psychologists work with a subset of students—those at the margins—and their teachers and parents. Their efforts are designed to enhance students' educational progress and to facilitate the instructional process for teachers and parents. In most cases, psychologists' contributions have involved assessing and "diagnosing" a student's problem and planning educational solutions to either correct or compensate for difficulties a student encounters in learning and behaving in a school environment. In this capacity, school psychologists are "helpers" to thousands of students and teachers who truly need the assistance to succeed.

The role of helper is an important role for psychologists in most school systems and is, in effect, supported by federal and state legislation concerning services for students with disabilities. Many school psychologists who are effective helpers feel secure and satisfied in this role. They shouldn't, however, because helping the at-risk, the disabled, and occasionally gifted students unfortunately isn't enough to be perceived as indispensable. If school psychologists want to be indispensable, they must be more than helpers.

They must become leaders in command of a program, an issue, or a problem that affects a large number of people in schools. Examples of issues or problems that affect virtually all educators and students are the assessment of learning or performance, the development of understanding and respect for individual differences, and the capacity to motivate and regulate one's own work efforts. These three examples are pervasive issues in schools, as well as in businesses, factories, and our government, and they impact the lives of students with disabilities, special educators, and virtually everyone else in schools! Psychologists have studied these problems and have much to say to educators and parents about them. In addition, school psychologists routinely address parts of these problems in the assessment and intervention of students with disabilities. And yet, it seems like very few school psychologists have assumed school-wide leadership roles that focus on such broad, central issues. Why? Time, training, "permission," and their affiliation with special education are probably four of the most frequent reasons practicing school psychologists would give for not assuming leadership of efforts to address these pervasive challenges in the education of all children.

From the three examples of systemic challenges identified above, I believe that most school psychologists are already equipped with the fundamental knowledge to take leadership roles in the *assessment of students' learning and performance*. American educators like never before are looking to the assessment of students' learning and performance as the leading edge of instructional and curricular reform (Linn, 1993; Wiggins, 1993). Calls are frequent and loud in most states and at the national level for higher academic standards, for more accountability in documenting students' application of knowledge and skills, and for greater alignment between what is taught and what gets tested. These standards-based reform (SBR) activities in education are purportedly for all students (c.f. Goals 2000, National Council of Teachers of Mathematics' Math Standards). Concurrently, with these activities we are seeing increasing adoption of inclusive educational efforts for students with disabilities. With SBR and inclusion come issues of standards, equity, individualized education programs, and accountability for *all* students. Educational leaders, teachers, and many parents are rightfully concerned about monitoring students' academic progress and accomplishment of tangible outcomes. The existing assessment technology found in most schools is inadequate for measuring academic progress and accomplishments on localor statewide learning outcomes. The existing assessment literacy of most educators is poor and hinders the use and advancement of assessment practices that are capable of measuring all students' application of knowledge and skills relevant to learning outcomes valued by society.

School psychologists are often the most knowledgeable and skilled assessment personnel in the schools, yet in my experience with schools engaged in reforming their assessment and instruction practices, school psychologists rarely are seen or heard. They are apparently too busy doing diagnostic assessments of students and/or are not viewed by the educational leaders in their schools as knowledgeable of large-scale educational assessment for accountability purposes. In some cases, the educational leaders are correct. Many school psychologists have not received training in large-scale achievement testing, nor have they been exposed to much program evaluation in their graduate training programs. As a profession, however, school psychology has a long standing interest in "alternative" assessments that are sensitive to instructional curricula and to functional outcomes. For example, school psychologists have been actively involved in research on and application of curriculum-based measurement (Shapiro &

Derr, 1990; Shinn, 1989), adaptive behavior or life skills assessment (Witt, Elliott, Kramer, & Gresham, 1994), and observational and behavior assessment (Kratochwill & Sheridan, 1990). The assessment concepts and tactics which are fundamental to these types of assessment are many of the same concepts and tactics being highlighted in the development of performance and portfolio assessments (Elliott, 1991).

Based on the paucity of coverage of performance and portfolio assessment and learning outcome standards in the school psychology journals, coupled with my observations that few school psychologists are actively involved in large-scale assessments in states where standards-based reforms are advancing, it appears that school psychologists are missing many opportunities to provide leadership on important assessment issues that impact *all* students. There are many pathways to leadership in the evolving educational assessment scene. Perhaps, first and foremost is the need that teachers have for continuing professional development with assessment. Teachers' knowledge about technical issues, such as reliability and validity, is poor. Their knowledge of test interpretation and use of test results also is limited. With regard to some of the emerging alternative forms of assessment, many teachers lack the knowledge to develop good scoring criteria and have limited experience in interpreting and communicating the results of criterion-referenced assessments.

Another avenue for leadership is the development and valid use of testing accommodations for students. Testing accommodation guidelines vary across states, although most states refer evaluators to a student's Individual Education Program (IEP) as the source for information about testing accommodations. School psychologists can take leadership in the development of IEPs to ensure they include information on accommodations that a student will need to fully participate in a large-scale assessment. In addition, data is needed about the affect of accommodations on the test performance of students.

A third area within educational assessment where school psychologists can assume leadership concerns communication. I like to say that "Assessment is communication!" meaning that the reason we do assessment, any kind of assessment, ultimately is to communicate. Because we often have to communicate with many people (e.g., teachers, parents, administrators, other pupil personnel, and the student himself/herself), it requires excellent communication skills and a command of fundamental assessment concepts and knowledge of academic subject matter.

School psychologists can provide much needed leadership in educational assessment by facilitating communication among the many educational stakeholders currently interested in assessment. Many of the communications will be with groups who do not agree about the "best" way to assess learning. Some of the participants in these discussions will question the inclusion of students with disabilities in accountability assessments. Others will not understand the differences between norm-referenced assessments and criterion-referenced ones or the importance of repeated measurements of students' performances. Most school psychologists have the skills to address these educational assessment concerns and to provide leadership in the way schools assess students' learning.

Summary

The knowledge and skills of school psychologists are needed in the current efforts to reform educational assessments. School psychologists have a long and productive history as assessment experts with students with disabilities; their teaming with special educators in the 1970s led to the advancement of educational services for many students who experience learning difficulties. School psychologists have listened to, learned about, and helped thousands of students at the margins. To advance the profession and to increase the likelihood that psychology is viewed as an indispensable part of education once again, school psychologists are encouraged to assume leadership in the assessment of all students.

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