ADVOCATING FOR THE WHOLE-CHILD: PROMOTING THE RESILIENCY OF PRESCHOOL AND ELEMENTARY SCHOOL STUDENTS IN A MULTI-TIERED FRAMEWORK OF SUPPORT.

By

Terri MacKaben

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Committee Membership
Dr. Sangwon Kim, Ph.D., Committee Chair
Dr. Emily Sommerman, Psy. D., Committee Member
Lisa Miller, M. A., L.E.P., Committee Member
Lisa Miller, M.A., L.E.P., Graduate Coordinator

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Abstract

ADVOCATING FOR THE WHOLE-CHILD: PROMOTING THE RESILIENCY OF PRESCHOOL AND ELEMENTARY SCHOOL STUDENTS IN A MULTI-TIERED FRAMEWORK OF SUPPORT

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This body of work reflects my skilled application of the ten domains of school psychology (NASP, 2010) within the dynamic context of a rural California school district. An emphasis is placed upon promoting the resilience of children through advocacy of the whole-child in a multi-tiered framework of support. Portfolio products evidence my ability to identify and analyze specific problems, needs and progress of at-risk students through utilizing appropriate methods of assessment and data collection. School systems can resolve academic problems by examining the conditions that support resilience in children. Based on my training experience, it is recommended that school psychologists strive to facilitate school-wide practices and policies that meet the academic and social-emotional needs of all students.
Acknowledgements

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Significance, Objectives, and Methodology

The role of a school psychologist is multifaceted and centers on understanding what factors cultivate children’s abilities to learn (NASP, 2010). School Psychologists act as agents of change, facilitators, and supporters (McGraw & Koonce, 2011) in reducing a spectrum of barriers to children’s academic, social, emotional, and behavioral success (NASP, 2003, 2010). It is encouraged for school psychologists to advocate for causes, ideas, and policies that influence children’s modes of well-being, and the profession of school psychology itself (NASP, 2003).

Humboldt State University (HSU) School Psychology graduates are required to meet the standards set forth by the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) ten domains of practice (NASP, 2003), as well as the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing (CCTC, 2001). The cumulative portfolio serves to exhibit my professional competence and adherence to best practice in the following domain areas: (1) Psychological Foundations; (2) Educational Foundations; (3) Legal, Ethical, and Professional Foundations; (4) Data-based Decision Making and Accountability in Assessment, Intervention, and Evaluation of Cognitive and Academic Skills; (5) Data-based Decision Making and Accountability in Assessment and Intervention for Socialization, Emotional, Behavioral, and Life Skills; (6) Consultation and Collaboration; (7) Mental Health; (8) Human Diversity in Development and Learning; (9) Family, School, and Community Collaboration; and (10) Research and Technology.
School Psychologists are viewed as generalists (McGraw & Koonce, 2011) in the sense that it is their duty to deliver and/or coordinate a continuum of services that support both students’ academic and social–emotional development (Fox et al., 2009; NASP, 2010). This continuum includes three levels or tiers of intervention; Tier I (primary or universal), Tier II (secondary or targeted), and Tier III (tertiary or individualized; Fox et al., 2009; Zins & Elias, 2007). The services delivered are selected based on individual student needs and are founded on an “evidence-based program evaluation model” (Fox et al., 2009; NASP, 2003, 2010).

“The habits we form from childhood make no small difference, but rather they make all the difference.” -Aristotle

Students, like all human beings, are whole-persons. The holistic perspective of the whole-child asserts that children not only comprise cognitive and physical needs, but physical, social, and emotional needs as well (Diamond, 2010; McGrath, n.d.; Noddings, 2005). I share the belief that a fundamental aim of education is to share responsibility for fostering the total development of children. The future of children depends on our moving in this direction (Noddings, 2005).

Cognitive, social, and emotional development are intimately intertwined (Diamond, 2010; McGrath, n.d.; Weare, 2000; Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg, & Walberg, 2004). In school, children’s academic successes and failures are connected to their social and emotional competencies (Diamond, 2010; McGrath, n.d.). Without satisfying children’s social and emotional needs, children struggle to think clearly and learn
effectively. For young children, this relates to poor rates of school readiness (Diamond, 2008). In general, children who receive social-emotional support and intervention services typically achieve better academically (Zins et al., 2004). There also is overwhelming evidence that social and emotional abilities are significant predictors to lifelong prosperity (Weare, 2000).

Unfortunately, many children are at-risk for negative outcomes due to adversity exposure, such as family violence, divorce, homelessness, acute trauma and chronic stress (Masten, Herbers, Cutuli, & Lafavor, 2008; Masten & Obradovic’, 2006). Children are more likely to exhibit resilience or positive patterns of adaptation despite risk and adversity (Bernard, 1995; Masten & Obradovic’, 2006), when multifaceted strategies are executed to support their total development across adaptive or “protective systems” (Doll, Brehm, & Zucker, 2014; Masten & Obradovic’, 2006). In school, the ecological conditions imperative to cultivate resilience, learning and academic achievement include “safety, challenge, support, and social–emotional learning” (Osher et al., 2008). These endeavors are most influential when embedded in a multitiered system of supports (Cowan, Vaillancourt, Rossen, & Pollitt, 2013). School psychologists can play an important role in addressing risks by engaging in collaborative efforts with school personnel, families, and community organizations, as well as coordinating appropriate evidence-based interventions (NASP, 2003).

During my internship year, I had the privilege of serving a district with less than 3,800 students in rural California. A significantly large percentage of community residents are socio-economically disadvantaged and/or are from Hispanic/Latino
backgrounds. I worked within the distinct political and cultural systems of two elementary schools (TK-5) and a special needs preschool (ages 3-5). Approximately 80% of the student population qualify for free and reduced lunch and between 27-60 % are English Language Learners. Many students have endured acute or chronic abuse, neglect, poverty, homelessness, unstable or negative family environments, or mental health issues.

Each school site enforces contextually different service delivery models for the student populations. Whereas one of the elementary school sites implements methodical Response to Intervention (RTI) and an inclusive model for specialized academic instruction, the other site does not execute a cohesive continuum of interventions and nor a pull-out model for special education services. The special needs preschool serves as a special day classroom for primary age students who demonstrate moderate to severe developmental disabilities, primarily Autism and Speech and Language Impairment (SLI). A portion of these students also receive academic instruction in the general education preschool setting. To fulfill the dynamic role of a school psychologist, I needed to flexibly adapt my modes of consultation and encourage varying student- and system-level change in congruence with each site’s existing cultural and procedural frameworks.

A portfolio of four work products displays my knowledge base and competence in the HSU domains of school psychology practice. Those products are not contained within this paper due to confidentiality laws and regulations surrounding education and student rights. However, the HSU School Psychology Program manages a method for products to be evaluated by credentialed professionals through the use of an online portfolio system. As my portfolio products evidence, I worked toward integrating services (academic,
behavioral, social, emotional, and mental health) to promote the resilience of children in a multi-tiered system of support. The products for my internship year are outlined in Table 1.

Product 1 features a multidisciplinary psychoeducational evaluation I conducted as part of a fourth grade English Language Learner’s triennial evaluation. This case was quite complicated in that the Individualized Education Program (IEP) team and I highly suspected that this student did not theoretically qualify to receive special education services under the Individuals with Disability Education Act (IDEA) eligibility category of Autism. I thoroughly examined the student’s background information, English language development (e.g. English Language Proficiency), and cognitive, academic, and social-emotional functioning using ethnically and culturally sensitive tools. The results of the evaluation revealed that the student met the IDEA eligibility category for Other Health Impairment (OHI) rather than Autism due to his severe attention and executive functioning deficits. Thereafter, I applied my knowledge of human learning and empirically supported interventions in forming tertiary recommendations and supports.

As depicted in Product 2, I carried out a Functional Behavioral Analysis (FBA) for a fourth grade student receiving special education services whose defiance/non-compliance, emotional outbursts, and inappropriate vocalizations/self-inflicting threats considerably mitigated his academic and daily functioning. In order to understand the context of the student’s emotional and behavioral functioning, I collected background information, conducted extensive observations and semi-structured interviews with all stakeholders, and administered a standardized tool (the Behavioral Assessment System
for Children, Third Edition). Thereafter, I collaborated with the student’s IEP team in developing an accompanying Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP) that served to decrease these interfering behaviors. Since the general education teacher was initially reluctant to participate in the BIP process, I consciously built a working relationship and discussed the team’s legally mandated roles and responsibilities. To determine the effectiveness of the BIP, I carried out a systematic evaluation including several fidelity checks. Post-intervention data showed that the student made improvements in all targeted behaviors measured, especially in the general education setting. Due to the student’s long history of mental health issues, I referred the student for community-based mental health services as well.

Product 3 portrays the implementation of a class-wide intervention that addressed the prevalence of peer aggression in a fifth grade classroom. Many students reportedly argued back-and-forth, made hurtful comments, insulted, taunted and even occasionally pushed or hit one another. These destructive patterns of aggressive behavior were negatively impacting the classroom climate, total academic learning time, and the students’ mental health trajectories. The teacher and I collaboratively administered the ClassMaps survey (a classroom resiliency measure) to monitor student progress, consulted with the students about their perceptions of the identified classroom problems, and then implemented behavioral and classroom management intervention strategies. Applicable lessons were carried out from the evidence-based social-emotional learning curriculum, Strong Kids (Grades 3-5). The results of the class-wide intervention indicated
that the students engaged considerably less in peer aggression at post-intervention, especially in the areas of arguing, making fun of each other, and teasing/saying names.

Lastly, Product 4 illustrates a professional development training I coordinated and delivered to community preschool staff on the topic of inclusive supports for the general education preschool setting. I developed the training upon identifying that a large portion of the community public preschool programs do not cohesively implement supports and accommodations that enable young children with disabilities (ages birth to six) to access their education in the least restrictive environment—a legal and civil rights mandate specified within the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEIA) and Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA). The inclusive practices covered reflect determined areas of need (e.g. behavioral intervention strategies) and empirical evidence found in psychological and early childhood education literature.
Table 1: Domains of Knowledge and Competence in School Psychology Documented in Each Portfolio Product

1. Psychological Foundations
2. Educational Foundations
3. Legal, Ethical and Professional Foundations
5. Data-based Decision Making and Accountability II – Assessment & Intervention for Socialization, Emotional, Behavioral, and Life Skills
6. Consultation and Collaboration
7. Mental Health
8. Human Diversity in Development and Learning
9. Family, School and Community Collaboration
10. Research and Technology

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Conclusions and Recommendations

My cumulative experience in the School Psychology Master’s Program at Humboldt State University strongly mirrors Psychologist, Carl Roger’s notion of reaching congruity between one’s ideal and true, authentic self. In committing myself to the field of School Psychology, I have manifested my innate passion for advocating the overall well-being of children. From a risk and resilience perspective, schools can foster the total development of all children by coordinating a comprehensive continuum of services founded on student needs, family, and community partnerships.

As a School Psychologist Intern, I comprehensively applied the ten domains of best practice as delineated by the NASP within the distinct political and cultural systems of three separate school sites. Over time, I learned how to successfully adapt my delivery of services in accordance with the divergent systems of learning supports and procedures established at each site. These unique experiences taught me that sustainable and effective change takes time, and that individual schools will vary in their readiness to implement improvements.

I strive to continue building a foundation for social, emotional, and mental health in school systems through advocacy. This endeavor will allow me to serve the best interests of students, educators, and families. Since the field of School Psychology itself continuously progresses, there is always room for my growth as a school psychologist in promoting meaningful individual and system-level change.
References


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