

# The Informal Curriculum

## *The Latent Aspect of Psychological Training*

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**ABSTRACT** It has been argued that the nature of academic school psychological programmes and the training provided by them are revealed mainly by the informal and often more latent, messages delivered to students. These informal messages indicate the extent to which the programme treats students as partners in a complex learning process who may participate in determining its course or as those who should be informed; they may regard students as developing adults capable of responsible problem solving in the school setting or as those who still have to learn by watching others; and they determine the complementary roles of students and faculty members. We posit that these informal determinants of the training programme determine to a large extent the role definition of school psychology that guides them and is conveyed to the students.

A review conducted a decade ago (Constenbader et al., 1992) indicated that school psychologists in the USA tended to describe their training as insufficient. About a quarter of them claimed that they did not learn any systematic model of school intervention and others reported that their field work did not reflect the intervention model that was taught in their university. Similar findings contributed to intensive efforts to provide a clearer definition of the field of school psychology and the curriculum derived from this definition. Conceptualizations of this role (Cunningham and Oakland, 1995; Erchul and Martens, 1997; Ysseldyke et al., 1997) delineate about ten professional skills and capabilities required for fulfilling it successfully:

1. Data-based inquiry and decision making. Professional decisions should be based on the available empirical knowledge and should

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*School Psychology International* Copyright © 2001 SAGE Publications (London, Thousand Oaks, CA and New Delhi), Vol. 22(4): 387–400. [0143–0343 (200111) 22:4; 387–400; 018743]

reflect flexibility in thinking that considers alternative possible solutions (Burden, 1994; Schon, 1987).

2. Interpersonal communication. Effective interpersonal skills and ability to communicate with students, teachers, parents and peers are essential for being able to understand the others' points of view, for serving as a change agent and for attaining a greater consensus and harmony in the school.
3. Contribution to improving learning in school. School psychologists should be able to contribute to improving instruction, adopting new methods that enhance student responsibility for self-regulated learning and assessing the application of these methods.
4. Teaching life competencies. School psychologists should be capable of developing methodologies for enhancing a positive school climate, mutual respect, pro-social behaviour and conflict resolution and for reducing alienation and disciplinary problems.
5. Multi-cultural education. Students often come from a variety of racial, ethnic, cultural and linguistic backgrounds. School psychologists may help schools in determining what these students require to succeed and in fighting possible racial, class or gender biases.
6. Recognizing the school as an organization. School psychologists should regard the school as a system and contribute to devising school policies such as discipline or grading and dealing with specific groups of students. They should help schools to become inviting places contributing to all those who are part of them.
7. Prevention and crisis intervention. School psychologists are supposed to recognize factors contributing to behaviour disturbances or school dropout and to design appropriate programmes of prevention and crisis intervention. They should be prepared to address issues like substance abuse, AIDS prevention or sexual harassment.
8. School-family collaboration. School psychologists should understand the impact of the family on the school performance of pupils and be prepared to promote and lead collaboration between school, parents and the community.
9. Research skills. The research skills of school psychologists should enable them to understand what constitutes adequate research and to evaluate empirically local school programmes.
10. Ethics and professional development. School psychologists should practise in school according to appropriate ethical and legal standards. They have a responsibility to continue their own professional development and to help other school staff to continue their professional development.

It appears that these aspects of professional training are generally

accepted, so that different training programmes differ mainly in their emphasis on different domains. Moreover, there seems to be general agreement that experiential learning, practicum-based training and internship should accompany the theoretical study of these domains (Lewis, 1990; Phillips, 1990).

Attempts to agree upon a comprehensive training programme for school psychologists have concentrated mainly on the formal curriculum, that is, on the syllabus content and the professional skills that are derived from it. We believe that an analysis of the formal curriculum is not sufficient for representing the training model underlying a training programme. Programmes with fairly similar lists of courses may differ substantially in their educational philosophy and in their image of the desirable graduate student.

It is the contention of this paper that understanding a psychological training programme requires a differentiation between its formal and informal curricula. The unique features of a programme are expressed more often by its informal curriculum, that is, by the messages delivered to the students concerning their role as future psychologists. Educational discussions of this issue often use the term 'hidden curriculum', (Wren, 1999). We prefer the term 'informal curriculum' since the values and beliefs underlying training programmes are not necessarily hidden. Every informal curriculum of training of psychologists has to deal with several basic dilemmas, such as:

1. What is the educational philosophy underlying the process of training?
2. What is a good training and who are the appropriate trainers of future psychologists?
3. What are the needs of the students who participate in such a programme?
4. What student-teacher relations are required for successful training of these students?
5. What image of the graduate student guides the programme?

The answers to these questions may differ in less developed and in more developed educational systems (Catterall, 1979; Erchul and Martens, 1997). The former may have to cope with a low level of teacher education, low level of academic achievement and high rates of student dropout, whereas the latter can afford to deal with development of students' independence and personal inclinations and with expanding their general education. However, in preparing psychologists for any educational system, the training programme has to be clear about the role model that should direct the students and the future professional development derived from it. The present study discusses the relatively

ignored issue of the informal curriculum of training school psychologists. We present several major dimensions pertaining to this training process. It is quite evident that most programmes do not represent the extreme poles of these dimensions. However, to simplify the discussion we analyse the implications of preferring one pole of each dimension to the other.

### **Inculcating skills versus developing psychological reasoning**

Training programmes for psychologists have to determine the relative importance they assign to inculcating professional skills and techniques compared with developing meta-cognitive processes of psychological considerations and reasoning. Programmes emphasizing the importance of skills will concentrate on teaching a wide variety of diagnostic tools and on instructing intervention and consultation techniques at the individual, the group or the whole school level. The implied message of such programmes is that a better trained student has acquired a wide variety of skills and methods of intervention in his or her academic studies (Ysseldyke et al., 1997). According to this reasoning a major advantage of veteran over novice psychologists lies largely in the greater number of techniques acquired by the former and the greater skill in employing them.

Psychologists in the field often support this perception of psychological training. An interview with novice psychologists looking for a job is more likely to discuss their diagnostic skills than their ability to analyse a complex school problem. Novice psychologists, who are reluctant to find themselves in a position where they are unable to deal with a problem raised by a teacher, a child or a parent, often accept this perception. Students and interns may be quite anxious, fearing that they may offer more help than they can actually give, that they raise expectations in clients that they will not be able to fulfil and that these clients will realize the paucity of their knowledge (Skovholt and McCarthy, 1988). Programmes that inculcate a larger number of professional techniques may help students feel that they have acquired a wider variety of answers to possible questions.

A different model that seems preferable to us derives from the assumption that graduates of the programme are primarily thinking people guided by psychological considerations. Accordingly, training programmes should not concentrate mainly on skills and methods of intervention but on defining problems and problem solving (Burden, 1994; Erchul and Martens, 1997; Farrell, 1993; Guillemard, 1994). School psychologists must have the skills required for working with pupils, teachers, parents and the school as an organization. They should be trained, however, to do two major things. First, to ask questions that

will help them understand the people with whom they work and the issues that are important for the educational setting in which they work. Second, to use professional reasoning to determine priorities, develop strategies for coping with the problems to be overcome and choose partners for completing various assignments.

When a teacher or a parent refers a child for diagnosis, the psychologist may choose to accept this referral at face value and diagnose the child. On the other hand he/she may enquire whether the problem lies with the child, the teacher, the social standing of the child in class or the home situation. The answer to this question may indicate whether testing the child is an appropriate way of dealing with the issue (Christenson and Ysseldyke, 1989; Martens et al., 1995). We believe that professional intervention should start with determining the issues at hand rather than looking for techniques of intervention. The issues determined should guide the decision on whether there is a need for intervention, who it should focus on and who should carry it out (Gutkin and Conoley, 1990).

### **Directing supervision versus enabling supervision**

The issue of teaching skills versus developing psychological considerations is associated with the supervision method employed. Students expect supervisors to show them how to handle their contacts with children, parents, teachers and principals. This expectation may apparently be met by means of two major methods that we shall call directing supervision and enabling supervision.

In directing supervision, supervisors use their experience to show students how they coped with similar situations in the past or how they would have behaved had they encountered a similar situation. The assumption underlying this supervision is that in their training process students will have a chance to acquire a large number of solutions for characteristic school situations, which can be used in their future fieldwork. We assume that providing students with immediate practical answers to their questions may reduce their anxieties in the short run. However, this method of supervision also suggests that they are not yet ready to raise independent professional considerations and to consider how they may proceed in solving problems in school.

Enabling supervision, which directs our work, maintains that students should be taught modes of thinking aimed at helping them to form their own solutions for the problems they encounter in the field. This supervision process helps students to define and analyse the issue at hand and to examine alternative modes of action that may be appropriate, rather than providing them with the solution that the supervisor regards as suitable. This model expects supervisors to abandon the

position of experts who know all the answers and to become partners of students in mutual analysis of problems and seeking possible solutions. This method is also employed in mutual probing of the images, worries or intentions that motivated decisions and actions of students in the school, as well as possible alternative decisions that could have been made.

Experience shows that graduate students of psychology taking their first steps as consultants or therapists tend to develop dependence on their supervisors and to emphasize their own lack of experience compared with them (Hill et al., 1981; Loganbill et al., 1982; Ronnestad and Skovholt, 1993; Stolenberg and Delworth, 1987). Moreover, they tend to believe that their supervisors know the solutions to the issues raised by them but refuse to reveal them for didactic reasons. They should be expected to learn that there is no single solution for most of the complicated problems and that they should be partners in offering alternative solutions and in taking responsibility for the solution chosen by them. Enabling supervision is aimed, therefore, at developing students' independent thinking, self-confidence and sense of competence and at encouraging them to initiate activities in their work at school.

The debate between these methods of supervision is not about teaching techniques. It pertains to a wider issue: what learning process will have a greater contribution to promoting change processes in students, their role perception and their ability to perform effectively. Directing supervision seems more appropriate for programmes assuming that these changes are a function of inculcating techniques and skills. Enabling supervision is based on the different assumption that the important changes that should take place in students refer to their belief in themselves and in their ability to understand, analyse and sense the focal issues in the problems encountered.

Despite the theoretical importance of the distinction between these two methods of supervision, it is expected that supervisors and teachers will find some golden path between the future and the present needs of students and will help them answer pressing questions such as 'What am I supposed to do in my next meeting with a worried parent?' Finding such a golden path is more critical whenever students are requested to be responsible for actual interventions in class.

### **The sorcerer's apprentice versus the developing adult**

Different models of training present different perceptions of students as well as the learning processes that may contribute to their development. The apprentice model maintains that students do not yet understand how psychologists work, what the psychological processes that they go through in the course of their training are and what the real problems

of their clients will be. The best way for learning all these is to follow an expert psychologist, observe his or her work and adopt similar working methods. The assumption underlying this model is that the development of apprentices is contingent on their success in imitating the master.

Training programmes have several ways of showing students how they regard their status. The programme may emphasize the importance of independence and initiative as major aspects of the school psychologist's role, but make it clear that these do not refer to the current position of the students. A clear message pertaining to the limited abilities of the students is conveyed by practicum-based training opportunities that do not allow them to do independent work or give them assignments that do not reflect the kind of work done by the school psychologist. The apprentice role likens students to tiny babies still learning to walk. This image is often similar to the students' feeling that they still have a lot to learn in order to become psychologists and it is easily associated with their doubts about whether they will be able to fulfil their own or their teachers' expectations.

We believe in another growth model, in which students get the message that they are developing adults. We assume that people who are given a meaningful and responsible task will feel appreciated and their behaviour will reflect the respect and esteem attributed to them (Goffman, 1961). Assigning students to meaningful and responsible tasks conveys the message that the programme regards them as mature people who have prior experience, sensitivity and abilities that make them eligible for working as psychologists. This message indicates that their teachers believe in them and in their ability to develop and become independent psychologists.

Students are more likely to receive this message when the training programme requires them to perform some of the roles of a school psychologist and to cope with real school problems. Dealing with such problems, they may sense the responsibility and the anxieties that are involved in making meaningful decisions about other people, as well as the joy of making good decisions. The message of such practice is that the programme will extend any help that they may need, but expects them at the same time to cope with these problems as adults who have to act in a complex setting even though they do not possess all the required psychological tools. It seems to follow that a major part of training school psychologists should be practicum-training opportunities that enable them to serve as independent psychologists in a defined setting in the school. These opportunities rendered indicate that their teachers have faith that, supported by appropriate supervision, students can be trusted to function responsibly and efficiently despite the small amount of their current knowledge.

Training programmes that promote student independence and

responsibility are unlikely to allow this responsibility to be exercised in respect of their curriculum. We posit that inviting students to criticize the curriculum opens additional opportunities for fostering the students' own responsibility for their learning and mature thinking. Students should evaluate the various aspects of the curriculum and indicate the ways in which these fulfil or do not fulfil their expectations and what changes are required to make their learning more meaningful. While students expect the heads of the programme to solve these difficulties, they are requested to treat them like any similar difficulty that they may encounter in school. They are asked to consider how to present their grievance to the relevant teachers and supervisors without giving offence and how to suggest ways of improving their future learning.

These discussions may help students to cope with the difficulty of negotiating with authority figures and of conveying to them either criticism or praise. Thoughtful negotiations may improve the situation or demonstrate to the students the limitations of attempts to change things (Sarason, 1971). It is important for students to realize that this is not just responsibility training, that some of their suggestions will have an effect on the curriculum and that there are reasons for not accepting other suggestions.

### **Feedback: self-examination and psychological costs**

The professional and personal development of school psychologists is linked with their readiness to examine seriously and honestly their development as psychologists and as people and with their ability to understand the reasons for succeeding in some domains or relationships and failing in others. Accordingly, despite the emotional difficulty involved for both students and teachers, any school psychology training programme should conduct systematic feedback sessions with each of its students. This feedback should sensitize students to their performance and teach them to examine the domains in which they tend to fulfil or fail to fulfill, their own and their teachers' expectations. The feedback session discusses how students can make optimal use of available learning opportunities to enhance their personal development. It also indicates that their teachers are interested in them personally and feel empathy for their difficulties and satisfaction of their success.

When feedback sessions are perceived as a method of helping students to take a better look at themselves, they may serve as an important method for self-assessment. Even under optimal conditions these sessions may constitute a painful experience that raises difficult issues of self-image, personal suitability, emotional investment and the discrepancy between self and others' assessment of development (Hill et al., 1981; Loganbill et al., 1982; Ronnestad and Skovholt, 1993; Stolenberg



and Delworth, 1987). Feedback sessions may have a different meaning when students feel that they are held for the purpose of criticizing them, emphasizing their deficiencies or questioning their suitability as future psychologists. Under these conditions feedback sessions may raise students' anxieties of rejection and losing the esteem of important others. These reactions are likely to be enhanced when students feel that this feedback reflects lack of empathy for their problems or teachers' negative attitudes.

It is important that students regard the feedback session as offering formative rather than summative evaluation (Slavin, 1997), namely a process designed to help them assess their development and not to rate their personality and suitability. The feedback should concentrate, therefore, on students' analysis of their performance and should relate to positive aspects of their development, not only their difficulties. Students tend to assess their development by comparing their present condition with their performance and self-confidence in the past. This subjective measure of change conceivably will not correspond to the changes expected by supervisors. In light of the major importance attributed to this feedback by students, supervisors must distinguish aspects of this feedback that can be accepted and utilized by each student, from those that he/she cannot regard as characteristic of his/her behaviour or personality. Discussion of the latter will not contribute to improving students' performance or self-awareness.

### **Educational and clinical training**

Graduate and internship programmes tend to distinguish educational from clinical training. Recent definitions of the role of school psychologists (Cunningham and Oakland, 1995) tend to widen the domains of their responsibility, but do not include child psychotherapy among them. We believe that this division of responsibilities reflects historical development rather than a comprehensive analysis of school needs. School psychology programmes should therefore examine the extent to which they should also train students as clinical child psychologists. Kalman Benyamini, who played a major role in moulding the Israeli conception of school psychology suggested a re-framing of this issue.

According to this analysis (Benyamini, 1981), defining the client of school psychologists should determine their required skills. Benyamini suggests four client definitions that are not mutually exclusive. One client is the *individual child*. Psychologists are responsible for the mental health and the proper development of the pupils: children with emotional difficulties, those who need special education and pupils with outstanding abilities and talents. To help these children psychologists need clinical training and the ability to treat those in need (Hughes, 1999).

Experience shows that a single psychologist cannot answer the needs of all students. The *teacher* is therefore defined as a second client of the school psychologist. It is assumed that teachers who are ready to serve as mental health agents may reach a large number of pupils in need and, under the supervision of the psychologist, help them solve their problems. According to this role definition, school psychologists should develop consultation and supervision skills (Gutkin and Kurtis, 1999) and help teachers in their efforts to solve pupils' problems.

A third perspective defines the *school and its problems* as the major client. According to this position school psychologists should deal with the difficulties of the school as a system, rather than working with individual teachers and help it devise policies for treating difficult or slow learning groups of pupils. In this role psychologists are expected to: (a) understand the impact of family background or cultural diversity on students' learning; (b) be aware of the current issues that are important for the educational system; (c) be involved in the public or political aspects of school life and (d) serve as change agents (Bowsher, 1992).

Emphasizing school difficulties may harm its public image and exert a detrimental effect on its self-improvement efforts (Benyamini and Klein, 1971). The *school and its resources*, therefore, are suggested as a fourth client of the psychologist: School psychologists should take the role of organizational psychologists in order to advance all the sections of the school without being associated necessarily with treating the weaker groups. In this role they may help to improve both school self-image and its status in the community. In this capacity they may promote discussions on improving the academic achievement of all pupils or of talented pupils (Elliott et al., 1999), initiate social activities among teachers and pupils, foster school relations with the community and the parents (Christenson and Buerkle, 1999) and introduce prevention programmes.

In this role school psychologists must have clinical skills and consultation abilities, as well as knowledge of how to work with the school as a system. Moreover, they should be able to determine which of these skills should be employed on different occasions. Lack of any of these skills may reduce their ability to do their job effectively.

### **The nature of the school psychologist's role: the case of Israel**

The issue of formal and informal training programmes is easily extended to the role played by school psychologists after graduating from university. In the field, much as at university, there are differences between how school psychologists are supposed to do their work and how it is actually done. We argue that this difference represents the gap between the formal and the informal agenda of school psychology. This issue is

next examined for two dilemmas characteristic of the Israeli scene. The first is the extent to which school psychologists can wish and actually do act as comprehensive psychologists. The second pertains to their role definition once they endorse the concept of a comprehensive psychologist.

*Comprehensive versus expert psychologist*

Schools need consultants who can help them to solve pressing problems and examine how they function at the individual and the classroom levels and at the level of the school as a system. Analyses of school needs therefore endorse a comprehensive role definition of school psychology (Erchul and Martens, 1997; Ysseldyke et al., 1997). However, this role definition puts psychologists in a complex and ambiguous situation. They have to believe in their ability to analyse new situations and to help clients in the school solve a wide range of problems. They are requested to determine priorities and decide how to allocate their limited time and resources among different potential clients and various issues, in which their intervention is required. Novice psychologists may feel that they do not have the knowledge and the experience required for coping with this definition of their role. They often doubt their professional abilities, sensing that they promise their clients more than they can deliver (Rønnestad and Skovholt, 1993; Skovholt and McCarthy, 1988). Note that this dilemma is not limited to novice psychologists. Veteran psychologists may define themselves as experts in treating special education pupils and contribute a lot to advancing this group. This success will not make them the psychological advisors of the school if they expect to deal just with issues deriving from their domain of expertise and refrain from addressing other problems that their clients in the school regard as pressing (Siegel and Cole, 1990).

The complexity of the role of comprehensive psychologist, the fact that school psychologists in Israel have relative freedom in determining their activities in school, as well as personal preferences, may account for the finding that many Israeli school psychologists tend to prefer a more clinical definition of their role. A recent survey (Raviv and Erhard, 1998) indicates that Israeli school psychologists devote 20.9 percent of their time to individual and group therapy and to consulting parents, 17.8 percent of their time to diagnosing pupils and only 17.2 percent of their time to consulting teachers and principals. It is quite clear that a role definition derived from this time allocation would tend to be more clinically oriented, reflecting the emotional needs of pupils, parents, teachers and the psychologists more often than the needs of the school as an organization.

There is reason to believe that this inclination may reduce school expectations that their school psychologists will become their

comprehensive advisors. School principals and the educational system as a whole often worry about issues such as pupil violence, drug abuse, a large number of problematic pupils, conflicts between teachers and school management or between school and parents, low status of the school in the community, quality of teachers or low level of academic achievement. School psychologists may eventually find that refraining from providing answers to such issues may cause teachers and principals to regard them as incompetent to answer the school's pressing needs. When the school authorities do not expect the school psychologist to respond to these needs they are likely to look for other professionals who can do so. School psychologists must cope with this dilemma and make up their mind about their role in the school.

*School psychologists or educational psychologists?*

The issue of a comprehensive psychologist or a specialist is associated with whether school psychologists are by definition educational psychologists. The International Association of School Psychologists includes a wide variety of educational tasks in its role definition of school psychology (Cunningham and Oakland, 1995). However, in Israel a large number of school psychologists apparently do not wish to become educational psychologists. Over 40 percent of them were trained as clinical psychologists (Raviv and Erhard, 1998) and quite often they make no substantial contribution to major educational issues such as multicultural education, teaching heterogeneous classes, inducing new teaching methods or improving the academic performance of pupils. They let others deal with these issues although they feel threatened by teachers consulting consultants, organizational psychologists or diagnostic psychologists who take over functions that 'belong' to them. Prevention programmes, for instance, are supposed to constitute an important part of the school psychologist's role (Ysseldyke, 1997). However, most of such programmes that were devised in Israel were not written by psychologists and are not carried out by them.

School psychology programmes must be aware of the informal messages delivered to students. We believe that they should make students understand that they do not have to give up doing what they know best and feel confident in doing. However, those of them who wish to make an impact on school decision-making have to understand the needs of the school as perceived by its management and teachers and help fulfil these needs. This analysis of the clients' needs is essential for determining what intervention is required, whether it should concentrate on individual pupils or teachers, classes and special groups of pupils or should mainly involve the school level and the people responsible for school decision-making.

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