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Building Bridges, Avoiding Schisms in School Psychology

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It is somewhat paradoxical that society's safe-haven, the school, should harbor turbulence. In the birthing of school psychology, the progeny of clinical and educational psychology, Lightner Witmer, recognized that his "educational therapy" required diversity of services, types of service recipients, and professional/interdisciplinary practitioners (Baker, 1988)—it was not a "one size fits all" plan.

The emergence of the scientific-practitioner model for clinical psychology (Shakow et al., 1947) charted a collision course with school psychology. Phillips (1990) noted that "a clinical psychology in child psychology no longer existed, and school psychology's capacity to prevent and repair school mental health problems of children was diminished" (p. 9). To some extent, the split from clinical psychology raised the question of whether school psychology should give greatest emphasis to education or psychology, as though one had to dominate the other. Therefore, the Thayer Conference (Cutts, 1955) provided school psychology with what should have been a defining foundation, and later conferences added strength to school psychology (Woody, LaVoie, & Epps, 1992).

The first sign of a possible flaw in the conceptualization of school psychology came about in the 1960s, when there was a competition between psychologists aligned with insight-oriented versus behavioral approaches. Theoretical integrationists, more or less, helped bypass a

long-lasting barrier, but there were six other schisms that emerged and that continue to this day:

First, the debate about education versus psychology, witnessed by some training programs that ping-pong back and forth seeking a departmental home.

Second, the establishment of the National Association for School Psychology (NASP; Farling & Agner, 1979) promoted subdoctoral training and often contradicted the APA Division of School Psychology, and there is still more competition with than support for each other.

Third, the psychoeducational model for school psychology emerged (Bennett, 1985), spawning differences of opinions about whether school psychology services should be primarily clinical or educational.

Fourth, psychological assessment (psychometric and projective) became the focus of discord among school psychologists.

Fifth, the problem solving and Response to Intervention (RTI) approaches seem to provoke either defensive or attacking communications.

Sixth, the APA Model Licensing Act seems to nurture class differences.

On either side of each of these schisms, members of the school psychology professional community sometimes exist in two warring camps, using research or erudite statements as armament. Although scholarly debate should be encouraged and is the *sine qua non* of professionalism, the elevated emotions that are interlaced into positions statements seem potentially problematic (e.g., the tone could lead to unacknowledged bias in research and training). [In preparing this manuscript, I posed relevant questions to several school psychology leaders, each of whom definitely chose to be oppositional to a viewpoint, and did so with considerable emotion—but none wanted to be quoted!]

By definition, conflict resolution requires active strategies (VandenBos, 2007). From the specialty of social psychology, there is the notion that conflict will occur when resources are unequal between subgroups within the same sphere.

School psychologists should be dedicated to dispassionate objectivity when evaluating individual differences, and professional ethics provide the benchmarks for decision-making. Koocher and Keith-Spiegel (2008) describe the psychological approach: "Our traditional training as behavioral scientists teaches us to believe that an individual who applies rigorous experimental methods can discover significant truths within ranges of statistical certainty. We seldom give simple dichotomous answers to questions, preferring to use probabilities, ranges, norms, and continua that reflect the complexity of individual differences" (p. 459).

School Psychology folks cannot (easily?) bridge the schisms described above because of the mandatory "scientific" commitment and ambiguity (i.e., no black or white answer) that are inherent to professional ethics that control decision making for, say, school psychology practice. What strategies, then, are viable?

A strategy of professionalism supports colleagues' seeking and evaluating the appropriateness of innovative ideas about factors, principles, or events. Instead of thinking of that opposing viewpoints requires discarding one or the other, it is more strategically wise to see different viewpoints as expanding the options and enriching the scholarship that lead to evolving improved roles and functions. Collegiality must prevail.

Turning to group theory for a strategy, those of us in school psychology should accept that APA Division of School Psychology and NASP are comprised of interdependent professionals. Like it or not at times, members of both associations have emotional ties and interact on direct or indirect bases (Franzoi, 2009). In the eyes of the society, school

psychologists are school psychologists. In keeping with the primordial notion of Lightner Witmer, it seems self evident that there is justification and need for diversity of services, types of service recipients, and professional/interdisciplinary practitioners—this foundation has survived the ages. It seems to be a good omen that Tharinger, Pryzwansky, and Miller (2008) believe that having “two professional homes” is a positive accomplishment and each association benefits from the other: “This dual professional heritage, history, and identity has resulted in distinct yet overlapping and at times integrated developmental pathways for professionals desiring to practice in schools” (p. 535).

With all due respect to those who wish to fire a salvo over the bow of another ship, it seems that school psychology has matured as a professional specialty to the point that it should be committed to peaceful progress. A commitment to conciliatory and collaborative strategies is most apt to bring stability and growth to school psychology.

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