Beginning Graduate Studies in School Psychology:

A Journey of Reflection and Optimism

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Abstract

As I begin my graduate studies, I have had the opportunity to reflect on how I came to this point in my career, and the current state of school psychology services in my school community. My journey into graduate studies is one that will be reflective and optimistic as I strive to change the model of school psychology services to better meet the needs of the students, parents and school personnel in my community.
As I begin my graduate studies program in school psychology, my view is one of reflection and optimism. My goal is to become the school psychologist for my current school district, which is located on the remote islands of Haida Gwaii, on British Columbia’s Northwest Coast. With only 550 students, the current practice in my district is to bring a school psychologist in on contract, twice a year, to assess students who have been referred. In spite of its small size, the school district trustees and administrators have recently recognized that the school community, including students, their parents and teachers, need regular school psychology services. To address this need, the school district has decided that it would be a sound educational and financial decision to train a qualified teacher to become an on-island school psychologist. After successfully completing the selection process, I find myself in the unique position of beginning my graduate studies knowing that I will have a job in my field when I am finished; however, the I do recognize that I must approach my studies and my new role with great reflection.

As a special education teacher for the past decade, I have collaborated with many school psychologists and witnessed how their services can inform and empower students, parents and educators. More often though, I have witnessed how difficult it can be for students, parents and educators to understand the results of school psychology services and put them into meaningful action. I want to believe that there is more to being a school psychologist than the ability to assess and categorize students for the purpose of gaining funding for schools, but truthfully, I cannot say that I have seen evidence of much other than this. Still, I am driven by a desire to find
another way. I am not arguing that assessment is not valuable or important. On the contrary, I am hoping to develop a means to make assessment more valuable and important.

Through my studies, I am optimistic that I will gain the skills, knowledge and confidence to provide services that are meaningful and empowering for all involved; however, I am cautious because I know it will be my greatest professional challenge to develop a service model that is based on the needs in my community, rather than rely on the familiarity of what has been done before. Erhardt-Padgett, Hatzichristou, Kitson and Meyers (2004) argue that it is the responsibility of school psychologists, even those in training, to shift our current model of assessment, diagnosis and remediation, to one that focuses more on data supported services, group-focused intervention and collaborative partnerships. Erhardt-Padgett et al (2004) also state that, “as skilled evaluators, we have a means of using assessment information as data for intervention services. Assessment is not necessarily a nemesis, but rather a functional tool for establishing baselines and monitoring performance” (p. 109). In his book, Merrell (2006) describes in detail how and why the field of school psychology must adapt to students’ needs to affect change. Terjesen, Jacofsky, Froh, & DiGiuseppe (2004) also describe how school psychologists can be more effective through integrating a model of positive psychology into schools, focusing on prevention rather than diagnosis and intervention alone. It gives me hope to know that I am not alone in my desire to make a change to the current model of school psychology services, and that I can look to the research of others as I strive to meet the needs of my own school community.

My graduate studies will also be one of my greatest personal challenges. I am beginning to understand the level of work, the critical thinking skills, as described by Facione (2006), and the self-discipline it is going take to balance my studies with my family and work obligations.
Simply getting organized to begin my first two courses was more intense than I could have imagined; however, I have confidence that I will succeed in meeting all of my obligations. I will be certain to use some of the strategies from the many websites available, such as the tips on time management detailed by Kuther (n.d.), and I am looking forward to developing mutually supportive working relationships with the students in my cohort, my instructors and my supervisor. As I begin this unique journey, it is with reflection and optimism that I take the first steps.
References


