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PREVIEW

**The Continuing Education Interests of New York State
Early Childhood School Psychologists**

by
Iris Goliger, MS.Ed.

**A Doctoral Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Psychology
in the Department of Psychology at Pace University**

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PREVIEW

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ABSTRACT

Continuing education (CE) for school psychologists is crucial in order to maintain knowledge and skills obtained during preservice education and training, to keep abreast of current research, new tools and techniques and the implications of these for practice, and to develop new competencies based on the changing needs of society. Historical trends in school psychology training and the rapid expansion of the scope of practice to encompass infancy and early childhood are discussed to contextualize the dramatic need for CE research to inform development of CE programs for practitioners serving the zero-to-five-year-old population.

The Infant and Early Childhood Psychology Survey, developed by members of the research task force of the New York Association of Infant and Early Childhood Psychology (NYAECIP), was used to gather information about infant and early childhood psychology practice in New York State, including practitioners' preferences in topics, formats, and means of recognition for CE efforts. The survey was sent to all 2,286 of the New York State affiliates of the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) and the New York Association of School Psychologists (NYASP). Of the 812 respondents (36%), 214 (9%) were selected for the final sample because of their acknowledgement of professional work with the zero-to five-year-old population.

Nearly all respondents were Caucasian (90.5%). Most respondents held Master's degrees (63.6%) as their highest level of education, and the majority had received their highest degree training in school psychology (87.3%). The sample was highly skewed in terms of gender (80.4% female, 19.6% male), and males were represented in greater than expected proportions as being older, more likely trained at the doctoral level, and to have received training in a content area other than school psychology. Most respondents indicated New York State School

Psychology Certification as their highest credential (67%) and a large number were new practitioners with less than 5 years experience (32%).

Nearly all subjects (98%) endorsed infant and early childhood psychology CE interests, with most practitioners endorsing more than half of the topics presented as needs. Gender, age, educational level, content area of pre-service training, years of experience and credentials were unrelated to overall level of interest in infant and early childhood CE, but were related to interest in specific CE topics. Each topic listed received endorsement from at least 33% of the sample. Percentage of time engaged in infant and early childhood practice was related to specific CE interests but was the only factor related to overall number of CE topics endorsed. Demographic background, education and training, and credentials were also related to interest in specific CE topics. Topics of greatest interest to the sample were (1) intervention approaches, issues and strategies, (2) assessment approaches, issues and strategies, (3) disabilities: diagnosis and intervention, and (4) pharmacology with the early childhood population.

The majority of practitioners (92.2%) preferred a workshop format for CE, especially if provided by a professional organization (80.3%). New practitioners were interested in CE through the professional organization at a significantly higher rate than experienced psychologists. Females were notably more interested in weekend opportunities for CE than males. The majority of respondents (76.7%) preferred short, intensive programs of study (e.g., three days or less), compared with extended commitments such as formal graduate or certificate programs. However, formal graduate or certificate programs were of interest to more than a third of the sample. Interest in formal recognition for CE was related to interest in a formal certificate program. Most respondents (72.6%) indicated interest in receiving continuing education units (CEUs) for their CE activities.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The emergence of infant and early childhood psychology practice is an illustration of the ongoing and rapid diversification of psychology into subspecialties. Researchers who have explored the needs of infants, young children and their communities, often point to service deficits and call for improvements in the standards of care and the range of services available to these groups. The identified needs of the zero-to-five-year population are multidimensional, encompassing knowledge of physical, emotional, social and cognitive development, and appreciation of an ecological framework that is pertinent to any member of a larger system, particularly those dependent upon others for their care. School psychology specialists, that is certified school psychology practitioners who are required to be trained to the Master's level at a minimum, are identified as being the best-positioned to meet the demands of the early childhood population, in light of the traditional training emphases on early childhood development, assessment, intervention and consultation that are considered core areas of competency for the generalist (Flannagan, Sainato & Genshaft, 1993; Gredler, 2000; Gutkin & Conoley, 2000; Kratochwill & Stoiber, 2000; Mowder, Widerstrom & Sandall, 1989; Nastasi, 2000; Sheridan & Gutkin).

In response to the call for increased services to the very young, school psychologists are often engaging in practice with the zero-to-five-year-old population, their families, and the medical, educational and therapeutic systems that surround them. The result is a dramatic diversification in school psychology practice that mirrors the state of psychology as a whole. Kratochwill and Stoiber (2000) state that: "the field of school psychology has become so extraordinarily diverse in its conceptual, research and theoretical foundations...[that]

straightforward definitions of practice and research in the field are somewhat elusive." (p.591).

There is an identity crisis for infant and early childhood school psychology practitioners, who are by virtue of the newness of the discipline frequently working in minimally-charted territory, are likely to have received little specialized pre-service training in preparation for work with infants, toddlers and preschoolers, and for whom there lacks a formally recognized subspecialty within major professional associations such as the American Psychological Association (APA) (Nastasi, 2000).

An inherent paradox exists: School psychology practitioners are thought to be best positioned for work with the zero-to-five-year-old population because of their generalist training, but have little specific infant and early childhood training. Another dilemma is that in New York State (NYS), private practice funding is not available for non-licensed psychologists, regardless of their level of expertise specific to a given target group. In short, while school psychologists are best qualified to serve infants, young children and their families, they are not eligible for funding for services except within a school or early intervention setting. Lack of eligibility for a NYS license to practice psychology in the private sector, based on a requirement of doctoral level education and 1200 hour preservice internship, may limit accessibility of children and families to services provided by the most appropriate professionals to effectively meet their needs. Best-positioned in this case, does not necessarily imply fully competent, and there is evidence that current school psychology training programs may need to modify curricula to meet the emerging needs of the infant and early childhood population, now covered in their scope of practice (Nastasi, 2000).

Early childhood school psychology practitioners face many of the same concerns regarding competency as other psychologists. Advances in human knowledge and technologies have led to an information revolution among all scientifically based disciplines (Toombes & Lindsay, 1984). Consumers, service providers, practitioners, professional organizations, academic and professional training institutions, and oversight and monitoring agencies all recognize that

professional competence in one's field entails a lifelong commitment to learning (Hellcamp, Imm & Moll, 1989). In fact, the concept of competence, itself, has shown itself to be fluid. Standards change based on the latest research and the needs of society at a given time. Each of these impacts practice. For psychologists, particularly those in a rapidly advancing field such as infant and early childhood practice, pre-service education and training may quickly become outdated and obsolete (Houle, 1981; Toombes & Lindsay, 1984).

Continual shifts in socio-cultural, political, legislative and economic forces render changes in practice that are so broad that even the most comprehensive pre-service training cannot feasibly educate practitioners in all the skills needed for long-term competent service (Carroll, 1998; Dubin, 1972; Houle, 1981; Toombes & Lindsay, 1984). This is illustrated by the impact of legislation such as Public Law 94-142 in 1975, which mandates a free and appropriate public education to all children over age three, and Public Law 99-457 in 1986, which establishes guidelines for assessment, identification and intervention with infants and toddlers with developmental deficiencies. The result of these laws is a markedly altered landscape in terms of the roles, populations and settings in which school psychologists work.

It remains to be determined through research whether infant and early childhood practitioners are best prepared for their work through doctoral level clinical subspecialty training, that treat the emerging discipline as unique and distinct from the general school psychology training, or whether the needs of infants and young children are best addressed as an extension to the generalist school psychology training standards. What is known is that regardless of whether the formal coursework results in a master's or doctoral degree, there is no enduring competency status (Dubin, 1972; Houle, 1980). Carroll (1998) states that, "the one clear constant tenet of [doctoral] education and training is that it can only ever yield 'journeymen' or 'fledgling' psychologists, who must then be persuaded to participate in lifelong continuing education and professional development in order to become accomplished, full-fledged psychologists" (p. 21).

Continuing education (CE) for psychologists geared towards building new skills and competencies is an increasingly important aspect of ongoing practice. Such training has traditionally been conducted within the professional society in response to the loud calls from consumer groups for increased competency among providers (Crespi & Rigazio-DiGilio, 1992; Dubin, 1972; Hellcamp, Imm & Moll, 1989; Houle, 1981; Toombes & Lindsay, 1984). In their report on the National Conference on Postdoctoral Education and Training in Psychology conducted by the Education Directorate of the APA in 1994, Reich, Sands and Wiens (1995) write that "this lifelong learning we have so long espoused must be more visible, formal and systematic to ourselves and others because of the demands it must meet and the rapidity with which these demands are expected to change" (p. 4).

Despite the apparent awareness of the importance of CE, and the calls by our professional organizations such as APA for greater levels of collective skill and accountability for practitioners, these issues are only under recent consideration (Crespi & Rigazio-DiGilio, 1992). CE is typically left to the discretion of the individual practitioner (Carroll, 1998). The CE requirements instituted by APA and NASP, fail to assess a loss of membership and rights as a penalty for lack of compliance, and do not require any demonstration of actual competency by members (Crespi & Rigazio-DiGilio, 1992; NASP, 1989; VandeCreek & Brace, 1991). In short, members are compliant if they accrue and document hours, regardless of their competence in skills pertinent to practice demands. Fortunately, it appears that most psychologists are compliant with continuing professional development beyond the receipt of a graduate degree, even though their participation is voluntary and remains unchecked due to the lack of competence-based training evaluation (Kalafat & Neigher, 1983; VandeCreek et al., 1990).

Government oversight agencies provide certifications and licenses to psychologists based on minimum standards in pre-service education and training. These standards are designed to protect the public from harm from incompetent care and potentially enhance the quality of psychological services (VandeCreek et al., 1990; Vitulano & Copeland, 1980). As information is

rapidly disseminated in the information age, and consumers are more knowledgeable about best practices, a corresponding call for improved standards of care in the human service professions has arisen. This aspect of consumerism has resulted in high rates of litigation in the United States, and many oversight agencies are responding by demanding higher standards of care, and instituting mandatory CE (MCE) requirements for re-certification and re-licensure of psychologists (Hynd & Schakel, 1981; Rosenfeld, 1981). Such requirements typically involve the accumulation of a set number of credits over a discrete period of time, but are generally disconnected from competency demonstrations or a requirement that CE take place in an area of assessed need or related practice demands of the psychologist. Tying CE experiences to actual practice needs remains at the discretion of the practitioner (McNamara, 1975; Vitulano & Copeland, 1980; VandeCreek et al., 1990).

Evaluation of competency has remained uncertain due to a striking lack of research related to the actual CE needs of practitioners, and the impact of focused and pertinent CE experiences upon the skills and practice choices of practitioners (Kalafat & Neigher, 1983; Rosenfeld, 1981). With regard to New York State's infant and early childhood practitioners, the dearth of information goes even further. Exploration of basic descriptive information regarding practitioners, the characteristics and demands of their practices, and an assessment of their practice-related CE interests/needs has not been conducted. Without this information, we are at a loss in planning meaningful CE experiences that could positively influence the practice of infant and early childhood psychology, and might remedy the gaps in competence between historical training trends and the rapidly changing needs and service demands in the field.

The purpose of the present study is to obtain fundamental descriptive information about the school psychology practitioners in New York State working with infants and young children. The study examines the interests of current infant and early childhood school psychologists in a variety of practice-based CE contexts, and explores the relationship of these preferences to demographic features. Optimally, this research will serve as groundwork for those planning CE

experiences for early intervention practitioners and will provide a basis from which to explore other aspects of CE, including efficacy of training in terms of competency demonstrations of advanced skills.

The questions that drive the present study may be conceptualized in four main categories:

(1) overall interest in infant and early childhood CE: To what extent are early childhood school psychologists in New York State interested in infant and early childhood CE opportunities? Is general infant and early childhood CE interest moderated by personal characteristics (e.g., age, gender, and ethnicity), education, training and credentials (e.g., highest degree achieved, training content area of highest degree, and state-issued credentials held), experience levels (e.g., the number of years of practice and whether a practitioner is new or seasoned), and practice demands (e.g., the amount of time working with an early childhood population)? (2) infant and early childhood topic interests: Which CE topics are of greatest interest to infant and early childhood school psychology practitioners? Are these interests moderated by the personal characteristics, education, training, credentials, experience, and practice demands of the zero-to-five practitioners? (3) CE format preferences: Which formats for CE experiences appeal to infant and early childhood school psychologists? Are any other variables related to format preferences? (4) recognition preferences: Do the current school psychologists working with the zero-to-five-year-old population have preferences with regard to formal recognition for their CE efforts? Are these practitioners interested in receiving Continuing Education Units (CEUs) as documentation for their CE efforts? Are recognition preferences related to any other variables?

In order to contextualize the current study, chapter two will present a literature review beginning with a brief overview of the theoretical bases of adult education and motivational factors relevant to professional adult learning. This will be followed by a discussion regarding the assessment, meeting of needs and evaluating efficacy in CE. Next will be a description of the generalist training in school psychology and the impact of key legislation upon training and practice. Then, a thorough review of research pertaining to CE in school psychology and infant

and early childhood practice will be reviewed. With this foundation laid, the CE interests of New York State infant and early childhood school psychologists can be explored in detail.

PREVIEW