

**Teachers' Perceptions of School Psychologists: The Impact of  
Response to Intervention (RtI) Services**

by

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PREVIEW

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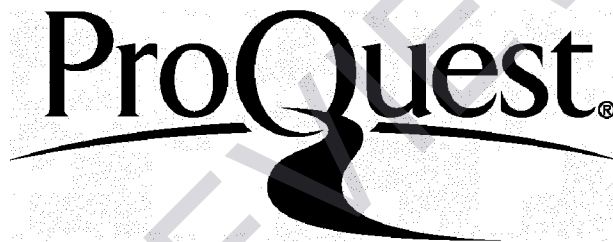
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## **ABSTRACT**

Past research has shown varied perceptions of the role of school psychologists. Administrators and teachers have been surveyed to assess their knowledge of the roles of school psychologists and whether school psychological services are helpful. As Response to Intervention (RtI) has been implemented in the schools since the 2004 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), another layer has been added to the role of school psychologists. There is limited research assessing the impact RtI has had on teachers' perceptions of school psychologists. The present study assessed teachers' perceptions of the role of school psychologists and explored the impact that RtI has had on these perceptions, particularly whether RtI implementation changes teachers' perceptions. This study explored how knowledgeable teachers were about school psychologists' roles, how helpful school psychological services were perceived and characteristics associated with school psychologists. A total of 110 teachers from Baldwin Union Free School District, in Baldwin, NY completed the survey; teachers' responses were examined based on their background regarding RtI implementation, as well their teaching experiences in special vs regular education. Results indicated that teachers who implemented RtI reported more knowledge of RtI services ( $p < .001$ ), and more awareness of how often school psychologists engaged in team meetings ( $p = .04$ ) and RtI services ( $p < .001$ ) than teachers who had not implemented RtI. Teachers who implemented RtI services also reported more awareness of various services offered by school psychologists including, in-service training ( $p = .01$ ), Functional Behavioral Assessment/Behavior Intervention Plan (FBA/BIP) development ( $p = .03$ ) and providing RtI services ( $p < .001$ ). Special education teachers

reported more awareness of how often school psychologists engaged in individual counseling ( $p = .04$ ) and in FBA/BIP development than general education teachers ( $p < .001$ ). Special education teachers also reported more awareness of the various services offered by school psychologists including, in-service training ( $p = .01$ ), team meetings ( $p = .01$ ) and FBA/BIP development ( $p = .04$ ). Special education teachers reported utilizing the services of the school psychologist ( $p < .001$ ), and the recommendations in a psychological report more ( $p < .001$ ) than general education teachers. An unexpected result was found regarding teachers' ratings of the degree of problem severity required to involve the school psychologist, the difference between special and general education teachers' ratings was actually significantly greater ( $p < .01$ ) when RtI was implemented. There were significant relationships between school psychologists' interpersonal skills, problem solving skills, consultation skills, professionalism and likability and teachers' ratings of perceived helpfulness ( $p < .01$ ) and general satisfaction ( $p < .05$ ) of their school psychologist. These findings appear to underscore the importance of teachers' experience with RtI and special education as factors that significantly influence differences in their knowledge of, perceived satisfaction with and helpfulness of certain school psychological services. With RtI implementation, general education teachers may be more inclined to seek help from school psychologists sooner. Implications for school psychologists and future research are discussed.

## **CHAPTER I**

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **Overview**

One of the main roles of school psychologists has been providing psychological assessment for the purpose of identifying students' special education needs (Fagan & Wise, 2000; Watkins, Crosby, & Pearson, 2001). However, the role is much broader than just providing assessments. School psychologists also provide counseling services, consult with teachers, administrators and parents, provide crisis intervention, create behavioral interventions, and participate in pupil personnel and Committee on Special Education (CSE) meetings (Watkins, Crosby, & Pearson, 2001; Reinke, Stormont, Herman, Puri, & Goel, 2011; Suldo, Friedrich, & Michalowski, 2010). In recent years, being a member of the Response to Intervention (RtI) team has become an added role for school psychologists.

RtI is a process of service delivery consisting of multiple levels of interventions with increasing levels of intensity for students who are experiencing academic and behavioral difficulties (Ball & Christ, 2012). The training school psychologists have received in counseling, interventions, consultation, assessment and research methodology provides a skill set that is needed with the implementation of RtI (NASP, 2006). School psychologists are able to identify relevant research, consult with parents, teachers and administrators, offer trainings, create assessments and evaluate the program's effectiveness (Sullivan & Long, 2010). Since the school psychologists' role has largely

dealt with assessment pertaining to special education, they have typically had more interactions with special education teachers over the years. With the addition of RtI, which is a general education initiative, it would appear that becoming a member of the RtI team would allow for more interactions with general education teachers, thus bringing about the question, "Has this changed general education teachers' perceptions of school psychologists?" While there have been studies that assessed teachers' perceptions of school psychologists (Gilman & Gabriel, 2004; Watkins et al., 2001; Farrell, Jimerson, Kalambouka, & Benoit, 2005; Reinke, Stormont, Herman, Puri, & Goel, 2011; Gilman & Medway, 2007; Mallin, Beimcik, & Hopfner, 2012), there is limited research which assesses whether the implementation of RtI has changed teachers' perceptions in any way. The current study sought to add to the literature by assessing the impact of RtI on teachers' perceptions of school psychologists.

### **Statement of Purpose**

As RtI services have become more prevalent in schools, this has added another layer to the role of school psychologists. To date there is no research assessing teachers' perceptions of school psychologists that includes the effects of RtI. The present study assessed teachers' perceptions of the role of school psychologists and explored the impact that RtI may have on these perceptions. Teachers' knowledge of school psychology and their perceptions of the helpfulness of school psychologists in meeting students' needs were examined in an attempt to replicate findings by Gilman and Gabriel (2004) and Gilman and Medway (2007). Reasons why teachers perceived school psychologists as helpful, as well as the attributes teachers associated with school psychologists whom they rated as being helpful were also explored.

## **Theory Guiding Research**

School psychology has progressed as a specialty rooted in the fields of psychology and education. School psychologists have knowledge of theories in the areas of educational psychology, developmental psychology, social psychology and developmental psychopathology. They also have knowledge of learning, effective instruction, and family processes. School psychologists use these areas of expertise to alleviate students' academic, intellectual, behavioral, and social-emotional problems encountered in school. School psychologists also use their knowledge of statistics and measurement theories to evaluate standardized and nonstandardized assessments, academic, behavioral and social-emotional interventions and classroom programs (APA, n.d.).

With schools' implementation of RtI which involves data-based decision making, school psychologists' training in assessment, measurement, and statistics puts them in a distinct position to provide consultation in this area. In many school districts, the school psychologist may be the only person who has an adequate understanding of this methodology to support a system of assessment that will sufficiently support the implementation of RtI. Thus, school psychologists would appear to be crucial in the RtI implementation process (Ball & Christ, 2012).

## **Research Questions**

To examine the impact that the emergence of RtI implementation in schools has had on teachers' knowledge and perceptions of school psychologists, several research questions were examined. The present study sought to assess whether the emergence of RtI in schools has changed teachers' knowledge and perceptions of school psychologists;

whether there is a difference between general and special education teachers' knowledge and perceptions of school psychologists; and, whether the emergence of RtI services has decreased the gap between general and special education teachers' perceptions of school psychologists.

The present study also hoped to gain knowledge of which areas teachers would like to see more, less or about the same level of involvement from school psychologists; and sought to identify which character traits correlate with teachers' ratings of knowledge and perceived helpfulness with respect to the role of the school psychologist.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **Evolution of School Psychology**

The role of school psychologists has undergone many changes since the profession's beginnings in 1890. According to Fagan and Wise (2000), the development of the field of school psychology in the United States can be divided into two time periods. The Hybrid years (1890-1969) of school psychology included the first school-based psychological clinic (1899, Chicago Public Schools), the first individual given the title “school psychologist” (Arnold Gesell, 1915), the first training program in school psychology (New York University [NYU], 1928), the first book on school psychology (Hildreth, 1930), the first school psychology journal (Journal of School Psychology, 1962), as well as the first organization for school psychologists (National Association of School Psychologists [NASP], 1969).

In 1896 Lightner Witmer founded the first clinic for psychological services in the United States at the University of Pennsylvania. Witmer is considered by many to be the father of clinical and school psychology, as he was an advocate for training psychologists to be experts in treating the many issues that arose in a school (Fagan & Wise, 2000). Witmer's influential work in his clinic at the University of Pennsylvania provided the foundation for what is now known as the scientist-practitioner model. Some of his first cases were with children who displayed school-related difficulties similar to what would be diagnosed as a learning disability today (D'Amato, Zafiris, McConnell, & Dean,

2011). Upon searching the literature and finding no causes or treatments for these disorders Witmer began to conduct research to assess these children's issues in order to develop interventions. This process was the beginnings of the development of what is known as Evidence-Based Interventions (D'Amato et al., 2011). In 1896, Witmer presented a paper at the American Psychological Association (APA) conference entitled *The Clinical Method in Psychology and the Diagnostic Method of Teaching*. The purpose of this paper was to create a role and structure for a specialty within applied psychology. His plan included investigating the development of mental and moral retardation in children using statistical and clinical methods; creating a psychological clinic within a hospital-training school to treat children with issues that interfere with school progress; creating practices for those who work in the areas of teaching and medicine; and creating training programs for "the expert" who would work in conjunction with the school, or medical practice who treats mentally retarded children (D'Amato et al., 2011). Although not well received, this paper was representative of a practical specialty that would evolve into school psychology. One of the most important aspects of this paper was that it stressed the use of scientific and experimental methods for understanding and treating children with psychological and developmental deficits. He also proposed using a multidisciplinary problem-solving team approach, and a problem-solving process similar to today's Response to Intervention (RtI) which would lead to evidence-based interventions (D'Amato et al., 2011).

In the beginning of the 20th century there was a rising interest in the idea of intelligence which led to the development of IQ tests for the purpose of identifying children who required special education services (Farrell, 2010). Psychological services



in schools increased due to the development of psychological and educational tests and the interest of school systems in identifying students' levels of intelligence. These tests quickly became the major identifying feature of psychologists working in schools, and administering and interpreting these tests became the main role of the first school psychologists (Fagan & Wise, 2000). This was important for the role of the school psychologist, as this task could only be performed by someone in this profession and was valued by schools (Farrell, 2010).

After World War II there was an increased demand for psychologists in the schools to provide students with services. The baby boom and desire for quality education became a focus and there was more of a need for children to receive individualized instruction in order to succeed academically (D'Amato et al., 2011). Although psychologists provided mental health services and psychoeducational assessments there were a limited number of school psychologists. There were also questions about how to best meet student's psychological needs. Following the path of the Boulder Conference, APA's school psychology division applied and received funds to create the Thayer Conference, which addressed these issues. As a result of the conference, the functions of a school psychologist were developed. In addition, training guidelines were established which included the need for doctoral level and master's level psychologists and an orientation in both psychology and education. Although the role of the school psychologist became more explicated as a result of the Thayer Conference, the definition of school psychology services was broad. Also, without a true distinction having been made between the doctoral and master's level psychologists, the two separate levels of service drifted into one. Since school psychology was not seen as a

doctoral only specialty compared to some of the other specialties (i.e. clinical and counseling psychology) it created conflict between school psychologists and APA leadership. This conflict eventually led to the founding of NASP (D'Amato et al. 2011).

During what Fagan and Wise (2000) termed the Thoroughbred years (1969-Present), NASP has created many opportunities in school psychology (i.e. publications, national certification, task forces, etc.). There has also been an increase in journals, training programs, as well as state associations (Fagan & Wise, 2000). Despite the many professional advancements that have contributed to the evolution of what is currently known as school psychology, the role of the school psychologist as evaluator has continued to be a major part of their functioning in the schools throughout the Thoroughbred years (Fagan & Wise, 2000) as evidenced by research (Farrell, Jimerson, Kalambouka, & Benoit, 2005; Watkins, Crosby, & Pearson, 2001) assessing teachers' perceptions of school psychologists indicating that teachers expect school psychologists to conduct IQ testing to assess for special education. School administrators also believe this task to be important to the role of school psychologists (Gilman & Gabriel, 2004).

The 1970's was a period of increased special education placement and legal rulings which contributed to the continued emphasis on psycho-educational assessment, in place of prevention, consultation and/or intervention services. However by the 1980's a shift began. Educational discussions shifted from utilizing funds to provide special education services for children to decreasing special education services and using funds to prevent children from being placed in special education. In addition, family dynamics began to change in the 1980's. There was an increase in single-parent homes, both parents working outside the home, substance abuse, teen pregnancy, suicide and school

violence. This created the need for ways to help these at-risk children whose needs placed them somewhere on the continuum between regular education and special education (Fagan & Wise, 2000). These issues expanded the role of school psychologists to include consultation, prevention and intervention services. In focus groups conducted with 39 school psychologists (Suldo, Friedrich, & Michalowski, 2010) from two school districts (one urban district and one suburban district), school psychologists indicated that they provided a broad range of mental health services. The services included individual and group counseling and crisis intervention. They also reported providing consultation, case management, counseling services to teachers, psychoeducation for parents, as well as trainings to parents and teachers. The school psychologist role continues to change with new federal legislations and state regulations including the expansion of RtI in schools (NASP, 2006).

### **Current Roles of School Psychologists**

According to the NASP (n.d.),

School psychologists provide direct support and interventions to students; consult with teachers, families, and other school-employed mental health professionals (i.e., school counselors, school social workers) to improve support strategies; work with school administrators to improve school-wide practices and policies; and collaborate with community providers to coordinate needed services (p. 1).

School psychologists are uniquely qualified members of school teams that support students' ability to learn and teachers' ability to teach. They apply expertise in mental health, learning, and behavior to help children and youth succeed academically, socially, behaviorally, and emotionally. School psychologists