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A Qualitative Study of School Psychologists' Perception and Interpretation of Their Professional Identity

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A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGISTS' PERCEPTION AND

INTERPRETATION OF THEIR PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY

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Abstract

The primary focus or aim of this qualitative multiple-case study was to increase understanding of how experienced school psychologists define themselves as professionals within the field, taking into consideration the profession's collective or organizational identity, the parameters established by the organization, and the actual performance of the job within the educational setting. Specifically, this study examined how the individuals' definitions had changed over time and what lived experiences led to development and change in professional identity. Six school psychologists with 10 or more years of experience from a large urban Southwestern school district's school psychology department were invited to participate. Data were collected through in-depth interview and then through participation in a focus group. Individual and focus group interviews were recorded and transcribed and member-checks provided. Four dominant themes emerged from the data: (1) Developing a definition of oneself as a professional school psychologist is a lifelong process of engagement, constantly evolving and adapting based on each person's accumulated lifetime and professional experiences and interpreted through their lens, (2) Identity is multi-faceted with roles defined in response to the needs of the people served and interpreted within the contexts in which the participants worked, (3) All of the participants characterized themselves first and foremost as advocates for children, (4) All identified leadership as the most critical skill set needed in the performance of their practice. Implications for school psychology practitioners, trainers, and program coordinators were indicated.

Acknowledgement Page

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Chapter 1

According to Burke and Stets (2009), "an identity is the set of meanings that define who one is when one is an occupant of a particular role in society, a member of a particular group, or claims particular characteristics that identify him or her as a unique person" (p. 3). Burke and Stets address these meanings as being the *role, social* and *person* identities that are the basis of constructing and creating an integrated sense of self for the individual (p. 210). However, most people do not have one sense of "self" because they operate in many contexts and therefore are seen as having multiple identities. The pursuit of knowledge and enlightenment being sought through this study is based upon the understanding of the above concept of constructed identity and its manifestation through one of many roles assumed by individuals, that of an occupation or more specifically, a profession. An occupation is understood to mean what a person does to earn a living. While a profession can be one's occupation, profession is understood to mean an occupation with several unique characteristics or "elements" (Mosey, 1985, p. 371) including: the aim of serving and being accountable to those it serves and the public as well as promoting the public good within its specific domain, having a code of ethics, having standards developed and set by a regulating professional organization, having autonomy in its practice, and having a specialized body of knowledge obtained through lengthy and rigorous study (Greenwood, 1957; Mosey, 1985; Hatch, 1988; Burbules and Densmore, 1991; Cruess, Johnston, and Cruess, 2004). Neary (2014) defines professional identity as "the concept which describes how we perceive ourselves within our occupational context and how we communicate this to others" (p. 14) while Slay and Smith (2011) describe it as the individuals' image of who they are as a professional. In 1990 Van-Zandt proposed that professional identity was all about the development of and acceptance of personal responsibility for a role in a profession and continuing to pursue

opportunities to increase and enhance related skills. It is also about maintaining high moral and ethical standards and behaviors and demonstrating pride in that profession.

Since its conceptualization and inception by Lightner Witmer in 1895, school psychology has been trying to find itself (French, 1984; French, 1990) and establish itself as a profession, giving its members professional identity and a unified front. It slowly progressed and developed in response to the events of, and within the context of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. These were times of rapid and significant social change and industrial growth. Attitudes toward children were changing, and laws were being passed to protect them. A significant force impacting the development of school psychology and other services was the enactment of compulsory school attendance laws. Now schools were mandated to deal with children who before might never have been enrolled in school: children with physical, behavioral, and learning problems (Braden, DiMarino-Linnen, and Good, 2001; Fagan, 1992; Fagan and Wise, 2007; Flanagan and Miller, 2010; Medway, 1992). The landscape of education was changing with the emergence and development of programs for "special" education. To support the new programs, in addition to the school psychologist, new and specialized service positions including the school nurse, counselor, speech/language therapist, and school social worker came into being (Fagan, 1992). Initially, school psychology services continued to be provided as Witmer had established, in clinics inside and outside the schools, where the primary function was to measure mental ability and make program or placement recommendations. Over the years, school psychology services have been evolving from the direct service assessment/intervention model to one which includes involvement in advisement and broader systems levels and reform issues (D'Amato, Zafiris, McConnell, and Dean, 2011).

In 1983 Jack Bardon wrote that "school psychology has been accumulated more than it has been developed" (p.185), an apt description if its history is traced. Over the years of its growth, school psychology has "collected" responsibilities and functions. It has responded to the political and sociological changes and movements as they have been reflected in education. As noted, initially the primary task of school psychology was assessment of mental ability and achievement. Over time the profession has taken on individual and group counseling, mental health services and consultation, behavioral assessment and intervention, and other roles/functions as have arisen (Ball, Peirson, and McIntosh, 2011; Bardon, 1983; Curtis, Hunley, Walker, and Baker, 1999; Ross, Powell, and Elias, 2002; Reschley, 2000).

In 1945 the American Psychological Association (APA) formed Division 16, Division of School Psychology, thereby establishing school psychology as a separate entity from clinical and educational psychology, and giving it an organizational identity. At the Thayer conference nine years later, the leadership of the school psychologists gathered to work together toward developing some semblance of consensus regarding the role and functions, qualifications, and training of school psychologists. The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) was formed in 1969 as a representative organization for those practicing the profession (Kramer, 1987; Fagan & Wise, 2007). In spite of the efforts of these organizations to establish their statuses as professional organizations, challenges were continuing as to the legitimacy of these claims and even to the legitimacy of psychology as a profession, to the extent that members of the field felt the need to justify their position (Peterson, 1976) and 10 years later Thomas Oakland took up the banner for school psychology (1986). As late as 1990, Phillips described school psychology as a "field [that] has stood for no set body of psychological doctrine or professional practice, and the separate strands of the field have never been knitted together into a

firm and patterned fabric" (p.3). Even the two organizations that purported to represent the field,

APA Division 16 and NASP, disagreed as to how school psychology and its practitioners should

be considered: is school psychology the stepchild of the broader field or is it a profession in its

own right (Bardon, 1982)?   While the "parent" figures of the profession were engaging in their

philosophical tug-of-war in the process of establishing a collective identity, the "children" were

on the front lines, performing in the manner in which they interpreted and understood the

position and responsibility to be from their individual perspectives (Trachtman, Elkin, Guttentag,

Leibman, & Levin, 1965).

The first year school psychology student typically takes a class that addresses the "role and

function" of the school psychologist as delineated by the institutionalized or collective

definitions from the field's representative organizations. Regardless of the philosophical and

theoretical focus of the school psychology program of a particular institution, a summary of the

primary role and function of the school psychologist is, as defined by Fagan & Wise (2007),

"...to bring a psychological perspective to bear on the problems of educators and the clients

educators serve" (p.4). Fagan & Wise further state "the roles of the school psychologist are

multifaceted. School psychologists are engaged in numerous activities that are all ultimately

aimed at helping children" (p. 156). When asked what school psychology is and what this

general description means, practitioners, consumers, and other professionals who work in the

field of education most often provide a checklist of things they believe a school psychologist

does. Conflicting messages based on theoretical tenets and political agendas/positioning have

created a dissonance in the development of professional identity among educators in general,

including school psychologists. According to Jack Bardon (1968), the complexities of the

factors influencing education make it challenging for people working in the field to know who they are.

Beauchamp and Thomas (2009) stated that "identity is an ongoing process, and therefore that identity is dynamic rather than stable, a constantly evolving phenomenon. It involves both a person and a context…" (p.177). Beijaard, Verloop, and Vermunt (2000) add to this description, noting professional identity is influenced by how we see ourselves, how we understand others' perception of us, and how the greater society views us. People continue to reflect, whether consciously as at times of significant life events or crises, or unconsciously about what is happening in their lives, about their actions, and about who they were, who they are, and who they are becoming. And so it is with professional identity. In 1968, Jack Bardon described the school psychologist in the context of a society that was in a time of apparent chaos, confusion, and reorganization:

> The pace of living, the amount of readily available information, the media of communication, and the moral sureties are no longer what they were…. We are part of a primary social institution, the school, which is undergoing changes which reflect almost as closely as any aspect of our society the agonizing changes in society itself…. It would be incredible, given this complex of factors influencing our professional behavior, if we did know exactly who we were. I have come to believe that any school psychologist who is reliable is probably not valid. By this I mean that the school psychologist who defines his role the same from year to year is probably not doing what he should be doing, which is, after all, to serve a changing institution in a changing society (p.188).

Jack Bardon's observations and challenges span the years and are as relevant today, 50 years later, as they were in 1968. The complexities of the factors influencing education make it

challenging for people working in the field to know who they are or, in other words, to establish their professional identity (Bardon, 1968). Members of the professional community of school psychologists continue to have a responsibility to reflect on if and how they define and redefine themselves within the parameters of the organizational identity in addition to how they have and are constructing their professional selves within the framework of a rapidly changing society and education system. Continuing reflection and self-awareness are necessary to the development of a philosophy and set of values that define the individual's professional identity and his functioning in the work setting and will add to the body of knowledge that will help the profession improve and sustain. In so doing, school psychologists can better serve their clients and the social institutions in which they work and ultimately better serve society.

The purpose of the current research is to explore how individual school psychologists define themselves as professionals within the field and also to explore the influences that contributed to and impact this identity. At this time there is a need to identify the common elements and themes that define the professional identity of the school psychologist from a personal perspective. Specifically, this study examined the following:

How do school psychologists define themselves as professionals and describe their lived experience within the profession? How has that definition changed over time? What are the lived experiences that led to development and change in professional identity?

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

The need for specialized services in schools quickly became apparent at the end of the 19th and

beginning of the 20th centuries, a time of intense and rapid socio-economic change, increase in

social consciousness, and educational reform. Those movements that would be at the forefront

of the educational system in the United States for most of the twentieth century were well

underway by the turn of the century: compulsory education, structures, and guidelines for a

standard classroom, the nine-month school term, free textbooks, education and enculturation of

immigrant and Native American children, responding to the demands for equal education for

African American children, and the philosophy of education that espoused educating the whole

child through active engagement in learning and as part of a social structure or community

(progressive education) (Kohn 2008; Merrell, Ervin, & Peacock, 2012). Compulsory schooling

for all children pretty much demanded services that went beyond 'just' teaching as children with

multitudes of differences and needs became part of the school and classroom community.

Suddenly schools were inundated with children who had previously been on the fringes of

society and who were now not only entitled to be educated, but mandated to be so. Many of

these children brought with them physical, behavioral, emotional, and learning problems (Fagan

& Wise, 2007; Phillips, 1990).

Finding ways to educate this new cohort of children soon led to the establishment of special

classes by school systems across the country. However, along with that came the need to figure

out how to best determine who might be eligible for the special classes as well as to determine

how individual differences were impacting learning. And so the 'assessment' system developed

in the form of child study programs as established by Lightner Wittmer, where psychologists and

other specialists worked in teams in the study and diagnosis of individual children's needs (Cutts,

1955). When viewed in retrospect, the socio-economic 'universe' of the United States was in an extremely intense state and was expanding rapidly in terms of changes in attitudes toward children and recognizing their psychological value and their place in improving and saving society (Fagan & Wise, 2007). The confluence of factors of the times might be said to have led to the 'Big Bang' of school psychology.

The Beginnings of a New Field

It would be remarkable if the progress and establishment of school psychology as a unique and professional field flowed smoothly and effortlessly from its points of origin. But, as Jack Bardon (1986) so aptly stated, "Progress is painful, full of dissension, unpredictable, and messy" (p.33). And so it was with the developmental path of the field of school psychology as it sought recognition of its specialty and an identity. Eminent School Psychologist and historian, Thomas Fagan, situated the early development and struggle for identity of the field of school psychology over a period of time designated as the "hybrid" years, 1890-1969 (Fagan & Wise, 2007). The early phase, from the turn of the century through about 1940, was a time of sorting out who was who in the field of psychology and what each was about, as well as what to call this emerging field specialty. Fagan and Wise (2007) and Phillips (1990) discussed the foundation of the field from the standpoint of a combination of educational and clinical psychology orientations. Lightner Witmer, whose focus was on children's learning difficulties in the schools, is generally acknowledged to be the father of both clinical and school psychology (Routh, 1996; McReynolds, 1996; Merrell et al., 2012) and is credited with first establishing the child study clinic (McReynolds, 1996; Phillips, 1990) in the United States. Shortly, educational psychology, with its experimental orientation to education, came to the forefront through the work of G. Stanley Hall and his promotion of the child study movement as well as through the work of

William James and John Dewey's promotion of progressive education (Phillips, 1990; Walberg & Haertel, 1992; Olsen Murray, 2001). The integration of psychological thinking and approaches for solving educational problems logically led to the use of the term "school psychologist" to delineate a psychologist working in a school setting (Fagan, 1996). While the title of school psychologist had appeared in the literature as early as 1898 (Fagan, 2005; Fagan & Wise, 2007), Arnold Gesell is thought to be the first practitioner to officially be hired under that title when he was hired by the Connecticut State Board of Education in 1915 primarily for the purpose of doing diagnostics (Fagan & Wise, 2007; Merrell et al., 2012).

As Merrell, et al. (2012) pointed out, although school psychology was being practiced during this formative period in the field, there was no "formal structure or specific professional organization" (p. 27). Fagan (1999) stated that "...for most of the period ... (1890-1930), there were no state or national standards for training or practice and no state associations of school psychologists, although there were a few local or regional groups" (p.3). Early practitioners in the field came from diverse backgrounds and training and plied their trade based on what they perceived the needs to be. They operated under a "plethora of titles, such as psychological examiner, psychoclinician, and clinical or consulting psychologist" (Merrell et al., 2012, p. 27). Fagan (1999) referred to this on-the-job training as "diversity of necessity" (p.3) because no set standards or guidelines for preparation were available. He further indicated that "...most [university] programs have no history of school psychology training before 1950, even though their administrative departments date to early in the century" (1999, p.3). As with Gesell being the first officially titled school psychologist, the first program specifically designed for school psychologists at the undergraduate and graduate levels was established at New York University in 1929. In the 1930s a doctoral level program was established at Pennsylvania State University.

New York and Pennsylvania were also at the forefront in establishing credentialing criteria at that time (Fagan & Wise, 2007). The reorganized APA provided some refinement and differentiation between fields of psychology through its divisions. Of particular importance to school psychology was its first organizational identity (Division 16) as separate from clinical (Division 12) and educational psychology (Division 15) by the APA in 1945 (D'Amato et al., 2011; Fagan & Wise, 2007).

Momentum was growing toward the establishment of school psychology as a specialized professional field and the Boulder and Thayer Conferences, held in 1949 and 1954 respectively, gave the movement further impetus and refinement toward establishing a collective and organizational identity as well as professional status. The Boulder Conference on Clinical Psychology had been funded by government agencies and planned primarily by the APA in response to the need for services for working with disabled personnel returning from the military after World War II. Thus the focus was on working with adult populations. Results of the work of the psychologist attendees of the Boulder Conference served to promote the legitimacy of applied psychology through designs of credentialing plans, and the introduction of the scientist-practitioner model or Boulder Model of training, as it was thereafter known, where psychologists were trained not just in research but also as clinicians (Fagan & Wise, 2007; Merrell, et al., 2012; Phillips, 1990; D'Amato, Zafiris, McConnell & Dean, 2011). In the context of the times, attention shifted to the immediacy of the need for addressing the large numbers of returning veterans, just as the need had occurred for psychologists and services during the turn of the century within the context of the rapid educational reform movement.

The Thayer Conference and the Formation of NASP

Not to lose the momentum of the progress made by the clinical community, APA Division 16 leadership obtained federal funding for a conference, the Thayer Conference, named for the hotel in West Point, New York where it was held in 1954. This conference proved to be a landmark event in the establishment of school psychology as a profession by providing specific guidelines for establishing the field's standards and credibility. The topics to be covered were refined and organized based on the results of surveys sent to practicing school psychologists. "The Thayer Conference proceedings is one of only a few comprehensive surveys of school psychological services undertaken in the first half-century of school psychology, and it is clearly the most comprehensive picture available of the circumstances of school psychology around 1950" (Fagan & Wise, 2007, p. 48). The goal of the conference was to develop positions on the role and function of the school psychologist, to develop guidelines and make recommendations for training, and to delineate qualifications for credentialing of members of the field. The Conference members also developed a definition of school psychologists that would help differentiate them from other educational personnel and psychologists, and that would unify them through a single title and specific identity:

> The school psychologist is a psychologist with training and experience in education. He uses his specialized knowledge of assessment, learning, and interpersonal relationships to assist school personnel to enrich the experience and growth of all children, and to recognize and deal with exceptional children" (Cutts, 1955, p.30).

During the 1960s, as awareness and utility of the field and the position expanded and increasing numbers of practitioners began to be integrated into the education fold, multiple stakeholders in education, including state licensing officials, boards of education, state associations, and

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universities attempted to describe what a psychologist was. According to Magary (1966), these

descriptions "confirm[ed] the viewpoint that school psychology is in an early stage of

development in which its future direction and form have not fully emerged" (p.340). Farling and

Agner (1979) more directly stated that "it developed so unevenly in different states that the

national view of the profession was one of confusion and disorganization" (p.141).

Fagan and Wise (2007) credit the establishment and actions of APA Division 16 with giving

school psychology the organizational identity it needed and with promoting and gaining national

recognition for it. However, most practitioners did not join the association because of the

requirement of holding a doctorate for full membership. Once a defined specialty in school

psychology with training guidelines was established, states began to require credentialing of

practitioners without concern about the two levels of training (sub-doctoral and doctoral) that

were recommended by the Thayer Conference. School psychologists began forming state

associations, the first of which was in Ohio in 1943. By 1969 there were 17 state associations

(Fagan & Wise, 2007; Merrell et al., 2012). In an effort to unify the growing number of state

organizations, and partly in response to the APA stance of excluding non-doctoral level school

psychologists, in 1968 a planning committee was formed at a National Invitational Conference

hosted by the Ohio State Association of School Psychologists. The following year the National

Association of School Psychologists (NASP) was formed at the St. Louis convention. Its

purpose was formulation of national guidelines and a communication network for its members,

to address the lack of input from school psychologists in Washington on matters and educational

issues that would ultimately impact the field, and to establish the development of a national

professional identity (Ball, Pierson & McIntosh, 2011; Fagan & Wise, 2007; Farling & Agner,

1979).

Definitions

Over the years a number of summative or collective definitions have been suggested and promoted as being representative of school psychology's organizational school psychology identity. The most recent APA Division 16 'public description' is as follows:

> School Psychology is a general practice and health service provider specialty of professional psychology that is concerned with the science and practice of psychology with children, youth, families; learners of all ages; and the schooling process. The basic education and training of school psychologists prepares them to provide a range of psychological diagnosis, assessment, intervention, prevention, health promotion, and program development and evaluation services with a special focus on the developmental processes of children and youth within the context of schools, families, and other systems. School psychologists are prepared to intervene at the individual and system level, and develop, implement, and evaluate preventive programs. In these efforts, they conduct ecologically valid assessments and intervene to promote positive learning environments within which children and youth from diverse backgrounds have equal access to effective educational and psychological services that promote healthy development (Fagan & Wise, 2007, p.3).

A search to find the definition of School Psychology on the NASP website home page under the heading, About School Psychology, yields the answer in terms of the questions "Who are school psychologists?" and "What do school psychologists do?"

> 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 partner with families, teachers, school administrators, and other

professionals to create safe, healthy, and supportive learning environments that

strengthen connections between home, school, and the community.

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. (www.nasponline.org)

In addition, a review of state association websites indicated that the majority of states have

aligned themselves with or are affiliates of NASP and reference the NASP Practice Model as

their standard and guide.

From Niche Service Specialist to Plenary Professional

It is said that all things happen in perfect right time and, in the case of the field of school

psychology, with the dedication, foresightedness, and hard work of the leaders in the profession

who brought it together (D'Amato et al., 2011; Fagan & Wise, 2007; Phillips, 1990). The

establishment of NASP as a representative organization of school psychologists and its aftermath

closed the chapter on the question of establishing the legitimacy of school psychology as a

profession. The Association became the 'home base' of practitioners as attested to by rapid

membership growth from 850 in 1969 to approximately 24,000 in 2008. Recently the number of

school psychologists working in some capacity within the profession in the United States is

estimated to be approximately 35,000 (Fagan & Wise, 2007; Farling & Agner, 1979; D'Amato et al., 2011; Reschley, 2000; http://www.nasponline.org/resources /podcasts/fagan2_transcript.aspx). However, school psychology services are not limited by boundaries. As the field was emerging in the United States in response to societal changes, the same was happening in Western Europe with the defining impetus being to meet the needs of nations struggling to recover from World War II (Cutts, 1955). As in the United States, landmark conferences and meetings were held leading to the establishment of the International School Psychology Association (ISPA). And, as with NASP, its purpose was "… to promote professionalism in school psychology [but] at an international level" (Fagan & Wise, 2007, p. 354). ISPA evolved from the establishment of support and efforts of committees formed within the APA and NASP (Fagan & Wise, 2007; Oakland, 2003) and continues to be the representative organization for countries around the world.

 In 2007, Jimmerson, Skokut, Cardenas, Malone, and Stewart conducted an investigatory study to determine how many countries of the 192 Member States of the United Nations provided some form of school psychology services and also looked at what evidence there was that supported its presence. Their results indicated that 83 of the 192 countries showed some evidence of school psychology-type services being provided to varying degrees by professionals with a variety of titles including counselor, educational psychologist, psychologist in education, and school psychologist, to name a few (Jimerson, Stewart, Skokut, Cardenas, & Malone, 2009). That evidence included regulations requiring licensing or credentialing, the presence of established related professional associations, university curriculum specific to the training for the service position and also opportunities for advanced university doctoral level training (Jimerson

et al, 2009; Nastasi & Varjas, 2011). It is estimated that the number of school psychologists in the world was approximately 100,000 as of 2007 (Fagan & Wise, 2007).

The Roles of the Modern School Psychologist

Jack Bardon (1983) observed that "school psychology has not developed from something into something else over the years…. It has grown by accretion, in layers, one on top of the other, retaining the old while adding the new" (p.185). School psychology came to be as a result of sociological changes that ultimately impacted education, particularly with the mandate for compulsory education, along with the development of child labor laws (Braden, DiMarino-Linnen, and Good, 2001; Merrell et al, 2012). It came about as an attachment to and function of special education with the focus on the individual child. Its initial function coincided with the publication of the Binet-Simon intelligence scales which were used to assist with "classifying and sorting children who were not successful in the general education settings…for the purpose of providing them with specially designed training in other settings" (Merrell et al., 2012, pp. 26-27). The role expanded into that of interventionist or "repairer" as a natural follow-on to the question of what to do with the "test" results. Symonds (1942), in a review of available literature dating from 1925, reported that the functions of the school psychologist included not only administering tests for diagnosing but also providing therapeutics for children with learning and behavior differences. Other functions included conducting research and engaging in consultation with parents and school staff. Symonds proceeds to discuss a need for expanded training for school psychologists so that they might facilitate communication and problem solving between children, teachers, and administrators. He described the school psychologist as "…a trained specialist who can discover and interpret the meaning of the psychological forces at work in a

school and hence make possible a more enlightened attack on the problems of adjustment of individuals"

(p. 176). The establishment of Public Law 94-142 (the Education for All Handicapped Children Act) in 1975 cemented school psychology's attachment to special education when it mandated appropriate special education eligibility assessments (Merrell, Ervin, and Peacock, 2012). Currently, school psychologists continue to engage in a wide variety of activities that can be categorized as falling under assessment, consultation, and intervention. The categories of activities associated with assessment, consultation, and intervention have remained consistent over the years. However, implementation of these varies widely. For example, an assessment may be part of a problem-solving process designed to help determine, guide, and monitor interventions, or it may involve administration of standardized instruments and techniques (i.e., observation, interview, etc.) to address questions of eligibility for special education services. Intervention can have many different interpretations and implementations also. School psychologists may work with individual students/student groups, with individual teachers, or with teams of school personnel. Interventions may take the form of tutoring or academic remediation, individual or group counseling, and crisis counseling. School psychologists may work with Individual Education Plan (IEP) teams to develop programs for students who are eligible for special education services or with general education teams to help develop interventions that might remediate academic or behavioral difficulties. School psychologists consult with parents to address their concerns about their children and engage in problem-solving or to provide lists of resources. Often there is an overlap between the areas of service such as when a consultation is focused on developing an intervention to address academic or behavioral concerns. School psychologists also participate in systems consultations through committee

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participation and through providing training to help facilitate or implement broader change such as in the promotion of the pre-referral or Response to Intervention (RTI) model where interventions for children are systematically determined, implemented, and monitored through data collection.

While most school psychologists work in settings where they have direct contact with children, there are others who function in less traditional roles involving administration, training, and supervision such as university trainers and instructors, and administrators or overseers of school system psychology departments (Merrell et al., 2012; Fagan & Wise, 2007). Fagan (2002) further pointed out more specifically that school psychology's involvement and adoption of responsibility includes addressing issues of child abuse, vocational and career development, giftedness, and neuropsychology. It is necessary for the school psychologist to have a wide base of knowledge and, hopefully, expertise in the performance of their duties. Fagan proposed, however, that "collectively, the plethora of positions reveal that the point has been exceeded where a school psychologist can be trained to perform all roles and functions with competence or to be all things to all people" (2002, p. 7). Reynolds (2011) also observed that, the nature of the field is such that it is not possible for school psychologists to keep up with the knowledge base and science related to the field as it rapidly increases and changes. This is even more difficult in light of the increased demands that schools put on school personnel as they experience "service creep" (Reynolds, p. 926) and are asked to do more and more for the students they serve. He proposed a change in training such that school psychologists are instructed in foundation knowledge and skills and then are given the opportunity to specialize and develop special competency in a particular area.

One of the earmarks of a profession is the establishment of a professional organization that assumes the responsibility of developing and setting regulatory standards that might constitute and set the bar for best practices within which to ideally practice. Over time, NASP has developed and refined standards for school psychology training programs. These were developed through a task force and first published in 1984 under the title *School Psychology: A Blueprint for Training and Practice,* the purpose of which was to provide "a framework to guide the future and practice in school psychology" (Ysseldyke, Burns, Dawson, Kelley, Morrison, Ortiz, Rosenfield, & Telzrow, 2006, p.5). It is now in its third edition, *Blueprint III,* and lists the following 8 domains as the basis of training and practice of school psychology: interpersonal and collaborative skills; diversity awareness and sensitive service delivery; technological applications; professional, legal, ethical, and social responsibility; data-based decision making and accountability; systems-based service delivery; enhancing the development of cognitive and academic skills; enhancing the development of wellness, social skills, mental health, and life competencies (*Blueprint III*, 2006). Within each of these practice domains, however, were delineated numerous skills areas in which the school psychologist must be trained and expected to show competency.

As it is with political and collective organizations, the people and ideas that drive them are constantly changing, and one might hope, evolving. A document entitled the *Model for Comprehensive and Integrated School Psychological Services*, which had been first written in 1978 and entitled the *Guidelines for the Provision of School Psychological Services*, and which had been updated periodically (most recently in 2010), is now referenced as the official policy statement that sets the standards of and guides the practice of school psychology (Appendix D). This, along with three additional documents, the NASP Standards for Graduate Preparation of

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School Psychologists, Standards for the Credentialing of School Psychologists, and Principles

for Professional Ethics serve "to provide a unified and comprehensive set of national principles

that guide graduate education, credentialing, professional practice and services, and ethical

behavior of effective school psychologists" (Williams, 2010, p. 320).

Review of Identity Research in the Helping Professions

A review of the literature in the field of developing professional identity yielded a plethora of

research and information in the areas of teacher, counselor development, and health care

workers. Studies within these fields have been undertaken that have explored the processes of

developing professional identification, but little in the area of school psychology was found

(Guest, 2000).

The available research in other professions such as counseling, teaching, and nursing not only

described the training and development of professional identity in these areas but also provided

insights about the motivators and dynamics of that growth through direct conversations and

reflections of the individuals in some cases. This information was then used to inform and

provide feedback for improving and developing professional training and support (Mannahan,

1989; Dalton et al, 1977; Rennekamp & Nall, 1994; Bruss and Kopala, 1993). It is conceivable

and very likely that similar research into where and how school psychologists come to identify

themselves with the profession can yield a depth of understanding and insight that will encourage

individual and collective growth and also help inform training programs as outlined in the

following studies.

As noted, studies within the counselor, teaching, and health fields have been undertaken and

completed that have explored the processes of developing professional identification. For

example, in a study of Canadian master's level counselors, Alves and Gazzola (2011)

investigated how these experienced practitioners defined themselves and also what they perceived as the major influences on determining and maintaining this. First and foremost was the impact from the connection between their personal and professional identities as had been reported in previous counselor research. The data were arranged in three categorical levels with personal identity at the core. Additional influences included work experience, roles and responsibilities, self-directed learning and professional development, being part of a community of practice or collective, work setting, and allowance for time during which to accumulate experience. Additionally, in 2010, Gibson, Dollarhide, and Moss announced in an article that "Professional Identity is at the forefront of national awareness within the counseling profession" (p.21) while, according to the American Counseling Association, it was considered to be critical for counselors. They designed a qualitative study that would address the process and tasks through which counselors-in-training move in the development of their professional identity. Data were collected through interview. Gibson et al. described developmental progress that occurred over time during three transformational tasks, beginning with the definition of counseling or external validation. During stage two, the counselor-in-training assumed and initiated responsibility for professional growth and becoming committed to the profession through coursework and training experiences. The third stage was described as one of self-validation where, upon reflection, the counselor recognizes his commitment to lifelong learning, to his sense of being part of a professional community, and ultimately to his acknowledgment and awareness of the integration of his personal and professional identities. The researchers noted that the group of the counselors-in-training reported to them that professional identity was a work in transition and a growth process. Koltz and Champe (2010) conducted a phenomenological case study that tracked the transition of mental health counseling interns to

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the identification of themselves as "professional" occurring during their last semester of internship. Data were collected through interview and analyzed, with steps taken to ensure trustworthiness. The main theme that emerged from data was labeled *professionalism.* This reportedly described movement towards identification with the role of professional counselor and movement toward increased professional knowledge, behavior and attitudes as well as internalization of the role (p.4). One of the three sub-themes was *shaping the professional*: this concerned itself with relationships, experiences and activities that had an impact on the interns' perception of self as a new professional. Relationships and feedback from professors, clients, and supervisors as well as peers, and activities such as personal reading and classroom experiences were included as impacting factors. *Practicing professionalism* was the second sub-theme that emerged from the data. This was described as an increased awareness of behavior and appearance appropriate for a counselor at internship sites and also of the need to practice self-directed behaviors. Finally, the third sub-theme to appear was *emerging professional.* In this stage, feelings were described as sad and fearful due to the loss of the previous support system, but also those of excitation resulting from the anticipation of having a job and being licensed. Again, results of the study were consistent with previously reported studies in indicating the integration of personal and professional identities, the impact of experience, and development as a growth process.

Findings similar to those noted in research of counselor identity development were also evident in studies of professional teacher and educator identity development. The purpose of the mixed methods study of secondary educators' perceptions of professional identity by Beijaard, Verloop, and Vermunt (2000) was to determine and compare how experienced teachers perceived their professional identity at the beginning of their careers and at the time of the study, to ascertain

what their most important learning experiences had been throughout their careers, and to identify

factors that influenced these perceptions of their professional identity. The majority of the

teachers participating in this study had more than 20 years of experience. Results indicated that

one-third of the group reported no change in their perception of their professional identity

between when they started and later at the time of the study while two-thirds indicated there had

been a change. A significant difference between how the teachers saw themselves at the time of

the study and how they had when they began their careers was reported. Relevant or influential

learning experiences varied among the study participants: within the subject matter field, the

necessity of keeping pace with new developments was most prominent. In the didactical field

most frequent was the importance of considering students' levels, and in the pedagogical field

most relevant was approaching students in a positive, respectful manner, followed by

establishing a positive and safe learning/classroom climate. Beijaard et al. concluded that their

study revealed some important insights into similarities and differences as well as changes to

teachers' perceptions of their professional identity (p.762). They proposed that these insights

might be useful for helping teachers reflect on themselves as teachers and adjust as they grow.

Lamote and Engles (2010) conducted a study of student teachers' professional identity within the

context of a three-year teaching program. Students completed questionnaires that looked at self-

efficacy, professional and task orientation, and commitment to teaching. Results of the study

indicated shifts in students' focus and attitudes over the course of three years as they learned and

had workplace experiences. Task orientation shifts occurred during the first few months of the

first year. While students' scores for commitment to teaching were moderately high at the start

of the educational training, they showed an increase, as did pupil-centered views after half a year

of instruction. Increases in self-efficacy and further development in commitment to teaching

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were noted. Further shifts in perception occurred after workplace experiences occurred. A

decrease in focus on classroom management, subject matter, and self-efficacy was reported.

These results were consistent with other studies of teacher development that suggested students

collected new information about their capabilities through hands-on experiences, resulting in

redefining and development of a more realistic assessment of themselves. The authors suggested

that it would behoove programs of teacher instruction to know about and take into consideration

the prevailing characteristics of identity at different phases or stages of students' education.

A recommendation similar to that for implementing a structure for supporting professional

identity development of students in education also was noted in the research into the

development of nursing identity. A study of beginning nursing students' definitions of nursing

was conducted by Cook, Gilmer, & Bess in 2003 with the goal of looking at the beliefs and

concepts beginning nurses bring to their educational programs. Results of this qualitative study

yielded an inductive framework of professional nursing identity with three major themes culled

from data. The themes, *nursing as verb*, *nursing as noun*, and *nursing as transaction*, were

broken down further into the following categories:

Nursing as verb – caring, nurturing, teaching, implementing, assessing/analyzing, advocating,

and managing. Previous studies had shown *caring* to be a dominant theme and was sometimes

described as the "essence" of nursing (p. 316).

Nursing as noun – profession, holistic system, connecting system, delivery system, discipline.

The students in this study did not label or describe traits specific to professional identity but

demonstrated awareness and understanding of characteristics that might enrich nursing identity.

Nursing as transaction – promotion of health, treatment of illness, prevention of illness,

promotion of self-care. The researchers felt that the value of their results was to provide

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information to nurse educators about looking at possible structural gaps in their curricula that might connect with the above framework to support professional identity. They also pointed out that the beginning students' definitions omitted issues related to clinical practices including descriptions of ethics, legal, and economics, all practical areas needed in the nurses' professional practice. Finally, these researchers pointed out that preparing nurses for responsibilities within an increasingly complex diverse society will most likely involve and require a variety of educational experiences not previously included in nursing programs so program expansion will be necessary. They reiterated, "Nurses who have developed a firm professional identity are more flexible when faced with role changes" (p. 316).

Professional identity is important for a number of reasons. The professional identity of organizations and groups helps to define and differentiate by demarcating what these stand for and do, providing a clearer understanding for consumers and stakeholders. The structure of those professional groups essentially establishes the foundation professional guidelines by which members practice. A strong identity and understanding of being a member of a particular profession allows members to feel confident in being able to clearly articulate who they are and what they do, and to have a clear understanding of what their specific contributions will be when working in cooperative multidisciplinary situations (Brott & Myers, 1999). Also, according to Mellin (2011), not having a clear and definite idea of their own professional identity can provide the opportunity for others in the workplace and outside a profession to interpret and define that identity to meet their own needs and agenda (Beijaard, Verloop, & Vermunt, 2004).

The psychological benefits and impact of forming and having a professional identity are numerous and interwoven with the continuous formation of personal identity. The way in which individuals see and come to understand themselves in their professional roles and during

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subsequent changes becomes an important tool that individuals will use to continuously understand and clarify their life's purpose and direction, in essence helping them to assign meaning to themselves as they evolve and grow. In addition, association with a respected profession and identification of a role within that often promotes psychological well-being as well as being a source of esteem and pride (Siebert & Seibert, 2005). Lammers et al. (2008) found that identification as a professional and with a professional group was associated with higher effort, productivity, and enjoyment of work and beyond.

School psychology is an established profession with practitioners numbering approximately 100,000 worldwide. It has an organizational and collective identity but, as Bardon (1983) so aptly commented, "organizational identity and personal/professional identity are not necessarily the same" (p. 187). Most of school psychology's members work in school settings, their roles, and functions shaped by the legal, sociological, political, and resulting educational winds that blow in addition to the needs of the particular system and site in which they work. They are not only externally influenced and directed, however. According to Fagan and Wise (2007), there have been numerous studies reporting on the percentage of time practitioners spend engaging in their professional activities. However, "…they do not describe the activities of any one practicing school psychologist, and it is probably safe to say that no two school psychologists spend their time in exactly the same way" (p. 107).

School psychologists are unique individuals who bring varied training and life experiences along with personal identities to the table. Job performances will differ depending on training and belief orientations regardless of the fact that school psychology has a common definition. Given the current evolving state of affairs in education, related legal issues, and in society, along with the rapid advancement of information and knowledge in education, psychology, and science, it

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will be difficult for educators and school psychologists to maintain a sense of who they are at any given moment in the context of the educational arena. School psychologists are being confronted with broadening interpretations of the traditional functions of assessment, consultation, and intervention as well as additional responsibility in the area of mental health. The time has come for school psychologists, as members of other helping professions, to reflect on where they came from and on their changing and evolving professional identities so that they can clearly articulate who they are and what they do in order to determine how best to stand up to the challenges of the changing educational scene.

Chapter 3:

Research Design

"The lack of a stable self-concept for a profession, as for an individual, results in a diffusion of effort within the profession with resultant insecurity and inconsistent behavior on the part of its members" (Blocher, Tennyson, and Johnson, 1963, p. 344). It is, therefore, the responsibility of members of a profession to reflect on where they came from, who they are, and where they are going to better help stabilize the position and function of the profession as well as help it to move forward and sustain with confidence.

The purpose of the current study is to describe and explore the experiences and perspectives of practicing school psychologists in developing and defining their professional identities. The primary focus or aim of this qualitative collective or multiple-case study is to increase understanding of how experienced school psychologists define themselves, taking into consideration the profession's theoretical collective/organizational identity and the actual performance of the job within the educational setting. Specifically, this study will examine the following:

How do school psychologists define themselves as professionals and describe their lived experience within the profession? How has that definition changed over time? What are the lived experiences that led to development and change in professional identity?

The Qualitative Approach

The answers to the research questions above are best found using a qualitative approach. Merriam describes qualitative research as "an umbrella concept covering several forms of inquiry that help us understand and explain the meaning of social phenomena with as little disruption of the natural setting as possible" (1998, p. 5). The underlying philosophical

assumption or worldview being ascribed to is that individuals construct reality through interaction with their social worlds (Merriam, 1998; Cresswell & Poth, 2018). Qualitative research differs from quantitative research in its foundation characteristics. It is naturalistic in that data is collected in the participants' settings rather than in contrived settings and are collected and analyzed primarily by the researcher who has been described as the "key instrument" used in the process (Creswell, 2007, p. 38; Merriam, 1998). The focus of qualitative research is determining the meaning that a participant attaches to an experience or issue. The analysis of the data collected is through inductive rather than deductive means. The researcher organizes the data into meaningful units, narrowing them until the essential patterns and themes emerge that ultimately describe the participants' views, understanding, or experience of the phenomena (Creswell, 2007, p. 38; Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Merriam, 1998). While there are a number of varieties of qualitative research approaches, there are 5 types that are most commonly described as representative in the field: narrative inquiry, grounded theory, ethnography, phenomenology, and case study (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 1998).

Multiple Case Studies

The use of the descriptive multiple-case study method was determined to best fit the purpose of the current study. Cresswell's explanation (2007, p. 73) of this approach provides a succinct yet clear definition of the inquiry and an explanation of the intent of this study: "Case study research is a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information (e.g. observations, interviews, audiovisual material, and documents and reports), and reports a case description and case-based themes." Merriam's

(1998) definition is even more succinct: "A qualitative case study is an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single instance, phenomenon, or social unit" (p. 27).

Case study is recommended as the preferred method of research when a study is asking 'how' and 'why' a particular contemporary social phenomenon works, when an in-depth description is required for further understanding, when the behavior of those involved or the events being investigated cannot be manipulated, and when the separation of context from phenomenon is unclear. A study may consist of a single case that is investigated thoroughly or, as in this dissertation, may consist of 2 or more cases. This multiple-case or collective case design can provide for a broader spectrum of understanding of the phenomenon being studied. A within-case analysis is conducted to provide an in-depth picture of the emergent themes and patterns, and then a cross-case analysis is conducted to compare and contrast the themes/patterns across the cases (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Cresswell, 2007; Stake, 2006; Yin, 2014).

The primary criteria for selecting subjects for participation in a study is that they have the experience that is the subject of the study (Englander, 2012; Creswell, 2007). In a multiple-case study, the subjects or cases are somehow connected by a common element or condition and may be considered part of a 'target collection.' The common element, condition, or phenomenon is the subject to be studied (Stake, 2006). Yin (2014) describes comparative multiple-case studies as being a counterpart to multiple experiments wherein each case study is approached as a separate experiment. Replication logic is used as cases are selected that are likely to show similar results.

Data in qualitative research may be collected through observations, documents, interviews, journals, and forms of art such as music, poetry, and drama. In case studies it is typically collected through in-depth interview and observations but also may be collected through

documents, and audiovisual materials (Cresswell, 2007; Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Stake, 2006; Yin, 2014).

"A qualitative design is emergent" (Merriam, 1998, p.155), revealing and directing the researcher into and through the study. The analysis of the data has been described as "custom-built" and "choreographed" (Huberman & Miles in Creswell, 2005, p. 150). Analysis of data occurs simultaneously with its collection as the particulars of the study reveal themselves during the collection process. In multiple case studies, analysis occurs in 2 stages: within-case analysis and cross-case analysis. Each case is first analyzed as if it was the only one, similar to a single experiment. Following this, the researcher compares and contrasts the data in order to see "processes and outcomes that occur across many cases, to understand how they are qualified by local conditions, and thus develop more sophisticated descriptions and more powerful explanations" (Miles and Huberman as cited in Merriam, 1998, p. 195). However, qualitative research can generate mountains of information and a system for managing and organizing what was collected.

According to Merriam (2002), "what makes a good qualitative study is whether it has been systematically and ethically carried out and whether the findings are trustworthy" (p. 30). In a qualitative investigation, there are a number of ways or strategies for addressing this including but not limited to triangulation, member checks, and researcher self-reflection. Triangulation refers to obtaining the data through multiple sources or collection methods to corroborate the data. Stake (2006) refers to it as "mostly a process of repetitious data gathering and critical review of what is being said" (p. 34). Member-checks refers to the process of "taking data, analyses, interpretations, and conclusions back to the participants so that they can judge the accuracy and credibility of the account" (Cresswell, 2007, p. 208). This may be done through a

number of methods including the use of a focus group. Focus groups provide a forum where participants are able to interact, with the possibility they may be influenced by or influence other members of the group. The best-case result is that the outcome of the focus group may serve to strengthen the credibility of the study findings and improves the quality of the interpretation. An important factor that must be considered in any study is researcher bias, particularly in qualitative studies that involve human interpretation of human experience and behavior. It is virtually impossible for any human researcher to approach a study of how people experience a phenomenon without influence from their own experience and opinion. Therefore, it is incumbent upon the researcher to engage in reflexivity as part of the process of establishing trustworthiness in the inquiry, to acknowledge and reflect on personal biases, preconceptions, and personal/experiential perceptions and perspectives. Malterud (2001) notes "the investigator always enters a field of research with certain opinions about what it is all about. Reflexivity starts by identifying preconceptions brought into the project by the researcher, representing previous personal and professional experiences, pre-study beliefs about how things are and what is to be investigated…." (p. 484). It becomes necessary then for the researcher to be forthcoming with their own preconceived ideas from the beginning of the work and to continue to maintain awareness of and note these throughout.

In addition to stating the researcher's interest and reasons for proposing the study, on-going reflexivity is documented through memoing as well as through maintenance of a journal of impressions and thoughts that arise during the interview and analysis process and, while summarizing what was being understood (Cresswell, 2007; Merriam, 2002; Stake, 2006; Yin, 2014).

Further enhancements of the trustworthiness of qualitative research include an audit trail and rich, thick description that will allow for analytical generalization (Cresswell, 2007; Merriam, 2002; Yin, 2014). In the writing of the study, the researcher provides a comprehensive accounting of how the study was conducted and what/how decisions were arrived at to answer the question of whether the data supported the findings and the conclusions drawn. Yin (2014) refers to this as the maintenance of a "chain of evidence" (p. 4). Also, a detailed description of the participants and context under study might be provided to enable readers "to determine the extent to which their situation matches the research context, and hence, whether findings can be transferred" (Merriam, 2002, p. 31).

Procedures and Implementation

Participants

Invitations to participate were issued through face-to-face meetings with school psychologists who work for this large urban Southwestern school district's School Psychology department. Participants for this study were invited and selected from the school district's 183 practicing school psychologists. The size of the school district staff provided opportunity for access to a representative cultural and ethnically diverse population. From a group of twelve school psychologists with ten or more years of experience with whom the interview questions were piloted, six were invited to become the cases of more in-depth study through interview and then through participation in a focus group. Participant selection was through a convenience sample where participants were selected because of their ease of accessibility and proximity to the researcher. While the group size is not large, the number was sufficient for reporting descriptive themes and not just individual differences. This study was conducted at various locations in the city where the school district was located. Because the participants were recruited and selected

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from this city's school district, the face-to-face interviews were conducted after work hours at the participants' work sites or offices as a convenience to them. The focus group session was conducted in a group meeting room at the library of the local university. Of note, only four of the six participants were able to engage in the focus group. The two school psychologists with the fewest years of practice were unavailable due to family obligations and illness.

Materials

For the purposes of this study, a semi-structured interview format, much like a guided conversation, was employed, with each interview lasting from one to one and one-half hours. This researcher developed a protocol to ensure that the key areas of case inquiry being pursued were addressed through the open-ended questions asked of the interviewees to elicit the thoughts and descriptions of their experience. Yin (2014) refers to these as levels 1 and 2 of 5 levels or types of questions. Level 1 questions are the *verbal* (literal) or actual questions to be asked of the interviewees to elicit their thoughts. It is important to note that during the flow of the conversation/interview new literal questions may arise and can serve as probes to clarify responses. Level 2 questions are those that the researcher is seeking to answer or the *mental* questions that serve as a structure for and reminder of the study's purpose. These help to keep the researcher on track. Level 3 questions are those that are asked of the data as part of a cross-case analysis and are not part of the question guide. As noted previously, interview questions were "field-tested" with 12 school psychologists who met the 10 years of practice criteria and then the questions were revised as necessary. The six in-depth interviews and the focus group session were audio recorded and transcribed, with the consent of the participants.

Analysis

For this study, data were collected through interviews and a focus group session. Transcriptions of the recorded interviews were prepared shortly after being completed and read through several times in their entirety to gain a global sense of the information. After the initial reading, the researcher memoed, that is, made personal notes and comments as if carrying on a mental dialogue about what was read. A log of impressions and observations was also kept about each interview session, and a summary of the interview contents written after the transcripts were reviewed multiple times (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Cresswell, 2007; Merriam, 1998; Rubin & Rubin, 2005). During subsequent readings of the interviews, the researcher looked at the themes and concepts that were emerging, clarifying, refining, synthesizing, and elaborating on them in the process of integrating the data across the interviews. The data units were then systematically categorized according to the main idea interview questions code so that like themes/concepts could be accessed, examined, and eventually sorted according to the relevant coding system that arose from the data. Throughout the analysis stages, passages were reread and key material marked and coded, with adjustments to the meaning units made as the analysis continued. Visual reference worksheets were developed to help organize the statements as well as help facilitate further recognition of thematic units. During this process, the researcher summarized each unit or developing theme, reflecting upon and interacting with the data for the purpose of continuing to check researcher objectivity and formulate further questions. The process of sorting, comparing, synthesizing, and integrating data and thematic units continued until the analysis was complete and the research questions appear to be satisfactorily answered using the information available (Cresswell, 2007; Rubin & Rubin, 2005).

Quality Control

For the current study, the use of multiple cases or interviewees serves as multiple sources of data along with input from the focus group encounter. Member checking during this study was an on-going process throughout the study through the use of reflective listening during interviews, providing reviews of transcripts and clarifying meanings. In addition, a focus group session was convened during which the participants had an opportunity to review preliminary analyses of the descriptions and themes that were emerging from the data. The focus group session also served as part of the triangulation process as possible new insights occurred in addition to providing for member checking (Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Morgan, 1997; Cresswell, 2007).

Implementation

Upon approval of the IRB, invitations to participate were issued through face to face meetings with school psychologists who work for this large urban Southwestern school district's school psychology department. A demographic survey (Appendix A) was completed by respondents to narrow the participant field to those who met the above sampling criteria. The study questions (Appendix B) were field-tested and refined with 12 of those school psychologists with 10+ years of experience. Six of these 12 school psychologists were then invited to participate in in-depth interviews and a follow-up focus group session. An informed consent form (Appendix C) was provided for all respondents who agreed to participate and was signed at the beginning of the interview session or at the time of agreement to participate. Per IRB requirements, this form included a description of the study and its purpose, the procedures, including audio-recording with transcription, any risks and benefits, a statement of voluntary participation as well as a statement of the right to refuse to respond to any questions deemed to be intrusive, a statement of the right to withdraw at any time, and procedures for ensuring confidentiality. After-hours

interview time and location were determined with each participant and interviews conducted. The location and time of the focus group session were arranged for the convenience of the interviewees. All data was stored in password-protected computer files as well as in hard copy files to protect against loss. Following the transcription of the interviews, a descriptive summary was reviewed with the participants to validate the accuracy of the information. Results of the study will be made available to the participants at the end of the study.

Chapter 4: Findings

Seidman (1991) asks the question, "Whose meaning is it that an interview brings forth and that a researcher reports in a presentation, article, or book?" (p.14). In spite of every effort to minimize interviewer effect, the fact remains that interviewer impact cannot be removed from the process. Cresswell and Poth (2018) describe researchers as "respectful co-constructors of knowledge. Researchers admit that the participants or the co-construction of the account between the researchers and the participants are the true owners of the information collected" (p.33). Mishler (1986) refers to the interview process as a joint construction of meaning and refers to the interviewees as "collaborators, that is, full participants in the development of the study" (p. 126). He states further "the discourse of the interview is jointly constructed by the interviewer and respondent…Both questions and responses are formulated in, developed through, and shaped by the discourse between interviewers and respondents" (p.52). And so, it is with this final reminder to the readers as they review the following depictions of six school psychologists' accounts of and reflections on their journeys to define themselves and their professional lives that they are now in the position of "attempting to make sense of the researcher trying to make sense of the participant's experience" (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2012, p. 182).

Shelley

Shelley never imagined she would work in an educational setting and actually began telling about this by declaring, "I didn't like schools very mu…. Well, I liked school; I just never thought I'd work in a school setting." She had initially aspired to be a doctor and started her undergraduate program majoring in biochemistry "… doing DNA fingerprinting and all that." The drawback for Shelley became pointedly clear during a summer internship about which she said, "…I hated every minute of it because there was me, myself, and I and one other person."

She qualifies it, saying: The subject was interesting but actually working in the field I was bored. I need the people interaction, and I didn't have that." Her exposure to psychology came during undergraduate school when she took a clinical psychology class where the students were required to do self-analysis using personality assessment instruments including the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator and The Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI). Shelley discovered she loved the assessment piece. In spite of her aversion to working in school settings, after earning her undergraduate degree, Shelley worked as a preschool aide and a substitute teacher. When reviewing options in the area of psychology with a couple of her professors before going into graduate school, she found that she 'fit' into school psychology "with my personality and my interests. I loved the assessment piece, and I loved working with the kids. I just liked kids and wanted to work with kids, and I liked just the description of the job and what it entailed."

Shelley has been employed as a school psychologist for 11 years. She completed her internship in a large urban Southwestern city school district and was hired by that district immediately after graduation. She has worked primarily in elementary level settings, and her current assignment requires her to work in Title I schools that have low SES and high ELL populations. Her caseload is approximately 1:2000. She feels her schooling had an impact on shaping how she sees herself as a school psychologist as well as "the fact that I've spent my entire career in this district and have never experienced anything else." However, she has had opportunities through program and evaluation reviews from other states to become aware of some of the differences in how school psychologists practice in other places outside of the school district where she works: "So I'm seeing things from other states, and it's just like….Wow! I feel I'm lucky that I'm in this district in a way. Our department is actually pretty good."

Shelley defines a school psychologist as "someone who has been in the field and is working in the field, someone who identifies as a school psychologist and who takes an active role in the field. I think it's your training and what you do in terms of does it align with what psychologists do." Her interpretation of "active role" is inclusive: "School psychology is such a broad spectrum, professionally it is much broader. Being in research or being a professor or being in the schools. I think they can all be school psychologists but doing different things." She feels that researchers' and professors' roles are different in that they do not work with kids and "they're less into people." Shelley identifies herself as "a school psychologist in the schools." She describes what that means in her experience: "for the day-to-day kids, we do the testing, we do the assessments; we do the counseling if need be. We work with the interventions and stuff." When she came out of school, Shelley thought she would be doing groups and counseling but was pleased to discover, instead most of what she was doing was assessment: "Makes me happy. I don't like the groups; I don't like therapy. I don't mind going and talking to kids and working one on one with them." While that was one of her reasons for choosing not to go into clinical psychology, "I knew I didn't want to do the 'therapy' aspect of it," she also attributes her hesitation about counseling to her internship experience.

> My internship was very basic and only focused on the evaluation part. I did not get the counseling experience, which could be why I am not as comfortable doing groups or other counseling. Counseling is the one area I wish I had more experience with during internship. It is very difficult to get these experiences once internship is completed and you are full time in the schools.

She reiterates her preference for doing assessment.

We do assessment 90% of our day. I enjoy it. That's the piece I really enjoy, because I get to actually work with the kids at that point. I'm not a trained teacher. I don't do interventions groups. We have teachers that can do the progress monitoring and the data gathering and the teaching. We need to do the assessment piece because we're the ones that are trained and we need to do eligibility. If we weren't doing assessments we wouldn't have a job.

While she acknowledges school psychology's move into addressing the needs and demands for meeting mental health needs, she asserts, "We are, but we also have counselors that can do some of that stuff."

While her schooling and having worked in only one school district have had a significant impact on shaping her practice and hands-on understanding of the role and function of a school psychologist, changes in education and education law have required her to adjust what she does as well. She states she is doing a lot more consultation with teachers as part of the Response to Intervention process and requirement, which has brought with it increased frustration for her because of resistance from some of the administrators with whom she has worked and their lack of demand for accountability from the teachers. She essentially feels that kids are losing out because "teachers aren't doing what they're supposed to be doing because there's nobody to tell them you have to do it." She references the data and the record keeping: "So you know they're just making up stuff. And that really bothers me. Or they think they know what they're doing and they don't." Shelley also voices frustration and anxiety regarding political and organizational changes in the school district and with what will happen to the way the school psychology department will be functioning: "I'm scared to see what's coming next year. What does that

mean for us? Is our job gonna change with how we function or not?" She is stressed as well by the demands of the job.

> Workload – there are not enough school psychologists. I cannot get everything done that
> needs to be completed during the workday. Right now, I am at three schools and I do not
> have time to do other things. Once in a while I will do some brief crisis counseling, but
> that is on an as-needed basis. Having three schools, one of which is a middle school, is
> very stressful.

In spite of the stresses and frustrations of the job Shelley has not considered leaving the profession. When asked about it, she quickly responded, "No. Leaving the district, yes" so she could be closer to her family members who are in California, and for what she considers better pay and benefits. She does not regret her decision to enter the field: "Not really. I overall really enjoy what I do. I love working with students and I feel that what I do is important and helps them." When asked, she stated she would do it all over again, "Yeah. I probably would have studied harder. And maybe gone to a different school, maybe one back East or something." She has a sense of belonging to the profession, of being connected, in part, because of her memberships in professional organizations including the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) and the American Psychological Association (APA) and also because of her pursuit of additional training and increased knowledge at conferences related to education, learning, and psychology such as the Learning and the Brain summer conferences. Socializing with some of her peers is also important to her, but "as my friends are moving out of the district and leaving, it's harder and harder."

Shelley does not hesitate to recommend the field of school psychology to others. She says, "It's a good field. It's secure with jobs. You can always find a job, at least right now. I'm not talking

5 years from now. It's a good job. You can pretty much work anywhere in the country and have a job." She delineates characteristics that she feels most school psychologists would relate to themselves when defining and describing themselves. She view peers and herself as very organized, having good communication skills, and as being good with technology. She feels she and her peers are able to multi-task and manage time well, and they are able to work with others. She also shares advice she might impart to people new to the field, "There's no compliance police. Try to get things done within the compliance timelines, but there will be cases that you just can't do. So don't stress the little stuff." Shelley says the key to being successful within the school is to network.

> Just network within your school. Just don't rub people the wrong way. Don't just sit in your office and hide all day. Get out and meet your staff. They'll be much more willing to work with you if they know you. Sometimes it's hard but you have to get out there and make yourself visible. Talking with others is very important. I'm not saying go out and be friends, but just network and be careful when you're back, who you tell things to, who you talk to. Be very very careful because it's a very small community.

Review. Shelley identifies herself as a school psychologist who works in schools with kids. Working with kids affirms what she thought she would be as a school psychologist. She states, "I really like the kid aspect. That's why I went into the field. It was working with kids. And I do the tests." She states that school psychologist is a part of her identity: "Of course. It is my career, and I love it. I cannot separate out my career from who I am as a person. It is part of me. It is not just a job. I love the field."

At the same time, there is more to her definition of self than her profession. She describes an integrated sense of personal and professional self:

School psychology is my profession. Yes, I am a school psychologist. I love it. But I wouldn't say it defines me completely. There's a lot of other aspects to me, you know, like I'm very involved in my family. So I'd give up everything for my family.

Shelley feels her schooling had an impact on shaping how she sees herself as a school psychologist as well as "the fact that I've spent my entire career in this district and have never experienced anything else." When she came out of school Shelley thought her practice would involve doing groups and counseling. However, she described her internship as very basic with the focus on the evaluation part. She was pleased to discover instead that most of what she was doing was assessment. She describes what that means in her practice:

For the day-to-day kids, we do the testing, we do the assessments; we do the counseling if need be. We work with the interventions and stuff. We do assessment 90% of our day. I enjoy it. That's the piece I really enjoy. Once in a while I will do some brief crisis counseling, but that is on an as-needed basis. Counseling is the one area I wish I had more experience with during internship. It is very difficult to get these experiences once internship is completed and you are full time in the schools.

Also impacting how Shelley's practice and understanding of her role as a school psychologist have evolved are the changes that have occurred in education practices and as a result of education law such as the implementation and requirement of the Response to Intervention (RtI) model that have required her to adjust what she does and how she defines her role. Shelley states she is doing a lot more consultation with teachers as part of the Response to Intervention process and requirement.

When she talks about the most influential kinds of experiences, she has had that helped shape her practice and helped her define her understanding of what a school psychologist is, Shelley describes the people interactions.

> The most impacting experiences that have helped shaped me into the school psychologist I am now are the consultations and experiences that I have had with other school psychologists. It is the collaboration and experience of others that also shape how I currently function and allow me to grow, learn, and change.

Shelley voices anxiety regarding political and organizational changes in the school district and with what will happen to the way the school psychology department will be functioning: "I'm scared to see what's coming next year. What does that mean for us? Is our job gonna change with how we function or not?" In spite of the uncertainty surrounding this and anxiety related to change and its impact, she speaks with confidence about who she is as a professional:

> I generally do not let others dictate my identity and practice. I try to be true to myself and do the job the best I possibly can with the resources that are available. I definitely learn from others and their experiences and take that into how I practice, but I do not let how others see me affect my identity and practices.

Lynda

Lynda has been a licensed practicing school psychologist for 11 years or 12 including internship as she points out. She received her undergraduate degree, earning full majors in psychology and biology, at the University of Arizona. She had decided at the age of 10 she wanted to be a pediatrician because "I liked kids and babies." She explains that she had a lot of experience being around children, first because of being the oldest of 13 cousins and also because "I've babysat and when I was old enough I did nanny jobs. Then when I turned 17, I worked in a

daycare-preschool and as soon as I turned 18, I could get my own class. So I had the two-year olds." She had taken a psychology class in her junior year and liked it so took a number of additional classes to fulfill the second major because "I wanted to keep my options open." After graduating, Lynda took a year off to decide whether she wanted to go on to graduate school or to medical school. To support herself, she started working as a child behavioral specialist with an agency and continued working with them while she was in graduate school. "So, I worked there and that's when I was like, I really like kids." While there she worked with a developmental pediatrician and a neuropsychologist from whom she learned a great deal and who also served as role models:

> Dr. Julie would come every Wednesday when we were having our staff meeting, and we would go over different children's diagnoses, so she would help us understand how they're diagnosed and how that affected them in the environment. I worked a lot with her and Dr. Tom.

During that year off Lynda was trying to figure out how to "incorporate what I liked and what I wanted for the future."

> I'm like, do I go to med school? Because I still wanted a family too. But I'm like, how do you do both? For a woman, if you want kids and med school - I knew people who'd go to med school and then they would graduate and they wouldn't really use their med degree because they wanted to have kids and get married.

She turned her attention to psychology, researching different fields within the discipline and eventually discovered school psychology. She found it to be the answer to her apparent dilemma:

I was like, I still love psychology and kids, and I came across school psychology. It was

so compatible with what I wanted for myself. School psychology seemed to be a good

fit. I still work with kids, make a difference, and I can still have a family life.

She also noted the probable advantage of having the same school schedule as her children: "Yes,

so the convenience. The pay, not so much, but you know what? You've got to figure out what

you want more.**"** Lynda stated she was not encouraged by a mentor or anyone, in particular, to

go into the field but did note she came from a family of educators: "My mom and dad were both

teachers. My grandmother taught the deaf and blind. My dad was a principal and was always

very involved in special education. So I'd always grown up around the school system."

Lynda went on to receive her Educational Specialist degree in School Psychology from a

university located in the same large urban Southwestern city where she also completed her

internship. She completed part of her internship at the school where she currently works as a

part-time school psychologist. Lynda describes her internship as a time when she "was pretty

much on my own." She was placed at her current site in the middle of her internship year after

the assigned school psychologist left the school district: "He was hired, he was assigned to [a

school], and they hardly saw him. But then they realized he was gone after about a month and a

half, and they found his keys on the desk." She took over the responsibilities at a second school

when the assigned person went out for surgery: "I had to take over, and so I was pretty much by

myself." She described the intern supervision as occurring when there was a need for someone

licensed to sit in on her multidisciplinary team (MDT) meetings. "They would come and just sit

in on my MDTs, and I pretty much…sink or swim." As she says, "It was a learning experience"

and adds "a very good learning experience."

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Lynda has been officially at her current assignment for 11 years since her internship and after being hired by the school district. She feels she has had extensive and unique experience at this site: "and I've come across many interesting cases working here, that you wouldn't see elsewhere." Part of what makes the experience of working in [this] county remarkable is the uniqueness of the city, with its gambling and tourist industry and related jobs. Education often is not seen as important due to the plethora of unskilled labor jobs available, so the focus of educating children includes helping them learn about alternate opportunities. She tells of encounters with parents of some of the children who attend school at her site, a Title I funded school with a very low Socio-Economic Status (SES) and high English Language Learner (ELL) population: "I've come across parents here who I have literally heard them say, 'My daughter does not need to learn to read and answer all those fancy questions; she just has to learn how to read the numbers on the doors.'" Despite the challenges, Lynda talks about her preference for working with the population in low-income areas.

> Working here, I just feel like the parents are just so happy with whatever you can provide them because they're just struggling to make food on the table, a roof over their house. They move a lot, so they're, 'whatever you can do for my kids.' They're more appreciative.

She explains that when people ask her why she does not want to move to a higher SES area, she tells them "there's pros and cons for all of it. Yes, you get a lot more parent involvement, fantastic, but sometimes that can make things harder to move forward because there's so [much] red tape you have to go through." She acknowledges there is more parent involvement in the higher income areas: "they're volunteering all the time; the PTO's very active." However, the

downside for her is that "sometimes they think they know best," inferring this might make the job more complicated.

When asked to define and explain what a professional school psychologist is, Lynda stated, "It's a combination of things. It really depends on the need of the school I think." As she talks about her actualization of the definition, she describes what she does from day to day and acknowledged that she does indeed, define herself in part by that day to day role. When people ask what she does, she says, "I give them basically the things that I do every day. And that could change, depending on the needs." She compares her experience to that of other school psychologists: "And I'm sure my experience is different from someone else who is in a higher SES area. You know, they have a lot more participation with parents. I think it's just the day to day experience would be different." At the same time, she sees the needs of children as being similar regardless of location: "I think all students need the same basic services. I think some schools need more [services] available to them. And we know teachers need that."

Lynda reflected on what her responsibilities were when she first started at her current site. She related she was working with "the itty-bitty ones" in reference to the fact that the school serviced kindergarten through second graders, and explained that most were initial evaluations, that is psycho-educational evaluations to determine eligibility for special education.

> A lot of it was just initials, getting into classrooms, helping new teachers because we had
>
> a very high turnaround. I felt like every year I was starting over from scratch. Then we
>
> inherited a lot of really low third, fourth, and fifth graders. We got the lowest of the low.

She talks about the Response to Intervention (RtI) process first being implemented at the time the school expanded to include grades three through five, and the responsibility of helping the teachers learn about data collection and progress monitoring. She noted that over time she "was a

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lot more involved in the classrooms, but I still had my evaluations that I had to do." When she talks about what the needs are at present, the description is very similar to what was needed previously. "For me, a lot of it right now is very test oriented, test and place, test and qualify. I've got so many evaluations that I have to do for compliance." She continued,

> I've got so many kids that are just waiting for testing, and I'm like, I've got to get in and get them assessed. And then you get stopped, and the new RtI person is just like, 'Can I bounce something off of you?' I'm like, 'Sure.' So we kind of sit down and reevaluate the RtI process. And there's so many teachers struggling with behavior issues right now in the classroom that it's hard to figure out, do I go for compliance or do I help them.

While she is not complaining, she is torn by her sense of responsibility, not only to the classroom teachers and her pending evaluations but also because of a perceived need to help new special education staff with learning the legal policies and general procedures they need to know to do their jobs. She expresses her concerns and personal feelings about how she and other school psychologists in the district would be able to make a bigger impact on children if they were assigned to school's full time: "I just feel like we're stretched so thin that we don't make as big of an impact as we'd like."

Lynda feels affirmed and supported by her site administrator with whom she has discussed her situation and frustrations. She explained:

> I feel more valued. He'll listen; he was like, "What is the school needing that I'm not hearing? What am I needing?" because he's like, "You're hearing the teachers' frustration." So that's when I sat down with him; I'm like, "I can't meet the needs right now because I know I have to test and find eligibility, that's a huge part of my responsibilities. The needs at this school are so great, whether it's evaluations or

consulting with teachers to help them with behavior plans, whatever, it's so great, that my

two, two and a half days is not enough.

His response to her concern was to use funds available through the school to pay for Lynda for

working extra days. Lynda feels her site administrator's expectations of her differ from those of

the teachers. She feels the teachers do not understand the parameters of her job: "I think the

teachers don't understand what I can and cannot do" and when she does not do what they expect,

they become disgruntled. "If that doesn't happen they're not happy. They all talk. But they don't

understand [what's legal] so I feel like you are always having to educate them, and there's been

so many new teachers each year that you're having to do each time." Lynda does care about

what others are thinking about her as a school psychologist but with reservations:

You don't want to be seen as, you know, that you're not out there for the kids. You're

just, just a job. You know that you come and you do your work. I mean, just like

anybody, someone tells me something nice, you're like, "Oh, they really do notice."

Everyone wants some sort of affirmation. Yeah, cause you don't want to be on the other

end. I know I'm doing the best I can with the resources I have been given. I have to stop

and pause, but it all depends on who it's coming from. If I respect that person, then it

holds more weight than if someone I didn't know said something either way.

She speaks of being lucky to have worked directly with two "strong" supervisors in particular

and notes their feedback was very important to her. She indicates they were role models and

helped shape her as a school psychologist.

When Lynda reflects on and compares what she is doing to what she thought she would be doing

when she came out of graduate school and was hired for the job, she speaks about the time spent

doing clerical type work and opines that the time might be better spent:

I do way more paperwork. I think then I thought I would be working with kids more than I'm actually doing right now. I thought I would be working more with students more often, being able to counsel more often. I thought I'd be able to be in classrooms more. Yeah, so paperwork. Gotta have this form, and this form, and this form that say the exact same things. We could be used better elsewhere with our education, than sitting there paper pushing. You're paying very high educated, higher paid than a lot of other people, to take care of paperwork or just submit it into a new program. It's more paperwork for paperwork than I thought.

She feels the requirements of the job and direction of the field have also changed since she first started working in this district, noting the School Psychology department's shift away from conducting as many formal assessments:

I came in at the tail-end to where you gave a lot of … it wasn't just academics, IQ, you did a lot more …the TAPS, for example, to where they're like, "We don't want so much of the processing assessments done." So I had to do a quick shift because you're still taught those in grad school. Their focus was no longer on that.

Lynda actually sees herself more as part of the school community, with more in common with them, than she does with the community of school psychologists. When asked about this, she noted,

School is where we stay the majority of the time versus when we get together how many times as a whole [department]. I think we are needed in the community and I feel like I'm an important part of the educational community. My teachers don't have the answers that we might be able to better provide.

However, when she is with the community of her school psychologist peers, she feels a sense of belonging, closeness, and support: "I really like our group that we've been in. That's kind of like a family. Cause I know if I need something I can always call up someone and they're very willing to help."

Lynda speaks from her personal experiences about positive characteristics or habits she sees as important and necessary for being a successful practicing professional school psychologist, citing first, time management and then organizational skills, followed by flexibility. She spoke about her to-do list:

> I try to keep organized with a to-do list. And I have a couple of them. I have those kids that I have to observe or test. And then I have another to-do list of things I want to get done today, which includes other things. Okay, this is what I want to get done today. But you never know because things may change. You may plan on doing one thing one day and then it doesn't happen.

She referred to her own system of organization as "organized chaos – I know where everything is." As an after-thought in reference to characteristics she added "not necessarily smarts-that does help- but some common sense." She would advise people who are considering school psychology as a career to talk with someone who is already practicing in the field:

> Sit down with somebody who's already a school psych in the area you want to work. Because if you think you're going to be working with kids all day every day, you need a little dose of reality. You're going to be doing a lot of paperwork; you're going to be doing a lot of reports at home; a lot of your meetings are with parents and you don't get as much access to kids as you probably think you will. So just to make sure, shadow if you can.

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She adds:

> Know that it [the job] is always evolving and the field of school psychology is ever-
> changing. What you see now may not be what you're going to be doing later on.
> Whether it's different programs you have to work with or what assessments are stressed.
> Know that you will have multiple schools. I don't see that changing unfortunately.

Lynda emphasizes the importance and necessity of being able to work in a group.

> It is team work and I think people forget that. You have to be able to delegate and not be,
> "it's only me, only I can do this." Other people are there; things actually get done faster if
> you work as a team. Things are a lot slower if you try to do it by yourself.

Review. Lynda declares, "I am school psychologist" when asked to identify herself but describes an integrated sense of personal and professional self. "I see it more as part of who I am. I think that's what I do. I go to school, I work, I take it home with me. I don't just leave it at the job." But the other part of her identity or role that Lynda speaks of is equally important to her:

> I'm a school psychologist, but I also am kind of like a…I don't want to say a stay-at-
> home mom because I'm not that either. But both of those play a huge identity in who I
> am. I like being a school psychologist because I can go out. I can make a difference, but
> then so much of what I do is family oriented. So they're both an important identity for
> me.

When asked to define, explain, and clarify what a professional school psychologist is, Lynda stated, "It's a combination of things. It really depends on the need of the school I think." As she talks about her actualization of the definition, she describes what she does from day to day and acknowledged that she does indeed, define herself in part by that day to day role. When she speaks of being a school psychologist, her focus is primarily on how the context in which she

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works impacts and ultimately defines her role and what she does, but within the parameters of the position.

Lynda reflected on what the needs of the site and of what her responsibilities were when she first started at her current site as an intern and then a new hire. She related she primarily conducted initial evaluations, that is, psycho-educational evaluations, to determine eligibility for special education: "A lot of it was just initials, getting into classrooms, helping new teachers because we had a very high turnaround. I felt like every year I was starting over from scratch." She notes that over time she spent more time being involved in the classrooms, but continued to have evaluations to do." When she talks about what the needs are at the present time, the description is very similar to what was needed previously. "For me, a lot of it right now is very test oriented, test and place, test and qualify. I've got so many evaluations that I have to do for compliance." She feels overwhelmed at times by her own site based duties and frustration with department and procedural requirements, expressing the wish to do more of the kind of services school psychologists are trained to do and can provide such as individual and group counseling or play therapy, but understands, "we're in such a high need, the evaluations take first priority." When Lynda reflects on and compared what she is doing to what she thought she would be doing when she came out of graduate school and was hired for the job, she speaks about the amount of time spent doing clerical type work:

> I do way more paperwork. I think then I thought I would be working with kids more than
> I'm actually doing right now. I thought I would be working more with students more
> often, being able to counsel more often. I thought I'd be able to be in classrooms more.

It's more paperwork for paperwork than I thought.

Lynda's background included working as a child behavioral specialist with an agency before and while she attended graduate school, an experience that helped her find her way to school psychology: "So, I worked there and that's when I was like, I really like kids." She stated she was not encouraged by a mentor or anyone in particular to go into the field but did note she came from a family of educators and had "always grown up around the school system." She described her internship as a time when she was very independent due to circumstance and felt it was pretty much "sink or swim." As she says, "It was a learning experience" and adds "a very good learning experience." She spoke of being lucky to have worked directly with two "strong" supervisors in particular and noted their feedback was very important to her. She indicated they were role models and helped shape her as a school psychologist.

While she identifies with school psychology, Lynda's sense of 'belonging' to a community continues to be contextual and related to where she is needed. She actually sees herself more as part of the school community, with more in common with them, than she does with the community of school psychologists. When asked about this, she noted, "School is where we stay the majority of the time…. I think we are needed in the community and I feel like I'm an important part of the educational community."

Lynda feels the requirements of the job and direction of the field have changed since she first started working in this school district, noting, for example, the School Psychology department's shift away from conducting as many formal assessments and the implementation of the Response to Intervention requirement in the law. As noted above, she observes:

> It [the job] is always evolving and the field of school psychology is ever-changing. What you see now may not be what you're going to be doing later on. Whether it's different programs you have to work with or what assessments are stressed.

Patrick

Unknowingly, Patrick had actually started down his path to school psychology around the age of 14 years when he became involved with the Boy Scouts and their aquatic camp programs where he "did everything from teach swimming to being a director. It was real fun." He reported working with them during summers throughout college, meanwhile seriously considering careers in architecture or medicine, unrelated to what he was doing for "fun." Unfortunately for those career fields, Patrick discovered in college that although he loved physics, he hated chemistry, so he began looking for another way to channel his interests. He recognized and emphasized the next as a turning point in his life: "*Actually, this is kind of important*. Another summer camp job I had was working with mentally disabled adults, and I absolutely loved it." He noted further, the message and motivation to go back to school and study after obtaining an undergraduate degree in psychology came in the form of highway construction work that included "hanging by his toes," that is, being strapped over the freeway to put up highway signs. So off to graduate school he went to become a school psychologist after finding out about it from a friend of his then girlfriend. "So with my undergraduate degree in psychology and my experience working with these intellectually disabled adults, I kind of found school psychology." As he said, Patrick was drawn in particular to the field by his interest in the people he would be working with: "Well then, again, the population you would be working with, you know. Special needs kinds of individuals. And I found kind of a love for that. I already had an attraction for that." He acknowledged, however, there was also a practical factor involved in his decisions. He noted the somewhat common thought about moving into clinical psychology, doing clinical work, or perhaps teaching:

At that point you're thinking about going on for like a Ph.D. in clinical psychology or

something or the teaching kind of thing or doing that kind of clinical work. But the

school psychology, first of all, it was easier because of just the location. It was in where I

was living. The program was right there. So I could do it rather inexpensively and rather

quickly. Then I could go on if I wanted to.

However, Patrick never felt the need to go on: "when I started it, and you're working with all

these special needs kids. It pulls you right in." He did not and does not regret his decision: "I

never thought of it as a mistake or I should of done something else."

Patrick went into his graduate school psychology program and finished it with the idea he would

be involved in providing counseling and family supports, "more in the tradition of a family

therapist" as he describes it, in spite of his training program's focus on producing diagnosticians

who look at educational disabilities. He said, "I guess I just had it in my head, that's what

psychologists do." He credited his internship with helping him recognize the realities of the job:

The experience during the internship was not what I expected. It was very helpful in

clarifying the role of the school psychologist. I realized the profession was more about

diagnosis and much less about the counseling. I'd been trained on these other things but I

didn't realize it'd be to that extent and that's fine because I really actually like the

diagnostic process. I always enjoyed the data analysis/statistics involved in the

profession. I like statistics; I like the data; I like the visual graphing.

Patrick defined a professional school psychologist as "a leader in education to enhance student

learning." He broke that definition down into specific components: "That would be the

collaborative work that you do, the problem-solving focus. It's constant problem solving. And

being prepared for what's coming, because you don't know. It's hard." His definition certainly

is concise but inclusive, and has evolved over his lengthy career. Patrick has been a professional school psychologist for 36 years. He began his career in 1981 working in public school systems in Minnesota and North Dakota until 1990 when he moved to and began working for this large urban Southwestern school district's School Psychology department. He reflected on his career and some of the experiences that he feels have shaped and changed his practice from the beginning:

> And [since] starting, the profession certainly has changed; the job has changed through the years. Starting out I used to do 3 IQs a day. I had my little WISC-R kit in the red bag and would just go building to building doing IQs. I think I've had a very very diverse experience in my practice from rural North Dakota, with one room schoolhouses, to a school district with over 300,000 students. Some of my [current] schools are bigger than the communities I've served. And I have worked in basements with dirt floors, I've worked in the boiler room, I've worked next to the mop sink.

Changes in education have also had an impact according to Patrick and, while he feels the practice of school psychology has changed for the better, "I'm not sure education has." He references the sociological impact:

> Well, my practice has changed because of the settings I've been working in. When I was working in North Dakota and Minnesota, it was a very homogeneous kind of population. And the individual needs of students weren't as diverse. These were a largely white farm class, working class. Very stable enrollments. Very stable friendships. Before, at that point you were looking at IQs, looking at discrepancies to see if kids needed special education. At this point the work is, you know, inner city, urban. And now it's changed to youth offender setting, which is somewhat unique. I went from rural North Dakota

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one-room schoolhouses and graduating classes of 4, graduating classes of under 10. That was kind of the norm. I mean schools were a very important piece of the community. And you come here and they're building schools for 3000 kids, which is kind of a crime in and of itself. We're probably looking at more of a systems kind of need. Because you have a large second language population. You have a very transient population. You are dealing with single parenting and you're dealing with the pressures of drugs, gangs. Those kinds of things that even our little kids are exposed to.

However, he noted that the kids across the settings in which he has worked are not all that different. As he indicated, Patrick's work settings have been diverse over the span of years he has been in practice as a school psychologist. In addition to working in elementary and secondary institutions in both rural and urban centers, he has worked in behavior schools, virtual (on-line) schools, juvenile detention centers, jails, and prisons. He noted: "At any location, you have this wide range of kids – personalities and needs. Even in small towns you've got, you know, juvenile delinquents. You have, you know, those neglected kids and you have those angry kids."

Patrick continues to view the key areas of his practice as being collaboration and consultation. He added data gathering, interpretation, and individual program planning to these, even in his current assignment where he works with juvenile offenders, but reflected on his own evolution and understanding of the direction the job has taken. He feels he has become less "idealistic." Whereas initially, the job entailed "looking at discrepancies to see if kids need special education," he feels the profession is looking at "more of a systems kind of thing" that addresses a sociologically based need for supports. And his current personal interest is in the study of the school-to-prison pipeline.

Patrick does not define himself as a school psychologist by his daily lived experience on the job but rather has a sense of it being integrated into who he is: "I find that being a school psychologist is certainly part of my identity, so I don't separate it from my existence and my life." He does not view himself through the lens of the "role" he plays in the work setting from day to day. "It's not an adjusting job. Do this today and something else tomorrow." Working with kids affirms how he perceives himself as a school psychologist and "is the core of the profession." He feels a sense of belonging to the profession based on feedback he gets from others: "I think my work's respected. I seem to get that feedback. I think my work is appreciated. I think people look to me for direction, answers." But his sense of belonging and the significance of school psychology is internalized as well: "I find that there's an internal reward. I think it's important; I think it changes lives for the better, and not just for students, but families. It can even save lives."

Review. Patrick defined a professional school psychologist as "a leader in education to enhance student learning." He described what that means to him, saying, "That would be the collaborative work that you do, the problem solving focus. It's constant problem solving. And being prepared for what's coming, because you don't know." In fact, Patrick might be described as a school psychologist chameleon, changing the way he performs the job as he moves from setting to setting. While he feels his practice has changed over time as he has moved from rural to urban settings, his description of what a professional school psychologist does and of what he himself does has remained constant: collaboration, consultation, data gathering and interpretation, problem solving, and individual program planning, regardless of the location. Essentially Patrick has maintained his core professional practice and adapted to the job requirements based on context:

What I tell my mentees is don't confuse your professional practice with the requirements

of the job. That does not reflect on you just because you're learning a new report writer

or a new data management system. That is not your practice.

Patrick recalled and shares a landmark event in his journey to becoming a school psychologist.

He says, "Actually, this is kind of important**.** Another summer camp job I had was working with

mentally disabled adults and I absolutely loved it." For Patrick the draw to school psychology

was the enjoyment of working with students with disabilities.

He went into his graduate School Psychology program and upon completion, prior to entering his

internship, thought he would be involved in providing counseling and family type therapy, even

though his program focused on diagnostics and educational disabilities. His internship

experience helped him clarify the role of the school psychologist and to realize the profession

was as his program focus had indicated, that is, "more about diagnosis of disabilities and much

less about the counseling."

Patrick went on to observe, "The profession certainly has changed; the job has changed through

the years." He related how he initially performed IQ testing in small rural school districts and

noted, "I think I've had a very very diverse experience in my practice from rural North Dakota,

with one room schoolhouses, to a school district with over 300,000 students. My practice has

changed because of the settings I've been working in." As he noted, initially the job entailed

"looking at discrepancies to see if kids need special education," and now the profession is

looking at "more of a systems kind of thing" that addresses a sociologically based need for

supports. As he reflected on his own evolution and understanding of the direction the job has

taken, he feels he has become less "idealistic." While he feels the practice of school psychology

has changed for the better, he says, "I'm not sure education has."

Patrick's understanding and definition of himself as a school psychologist has evolved over his lengthy career. He did not define himself as a school psychologist by his daily, lived experience on the job but rather has a sense of it being integrated into who he is: "I find that being a school psychologist is certainly part of my identity, so I don't separate it from my existence and my life." He does not view himself through the lens of the "role" he plays in the work setting from day to day. "It's not an adjusting job. Do this today and something else tomorrow."

Richard

Richard does not recall giving much thought to what he wanted to be when he grew up, although his mother thought he would want to be a truck driver because of his obsession with the garbage truck when he was little. Upon his return from his church mission, he "knew I had to start coming up with what I needed to do." Richard's experiences as a church missionary, where he realized he enjoyed working with people, led him to education when he became a teacher of language at the church's training center while completing his undergraduate degree. Richard was interested in education but felt he had to find a field in education that would provide financial stability and for that, would need a graduate degree. The professor of his undergraduate child psychology class was the head of the school psychology program at his school and helped point him in the direction of that program which combined his interests in education and psychology. Richard said of his mission, "That experience set me up for life. If I wouldn't have done that, I wouldn't be where I'm at right now. It was a critical life changing decision for me, because it really set me up."

Richard's pragmatic nature continued to help guide his decisions as he moved through his training program into internship and ultimately to his current employment. He chose to pursue the school psychology program with its paid internship rather than move into a counseling

program at a different University. However, his internship provided him with the opportunity to develop his counseling and assessment skills as a counselor-psychologist in what was considered at the time to be the "elite" program location for internship work. Following graduation, where he received an Educational Specialist's degree, Richard took a position as a school psychologist in a rural school district, working there for a year. He had interviewed with this large urban Southwestern school district's School Psychology department but had not heard back from them before accepting the rural position. When this district made him an offer, he responded that he would not break the first contract he had accepted but did indicate he would consider moving the following year, which he did.

Richard retired from this district after 30 years, returning to work part time with the district and as a contractor to charter schools in the private sector. Over time he has worked in a number of different educational settings and is currently working in a public middle school with a population of approximately 1300 students. The charter schools are primarily elementary level and add another 1300 students to his caseload. Richard's specific interests and specialties include Positive Behavioral Support and Response to Intervention. He also reported:

> I love assessment. I'm one of those weirdos. Some people say, "Well, I'm more into, I want to do more eclectic stuff and be out there and stuff like counseling, stuff like that." I don't mind that, but I really like…I do like my role [assessment] and what I do now.

Richard's immediate reaction when asked his definition of a professional school psychologist was, "Oh, gee, that's a loaded question." He went on to say:

> I think it's someone that is not only involved in assessment but consultation, a problem solver. Someone that teachers can go to. I pride myself in working with teachers over the years and getting ideas on how to work with kids in the classroom.

He described the importance of being part of a team:

> I think, for me, it's not only becoming aware of where I'm at, but also understanding a little bit of the role of all your team members. I think that's the big thing. Are you a team member, not just an individual who's just locked in your office.

He defined himself as a school psychologist in terms of the "daily grind" and by those specific times when he is involved in solving problems or doing consulting for things that he says are "off the beaten path of what I normally do" such as when helping a teacher develop an intervention plan or working with his private schools' staffs and parents to put together data-based study plans. Richard's definition of a school psychologist was more inclusive and is not site context specific. He feels that school psychologists who work primarily in research or publishing, for example, still fit the definition of school psychologist. He related, "They have a role. They're doing something to give us a service and it relates to what we're doing; they're just not doing it the same ways that's traditionally thought of."

To Richard being professional means "being abreast of, being aware of what changes are going on. It's looking at, if things are done better, not doing it the same way, but actually trying to expand your horizons and develop." He finds himself searching out additional training so he "feels more, better equipped to deal. I just think if you're growing, if you're becoming more well-rounded as an individual, that's a professional school psychologist." Richard's sense is that the person who takes the attitude of "I just want to survive" will burn out if he or she is not growing professionally through expanding the knowledge base. He emphasizes the need to be reflecting on what one is doing:

> Am I there or is that something…I think it's something you need to be thinking about all the time. That's scary, because sometimes you'll be saying something, you'll be thinking,

well, yeah. But then you'll hear something else that makes you kind of question a little

bit and something you've never passed and then you go looking.

He also feels strongly about being open to learning opportunities and stepping out of one's

comfort zone.

Looking around, seeing what your colleagues are doing. If you hear that somebody's

doing something really neat, find out what it is and then try to incorporate it into your

practice. That's what I think constitutes someone that's a true professional, when they

can look around and see what works and they go with that, rather than just feeling

comfortable and never really reaching out to find out what else is out there.

Richard's first real exposure to the incongruity between what he as an effective school

psychologist thought he would be doing and what he actually experienced was when he came to

work at this district. "First when I got in, I thought, oh, I'll come up with the answer and then all

of a sudden it's just gonna turn the kid around, and he's gonna be all successful." Richard

reflects back on the frustrations he felt when he first started working in the district as he became

aware of what he perceives are the large educational system's short-comings, particularly within

the area of special education:

I think my first few years are doing re-evaluations where I saw some of the pitfalls of

what I thought special education should be…. That was disturbing to me, so I was

thinking, geez, if I can do more on the front end, then maybe I could avert a lot of the

problems that they're having later on. So I kind of thought, well, I'm gonna be able to

just go out there and look at a kid, test them, get the teachers some answers, and all of a

sudden, they'll just rise to the top. That's not what happens.

He went on to explain his frustrations with dealing with what he calls the "inherent problems" with special education such as the inconsistencies of teacher quality and instruction, things over which he has no control. He recalled "a little bit" of this experience during his internship,

> …but not to the degree as when I got down here because I was still, I think, fresh, and still just learning and not aware of everything around me, not aware of building politics and stuff like that, or just politics and education as a whole. I think that's what I've become more aware of, just how buildings work, and how staffs work and stuff like that through the years. That's been a big difference from when I first started.

Being more aware of problems within the system has not eliminated his frustrations, but he has developed the confidence and system "savvy" for maneuvering within the bureaucracy of an organization the size of this large district, at least within the special education department. Richard's approach is direct but diplomatic. He feels that "unfortunately… a lot of times people get a little removed from working directly with kids, and there's middle and upper management and especially when a district is so big, that you start making decisions based on [trying things] instead of consulting with people and thinking what will really work." Also helpful to him was a lesson he had learned about politics during his internship: "You learn that when you're in education. It's just something you have to get through."

Despite his frustrations, Richard has continued in the field, pursuing knowledge and advocating for kids. He feels working with kids has affirmed his belief in what he is doing as a school psychologist. In his current assignment, he has been doing a lot more paper pushing, as he calls it, and noted "that part of it is not as enjoyable as the direct working with the kids" although he acknowledges that the paperwork is important. However:

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When you work directly with the students and teachers and you find out something, and you get to the bottom of why the student is struggling, and you give them some ideas and suggestions, and it seems to work, that's what I wanted to be when I came out. I wanted to help students and help kids because I enjoyed working with kids. That's why I got into education.

Richard's path to understanding what a school psychologist is and does is a marriage of openness to people and circumstances from whom or which to learn paired with continued self-reflection to determine fit. Richard's story was peppered with "people," from when he realized he enjoyed working with the people he was instructing at his church training center, to the present. He spoke of his college mentors, one of whom became his intern supervisor. KJ helped him learn one of his first lessons about working with difficult staff and politics in a school. For Richard it was reassuring, as he had been questioning his skills and himself when she helped him realize he was not the problem. She helped him learn to look outside of himself and step back from a situation to look at the big picture. From then and throughout his career Richard has gratefully taken the opportunity to learn from those around him:

I've watched people and people that were around me that I respected. I learned a lot from it. It's created who I am. I think of when I first got here. I worked with MB. He took me under his wing and showed me a lot of stuff. I worked with you and JS, and with JK. There's been a lot of good people that I've been exposed to that really helped me professionally. I've had wonderful experiences with people that I've worked with, again, supervisors. I've worked with great people and they've encouraged me to be independent and to work hard, but yet, to know that they can be a source of, in this district, I know there are certain people I can go to get help. That helps me feel more secure in what I do.

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While Richard spoke respectfully and positively of people he has encountered over the years, he acknowledged that when he first started he had concerns about others' opinions of him. He continued to speak of being a people pleaser in the present tense but with positivity:

> Sometimes what's sad is and sometimes I try and be a people pleaser and that can be a negative as well as a positive …. When I first started, it was a concern for me and I think that was a weakness of mine. I still like to help people and that's why I'm in a helping profession. But I've come to the point now where who I'm supposed to advocate for are the kids that I'm working with. If I always take the position what's best for kids then I'm never going to be in trouble. I may have disagreements with people. I'm not fearful anymore.

He went on to say, "If I have a position I feel really strongly about and I'm able to advocate for it and at the end of the meeting they don't agree, I'm not losing sleep over it. I know I've done my best to present a position that I felt was right and I feel good about it." He does acknowledge, however, that being in that situation when you first practice can be intimidating.

As he continued to reflect on the kind of school psychologist he has become, Richard addresses how his focus has changed. "…when I first started I could put out a certain number of cases. I felt I was working more quickly as a younger psychologist. I was referred to as a speed demon. …but I think I wasn't picking up things that I pick up now." He acknowledged his uncertainty about what he knew: "I think when I first started practicing, I think I was a little more gun shy because I questioned why am I doing this, and as I've worked over the years and I've seen so many kids, some things just come naturally." MB, one of his mentors, told him early in his career that it would take him longer to do the work as he gained experience and learned to look in different directions or have different thoughts. Richard observed, "Then I found he's right. I

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think I'm better at reading kids now than I was when I first started. When I feel like something

is a gut check, sometimes I think it comes from experience as well as intuition." However, one of

Richard's regrets is having limited time:

> Sometimes your time is limited so you have to be…, you'd like to spend a little bit more
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> time and I think that's one thing I wish we had would be more time. "I can get to know
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> you [the student] and I'm going to talk to you" but as you start to feel comfortable you
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> want to get going on what you need to do.

Richard feels the changes in education have had a positive influence on his practice. He likes the

idea of being involved in "some of the front end stuff," as he describes it. He likes being part of

the Response to Intervention (RtI) team where he can contribute to problem solving and

developing interventions for students rather than or before ever going to evaluation. He did

express frustration with the kinds of evaluations where Curriculum Based Data (CBM)

(quantitative data) is the primary source of information,

> …that's so frustrating to me because with all the recent assessments I've been doing
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> these re-evaluations on, I get in there and there's CBM data through the wazoo. I see
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> beautiful tables and everything's in the tables, but there's not a lot of descriptive
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> information in there as to maybe why they [the students] are not getting this. I like that
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> cognitive measure at least, so I know how a student processes.

Richard has enjoyed his job over the years and stated he has not thought about leaving the

profession. "I've been really quite happy with what I've chosen to do. But I know there's that

burnout out there." He feels the stress of the job is related in part to the shortage of school

psychologists but also feels that personal stress is related to the "gate-keeper" status assigned to

school psychologists by teachers and other team members when students are not found eligible for receiving special education services:

> It's supposed to be a team decision. It's supposed to be everybody contributing. I try to get everyone to do that, but there's still a lot of that pressure on the school psychologist because you're the one that's done a lot of the diagnostics and you're the one that understands that and explaining it to other team members. They really rely on that person to do that. With that comes a lot of stress.

Not only has Richard not considered leaving his profession, he declared he would choose to do it again if he went back in time. But, if he knew then what he has learned since, he "wouldn't screw off or goof off or take some classes I didn't need. I'd just go straight in and get it earlier." He has advised candidates considering entering the profession to be organized and "you've gotta have a strong belief in what you're doing. And you have to stand up for what you believe in and advocate for the kid. … Think, what's the best thing I can do for this child?" He added the following to the list:

> You've got to be a people person. You've gotta be able to read people. If you can read people, that's half the battle. You can bring people along to understand what's best. Good social skills are a really good attribute. And you gotta have a knowledge of the tests.

Richard advised double and triple checking scoring on tests because "you can't make mistakes. They need to be taken seriously." He shared concerns about the younger people coming into higher education and the job market. He went on to relate a conversation he had with a business owner and employer he knows concerning attitude toward responsibility and work ethic.

I think, and I'm not trying to get down on today's generation, but it's like everybody gets a trophy. We got into that realm where you get all these participation things, and we don't want to break anybody's heart or give them constructive feedback because it can be hurtful or something said may destroy them.

He tells about his own experiences with students' sense of entitlement when he was a part time instructor at a private college where he was questioned about why they had to do certain assignments such as research papers. He reflected,

I would've never been that way as a new person coming in. It was my job to learn my job and to become proficient and try and be as independent as quickly as possible. I think there's some truth to the fact that people feel a little bit more coddled now and entitled: "I should be here or I should have this."

Richard attributed part of this attitude to technology making life somewhat easier for students.

I think part of it is the computer age and stuff like that. They don't have to dig as much to do research. It's just boom, boom, boom, right there on the screen. They're used to quick answers. I think things have been easier and they expect this was easy, "my job should be easy."

Richard's philosophy and advice to new people coming into the field was quite simple: "You gotta work your tail off. You gotta be willing when you're first out [in the field] when you're corrected to accept the correction and to grow with it. If you're not willing to do that, then this isn't the field to be in."

Review. Richard's definition of a professional school psychologist was inclusive and not site specific in that he feels school psychologists can assume a number of different nontraditional roles and positions in venues other than schools such as working in publishing, teaching, or

doing research. He viewed the school psychologist as "someone that is not only involved in assessment but consultation, a problem solver." Speaking from his own experience, the school psychologist is someone that teachers can go to and he prides himself in "working with teachers over the years and getting ideas on how to work with kids in the classroom." In addition, he defined himself as a school psychologist in terms of his daily lived experience such as when he is involved in solving problems or doing consulting that he describes as "off the beaten path of what I normally do." As an example, he spoke about helping a teacher develop an intervention plan or working with his private schools' staffs and parents to put together data-based study plans.

Richard defined being a professional as separate from school psychologist. His standard or criteria for being professional means "being abreast of, being aware of what changes are going on. It's looking at if things are done better, not doing it the same way, but actually trying to expand your horizons and develop." He personally searches out additional trainings to improve and expand his knowledge. He added, "I just think if you're growing, if you're becoming more well-rounded as an individual, that's a professional school psychologist."

Richard's journey to school psychology started even before he had heard of the field. His church mission and subsequent educational exposure and experience had a significant impact on his life, pointing him in the direction of education and working in a helping profession. He said of it, "That experience set me up for life. If I hadn't done that, I wouldn't be where I'm at right now. It was a critical life changing decision for me because it really set me up." Richard's development has been impacted by his experiences with "people," from when he realized he enjoyed working with the people he was instructing at his church training center, to the present. He spoke of his college mentors, one of whom became his intern supervisor. KJ helped him learn one of his first

lessons about working with difficult staff and politics in a school. Throughout his career, Richard has capitalized on the opportunities to learn from those around him and he credited them with helping to shape who he is as a school psychologist: "I've watched people and people that were around me that I respected. I learned a lot from it. It's created who I am."

As Richard reflected on the kind of school psychologist he has become, he addressed how his focus, attitude, confidence, and understanding about his role have changed. He acknowledged his uncertainty about what he knew initially: "I think when I first started practicing, I think I was a little more gun shy because I questioned why am I doing this, and as I've worked over the years and I've seen so many kids, some things just come naturally now." He confessed having had what he feels was a weakness in trying to be what he describes as a people pleaser:

When I first started, it was a concern for me, and I think that was a weakness of mine. I still like to help people, and that's why I'm in a helping profession. But I've come to the point now where who I'm supposed to advocate for are the kids that I'm working with. I'm not fearful anymore.

He feels his experience and growth in the field have contributed to his effectiveness, noting the lessons he has learned regarding how buildings and staffs work and about the politics involved, with "instruction" beginning during his internship. These lessons have increased his problem solving skills for maneuvering within the bureaucracy of a large organization like the one for whom he currently works.

Richard feels the changes in education have had a positive influence on his practice. He likes the idea of being involved in "some of the front end stuff," as he describes it. He likes being part of the Response to Intervention (RtI) team where he can contribute to problem solving and developing interventions for students rather than or before ever going to evaluation.

Richard's core definition of what a professional school psychologist is has not really changed. However, his experiences have helped him broaden the way he applies these within his practice. He continues to be involved in assessment, consultation, and is a problem solver, performing these with a focus on advocating for children with the confidence he has gained through his years of experience.

Gwen

Gwen was drawn to the law when younger and attributed this to what she described as her competitive nature and to being a "little argumentative." She thought she would eventually become an attorney but then changed that idea to engineer and actually began pursuing this track in college until "I just thought calculus? No, thanks, I don't want to do this." In addition to her interest in law, Gwen had been a very athletic child, and her interest and involvement in this arena continued into college where she played basketball and then went into coaching after she finished her undergraduate degree. Meanwhile, she had become very interested in psychology, starting with sports related psychology particularly team dynamics as well as eating disorders in athletes, which she described in her experience as being rampant. "It [was] very fascinating, for me, how the coach and coaches handled athletes, and their motivation and how they motivated people." She initially thought of becoming a clinical psychologist but wanted a position where she would be able to work with kids, doing both coaching and counseling. After meeting and speaking with a school psychologist to learn more about the profession, she decided school psychology was the way to go as it seemed to provide the opportunity for her to work in her areas of interest. However, once she started in the profession, she realized quickly that she did not have time for both.

Gwen has been a school psychologist for 24 years and has worked 18 of those years in the school psychology department of a large urban Southwestern school district. Her current assignment is with the Child Find Project, a service whose purpose is to identify the special education needs of children and students ages three - twenty-one who are not enrolled in public school. The majority of children Gwen works with are three and four year olds. She described herself as having "regressed" from working with adults to adolescents, to middle school to elementary aged children, and finally "all the way down to working with preschool. Because partly, I can get on that level with them." She added, "…kids just know whether or not you're on their level." She wenrt on to describe how "it's all about play" and talks about the process of assessing small children: "I'm observing them but yet I'm playing with them and trying to interact with them so everything that I do, even though it's standardized assessment, is with regard to play…that's the only way you can get…at this age." She noted standardization of assessments can be maintained but "you can do it in a manner. It's the way you do it, and to be extremely patient, which these children have taught me."

Although she did not pursue a career as an attorney, Gwen's interest in and attention to the law are often at the forefront of her consciousness and provide the foundation of her practice as a school psychologist and mentor:

> I love my position because we also have that area where you need to know the law, inside and out with regard to working with children with disabilities. And I think, just my position here, with autism consultant and the amount of involved cases that we have, and complex cases that may go on. You can find yourself, and the teams that I work with here, if they do not take that extra step, you may find yourself in a position that you will have some legal ramifications if you're not looking at everything.

Gwen stays abreast of the laws affecting special education: "And things change. When I first started, and some of the nuances and the things that have gone to the 9th Circuit Court, so it's made differences and changes as the pendulum has swung from here to here." She tries to instill and emphasize the importance and possible legal fall-out from job performance when working with interns or new peers she is mentoring, sharing an example of dialogues she has had in the past:

> What if this [case] went Due Process? Do you have the data to support this? Do you feel that you have followed all NAC (Nevada Administrative Code) requirements? Are you able to substantiate this evaluation if this went beyond to a hearing? Could you testify and support what you are doing right now?

Gwen responded immediately when first asked her definition of a professional school psychologist:

> Well, I think I kind of have an idea as far as how I would describe. I would say that [person] is well-versed in the law. Someone who is well-versed in consultation, assessment. Have the counseling background. What our profession, the NASP model of service, and I think someone that abides by that and the ethical principles of our association and practices. Someone who exemplifies that would be considered, in my mind, a professional school psychologist.

However, she also defined who she is as a professional school psychologist by what she does on a day to day basis "because we're in the trenches with regard to working with children, families, staff, teachers, administrators, and every day is a new day." She feels the role cannot be defined over longer periods of time because things change. "We have different cases, we have different students we work with; so I'd say daily." Gwen feels she is part of a professional community in

the school district, in part because the school psychology department is large. She is

appreciative of the opportunity to "bounce ideas off of others, to collaborate, to work with each

other in a way that many other psychologists throughout the country would not have." She added

that even at her Child Find work site she has a unique opportunity to collaborate with people

who have been there for a long time in addition to those who are new. "And so they all bring a

different perspective of other educators and professionals." She feels that the school psychology

department has people "that truly want the profession to continue to be highly regarded" as

evidenced by their involvement and participation in NASP and NvASP, the state association of

school psychologists. She also appreciates the opportunity technology provides to allow contact

with the larger school psychology community: "the technology is great because you can go on

NASP and you can talk to other individuals through e-mail and the internet."

Gwen attributed her initial understanding of the profession to her graduate program at the

University of Montana. At the time of her matriculation, the school was trying to become NASP

accredited and so the school psychology department's focus and course designs were "consistent

with NASP's expectations, ethics, principles." She noted that since that time things have

changed, with coursework now reflecting the current state of education, including the Response

to Instruction (RtI) movement, and research on processing disabilities versus curriculum-based

measurement, where there is more focus on the kinds of interventions that have been found to be

effective for kids. She commented on how education is trying to fit into a business design where

teachers are rewarded based upon a performance-evaluation model that is tied into student

achievement. She expressed her frustration with this kind of narrow model, asking about the

'missing' quality: "who is going to make that determination, what is considered quality versus

what isn't? And how do you tie test scores, in and of themselves, into whether or not the child

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has made growth?" She feels strongly that the structure of her graduate training also contributed to her understanding, sense of being part of a community, and hands-on development of being a school psychologist:

> The way our program was structured, the first year was an internship, but our whole program we spent in schools. We had research, we had all of that, but we were assigned to a supervisor that we met with. It was a great school psychologist I worked with, and it was important to have that community. You weren't alone."

Gwen does not feel that her sense of who she is and how competent she is as a school psychologist is influenced by other' people's perceptions and opinions. As she noted,

> I would say that I don't think that matters necessarily what profession. I think that does back to individuals own personalities as far … do they rely on the external versus the internal? Are they more influenced and have a self-concept based upon others versus how they see themselves? She declares that most of the time she is a self-confident person and comfortable with her own competency: "I would say … for the most part, yes. There are days that I'm thinking, 'Holy, this is quite a case. What do…?' Then it's nice to be able to consult with someone.

As she reflected back over her career, Gwen recalled thinking initially she would be doing more counseling than assessment. She noted that there had been extensive course work in counseling during her training and her program had included a lot of practice in counseling. So she expected to be doing more of that in her practice. She found this was not the case, however. She feels her role, in terms of the scope of what she does, is very different from what she did 15 or 20 years ago because

I think as you develop in this profession you choose, based upon your preferences and the

population you want to work with, and consequently mine's been defined very narrowly

with regard to working with pre-school and primarily working with autism and consulting

and doing those kinds of things that are not in the schools, per se. I do do some school

age but not like I used to.

She recalled a brief period of time earlier in her career when she took about six months away

from school psychology to participate in the field of marketing. She recalled being very

successful at it but felt it was not who she was so returned to school psychology. She also

recalled one very stressful year when she was assigned to a middle school and was required to

work with a very difficult staff member. She related how this experience was the impetus for her

move to working with the preschool population. Despite any negative experiences, she has had

Gwen would "probably" do school psychology again if she had to make the decision. However,

she does wonder about what it would have been like to have gone into clinical psychology and

not having had to deal with all of the politics involved in an educational system.

Gwen's response, when asked the chief attributes and responsibilities that school psychologists

must have as professionals, was first and foremost about the law: "You need to know the law,

inside and out with regard to working with children with disabilities." She went on to say, "First

of all, you have to love what you do." Next, she addressed needing people skills, "And you also

have to have a grasp, people skills as far as working with others, and also team building. You

have to be able to work with diverse personalities." Of utmost importance is the need to be so

child-centered in focus that "when you go to bed at night, know, I made a difference. This child's

going to get the services that he or she needs." She warns, "But understand you're not going to

get accolades from mothers" and advises, "I think that you have to learn not to take things

personally. You can't be responsible for how other people may take something. To not own that, but to look at, this is the situation." She describes advantageous personality traits that the school psychologist should have since that person typically becomes the leader of the team. She denoted these as including being a leader, having clear communications skills, being very well organized, and being conscientious, and reiterates needing to have inner strength and being able to get along with people.

Gwen has had experience advising interns and new school psychologists throughout her career. She observed that her experience with interns has been somewhat inconsistent. She recalled that early in her career in this district, the interns with whom she worked "weren't prepared. They did practicums, not in a school. I was taken aback, because my program was very different than that, and you were prepared because you had to be." She described the hands-on training she received: "We had supervision when we were working with the child, doing the assessment, and received feedback on whether or not we followed the standardized procedures, when this happened with this child, what I could have done differently."

Gwen offered this advice based on her years of experience in professional practice to someone considering coming into the field. She heartily recommended speaking with a supervisor, not at the university level, but a school psychologist who is in the field, that is actually doing the job. If possible visit someone and have a conversation and shadow a school psychologist to see what the job is like, "because I think there are a lot of misconceptions of what school psychology is about." As for new school psychologists, Gwen encourages them to read everything thoroughly, the manuals, orientation information, and so on. She advises networking and seeking out an exemplary school psychologist to visit and talk with, shadow and have conversations with, including the new person's supervisor. "Find out, you're not alone in this profession. But make

sure that you connect with someone that values and has integrity in the field." When working

with interns, Gwen instructs and reminds them.

> How would you want this evaluation? What would you want? How would you want the
> teacher to interact? How would you provide services if this was your child we're talking
> about? And just remember, every one of these families that you deal with, they have that
> same perspective. I want the best evaluation. I want to work with the best psychologist
> that I can. So how can you make yourself be that way? You are the person that is
> ultimately responsible for the benefit of this child. Bottom line, you're there as an
> advocate for that child. What can you bring to this team so that you can advocate for this
> child. And by doing that, learn as much as you possibly can. It's all about being
> informed and having ethics and integrity.

Review. Gwen's definition of a profession school psychologist is all-encompassing in Terms of

the field, the role, and the practice. She defined or described a professional school psychologist

as someone who is skilled in assessment, consulting, and counseling and emphasized the

importance of being knowledgeable about the laws governing special education. She also

emphasized knowing about and following the guidelines and ethical principles established by the

profession's representative organization, the National Association of School Psychologists

(NASP).

In addition, Gwen defined who she is as a professional school psychologist by what she does on

a day to day basis and, because of the agendas of the wide range of stakeholders and other

professionals with whom she deals, said, "Every day is a new day." She feels the role cannot be

defined over longer periods of time because things change frequently. She also feels the job

"requires the strength of character and inner strength, and that does not come easily when you

first come into the field" nor does confidence, stressing the importance of experience in becoming a competent and successful practitioner and child-centered advocate. At the same time, she cautioned: "In this position, I think you walk a fine line if you are overly self-assured; it's a mistake to be overly confident" and stresses the importance of consulting with others when unsure. She views this attitude and practice as being "part of our profession."

Gwen attended the University of Montana where she studied School Psychology as a graduate student. At that time, the school psychology department was trying to become NASP accredited, and so the school psychology department's focus and course designs were "consistent with NASP's expectations, ethics, and principles. She recalled thinking initially she would be doing more counseling than assessment since there had been extensive course work in counseling during her training and her program had included a lot of practice in counseling. She found this was not the case, however. Gwen feels strongly that the structure of her graduate training contributed to her understanding about being a school psychologist as well as a sense of being part of a professional community and provided the opportunity for hands-on development of being a school psychologist.

Gwen feels her role, regarding the scope of what she does, is very different from what she did 15 or 20 years ago because "as you develop in this profession you choose, based upon your preferences and the population you want to work with." She noted hers had been defined very narrowly about working with pre-school and primarily working with autism and consultations. She reflected further on other changes that had occurred in the law that have impacted the role and practice of the school psychologist. She said, "When I first started, and some of the nuances and the things that have gone to the 9th Circuit Court, so it's made differences and changes as the pendulum has swung from here to here." There have been other impacts due to changes in

education over time, including the Response to Instruction (RtI) movement, and research on processing disabilities versus curriculum-based measurement. She pointed out that education seems to be trying to fit into a business design where teachers are rewarded based upon a performance-evaluation model that is tied into student achievement and questions the validity of this.

Karina

When asked "what is a school psychologist?" and "how does one define a professional school psychologist?" Karina responded "[that is] … a big question; I don't even know where to start." However, she did not shrink from the challenge. She went on to describe and define herself as a school psychologist in the context of the school setting: "…that works in a school. My role is multi-faceted. I'm a problem solver, a sounding board for teacher and parents and kids. I'm a behavior mentor. I do a lot of consultation. I pretty much do it all, except teach." Karina differentiates what she does from the standpoint of doing a 7:00 to 2:00 job versus being a professional: "… some people might come to the job, just do the tests, sit in their office, just test kids, just write reports, not interact with everybody." She used the term "invested" in relation to the school, to the children, and essentially, to people in general. Her sense of herself (of being) as a psychologist is internal. As she said, she "practice(s) a lot what I do in my job" outside the context of school "cause people – maybe human dynamics…I think it's the people that make it what it is. And the needs of the people around you that define that role." For Karina, it's all about relationships regardless of setting.

Karina has had a good deal of time to develop her personal understanding and sense of being a school psychologist after practicing the profession for 25 years. She received an undergraduate degree in psychology at a small private university in the Midwest after having her interest in the

field piqued during a high school psychology class where she learned about Piaget and Jung among others. Her initial interest in industrial psychology quickly turned to school psychology after she was introduced to this branch of the field from a family friend. School Psychology seemed to be the ideal program that fulfilled her interests: psychology, working in a school, working with kids, and working with kids with disabilities to better understand about their struggles. She went on to earn an Educational Specialist degree in school psychology from a Midwestern university.

Karina had always enjoyed opportunities for working and talking with people while doing odd jobs in high school and college. Now in her program, she learned to refine and expand those skills for rapport and relationship building as part of her training in consultation, crediting her mentors for modeling these skills for her. In addition to learning the ins and outs of the job, her internship provided the setting for Karina to be exposed to learning about and working with students with behaviors and emotional issues. She found "[I] really liked that group of kids. So that kind of put me on that path."

Following graduation, Karina worked for a year in a mid-size town in the Midwest before taking a position with the school psychology department of a large urban Southwestern school district. She related the story of two cases and encounters she had soon after moving that cemented her interest in children's mental health issues and feels these were significant in impacting and shaping her practice. "…I think these two experiences probably shaped the kind of psychologist that I am, the way I invest in my kids." Karina's case centered around two children with significant emotional problems. She described how involved her support of the family became, including accompanying the children to appointments and making home visits. She then told of her experiences helping a mother find a safe house because of needing to remove herself and her

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child from the home where the child was being sexually abused. Of the first case, she said, "I also learned that I am good with that population. Those kids like me and respect me and bond to me. So it made me want to be working with those kinds of kids more." Of the second case, she said, "That experience made me want to stay in that population-the lower SES populations- and work with these people." While these two experiences were influential in shaping her practice, they also provided some hard lessons.

> Moreover, I had to learn the hard way that you cannot fall in love with every kid you work with. Moreover, you have to figure out how to separate that. I love all my kids. However, I had to learn how to separate that from home, and not bring it home. So I taught myself how to compartmentalize all that. Moreover, I can't save them all. It doesn't mean that I don't feel it any less. It doesn't mean that I don't care any less.

In spite of her love of the profession, about midway through her career, there was a time when Karina began to experience burnout and considered changing jobs: "I wanted to go teach at like a community college or something different." She attributed this, in part, to her assignment. Her elementary school was "emotionally draining," and the other site assignment "was boring," with paperwork being the primary requirement. She described her feelings:

> I started feeling like I wasn't being effective and I wasn't making a difference anymore. Moreover, so, what was I doing; why am I doing this? I wanted a challenge. I wanted something new. I needed to try something different. I needed to grow.

So she made a change, moving to middle school while continuing to work at her elementary site. The effects of the change seemed to have been of benefit. She now calls her elementary assignment her home, saying, "My heart is here; I like my job better, and I feel like I'm making a difference."

Karina's training and early career started in rural and small to mid-size towns in the Midwest. Her early career experience in her current district was "eye-opening" as she puts it. "I had very little exposure to this…I mean we had poverty…however, very little exposure to this kind of thing." She currently works in an urban setting, servicing children grades preschool through eight. Her caseload ratio is approximately 1:2000. One of her schools is a Title I funded school where students are primarily from a low socio-economic neighborhood that includes a percentage of English Language Learners. Karina's interests and specialties include severe to profound intellectual disability, severe emotional disturbance, and autism spectrum disorder. She feels her "idea of school psychology has just changed with the times." She thought she would be doing more consultation and working with teachers in the form of service delivery and looking at interventions, as she had during her School Psychology program. When she first arrived in her current district, she thought she would be doing more diagnostic work and less straight assessing for determining eligibility. She recollects an "AHA!" moment when she first realized what it meant to her to be a school psychologist:

> I remember one day, walking into a school and all the things that had to be done that day were running through my brain, and I was thinking, okay this is what I'm going to do, and I had to deal with this problem. Moreover, I remember consciously saying to myself, "wow, now you're a school psychologist." So, I think at that point, my idea of what a school psychologist was was kind of firmed up. I've changed my definition from diagnostician to problem solver. We are problem-solving constantly….Moreover, it's a whole conglomeration of everything that we do. Very hard to define as this is the job.

Also impacting her idea of what school psychology is are changes in education.

Our job is very sensitive to the changes that are happening in education and the district specifically. I think that we have to adapt like everybody else, and the more stressed out teachers become with the changes that happen, the bigger our job gets.

She referenced federal (Common Core standards), state (Read by 3), and local programs and mandates and shared her frustration with the impact of political power jockeying and administrative transiency in a large school district such as the one where she is currently working:

I've had a different special ed administrator over [my school] the last four years. How do you have any stability with that? Moreover, why are they taking them out of classrooms when we are so desperate for special ed teachers? It's crazy…moreover, they have a lot of power. It's a lot of ego…it's all power. It has nothing really to do with what's best for kids. They don't really help make good decisions for kids.

Karina's concern always centers on kids and, as the school psychologist, she takes ownership of and responsibility for them: "I think that our kids are under so much stress all the time. I think mental health issues are huge in our schools and we are the mental health professionals in the schools."

In retrospect, Karina's professional path appears to have been clear to her since early-on in her life. In high school, she and her classmates had written predictions about what they would be doing five years after graduation: "When I got mine back five years later, I had written I wanted to be a teacher or a psychologist. At that time I didn't know about the job, School Psychologist, but here I am."

Karina has demonstrated personal-inner strength when championing and caring for kids throughout her career but, like most people, has struggled with developing her personal identity

and confidence. She has spent time in honest reflection. She discussed an understanding of her strengths but also candidly talked about personal weaknesses and their impact on her life and job:

> I would say one of my struggles is that I allow people's perceptions of me to have too much impact on me in general in my life, not just in my job but in my life. I think it started out initially in my life as I wanted people to like me. I don't want to do things half-assed. I want to do things well. I think I'm a pleaser. I think that I don't want people to be angry with me. And so that affects a lot of things. But that's me and I don't know that that's a trait of psychologists; that's a trait of me. And so a lot of what I have become as a school psychologist started out as me trying to make sure everybody liked me. And it became who I am. Now I don't know how to do anything else. But it's not just here [at work]. I think that's where I have grown is that there are people now with opinions that do not matter. And if I see them as doing something wrong and ineffective or hurtful, I can stand up to that person and not worry about the conflict.

While Karina feels she is getting stronger in her ability to speak up when she believes something is right, her confidence is challenged when she is around the larger community of school psychologists. Karina's husband holds an administrative position in the school district and there are times when she is unsure of how she is viewed by others. She questioned whether she is seen as Karina or being thought of as so and so's wife. Consequently, during large group meetings, she either stays by herself or tends to gravitate to people in the department she has known for a long time, to people she feels have no expectations of her. In addition, her dedication to performing her job at her school site is intense and her obligation to the school weighs heavily on Karina. She feels invested in her elementary school but does not always feel a part of the school

psychologist community: "...I already have so many people that want something from me [at the school]. I don't really want to reach out to other psychologists because when I do, they want something from me... I can't take more of that." However, she feels she is not alone in feeling this way: "...I also think that there are other psychologists that feel the same way-those of us that have been here for a while. People lean on us because they know we know." And while she does not want more people coming to her for advice, she also feels strongly about people being correctly informed, "It's very hard to balance all that." At some level, Karina is saddened by her feelings of inconsistently belonging to the community of psychologists but attributes this to the size of the department, fewer opportunities for the larger group to gather, staff transiency, and the nature of the job: "There are so many of us that it's more separated than it used to be when we were smaller. We were more intimate. We kind of knew everybody. Now you look at those faces and most of them you don't know." The result is a sense of isolation. However, she reported "kind of" enjoying the weekly site based collaborative meetings.

> ...not for what they're telling us, but to see other psychologists. Sometimes I feel like everything is on me. And so it's nice to go out and kind of be with other psychologists who are having the same experiences. From that perspective I think it is good. So maybe we'll start feeling less isolated.

After 25 years of working in the profession, Karina would come into the field again, if she did not know what she knows now. She expressed her frustration with education being "messed" up in this country but feels "this is where I can do the most good." She does feel she could expand her interest in mental health to an arena beyond school psychology, attributing this to her practice and experiences as a school psychologist:

I think my job has been evolving over the past 20 years, and particularly the last five,

working more and more intensive in the whole family as opposed to just the kid. I think I

could expand that to be more generalized than just school.

She half-seriously shared her dream of opening a bar as an alternative where she could "still be

doing my psychology. It has to be a social thing. I'm talking to people…." She would advise

someone showing an interest in coming into the field, "It's a hard job but it's a rewarding job.

You have to want to do it. If you're just about getting a paycheck, this is not the job for you."

Her advice to new school psychologists: "Pace yourself, prioritize. You can't do everything."

Review. Karina described and defined herself as a school psychologist in the context of the

school setting, that is, as someone who works in a school. She described her role in this way:

"My role is multi-faceted. I'm a problem solver, a sounding board for teacher and parents and

kids. I'm a behavior mentor. I do a lot of consultation." To her, being a professional means

being fully involved and engaged in the school and the people. She described this as being

"invested," not only in the school and the children, but also essentially in people in general and

noted that she engages in practicing a lot of what she does at her job outside of the school and

across other areas of her life. She added, "I think it's the needs of the people around you that

define that role."

During her graduate program and internships, Karina learned to refine and expand rapport and

relationship building skills as part of her training in consultation. She credited her mentors for

modeling these skills for her. Her internship also provided the setting for Karina to be exposed

to learning about and working with students with behaviors and emotional issues and she found

she particularly enjoyed working with that population. She commented, "So that kind of put me

on that path."

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Her early career experience in her current district was "eye-opening" as she puts it and moved her further down the "path" referenced above. She noted, "I had very little exposure to this…I mean we had poverty…but very little exposure to this kind of thing," referring to mental health related situations. She related the story of two cases in which she was involved shortly after her move to her current school district. These centered around two children with significant emotional problems and cemented her interest in children's mental health and the behavioral issues first encountered during her internship. She feels these were significant in impacting and shaping her practice: "I think these two experiences probably shaped the kind of psychologist that I am, the way I invest in my kids." She noted further these helped her realize an area in which she felt confident. She said, "I learned that I am good with that population. Those kids like me and respect me, and bond to me. So it made me want to be working with those kinds of kids more."

Karina feels her "idea of school psychology has just changed with the times." She thought she would be doing more consultation and working with teachers in the form of service delivery and looking at interventions, as she had during her School Psychology program. When she first arrived in her current district she thought she would be doing more diagnostic work and less straight assessing for determining eligibility in her practice. She feels her job has evolved over the past 20 years, and particularly during the last five, as her focus and work have shifted to working more and more with the whole family rather than just the student. Over time and accumulated experience she said, "I've changed my definition from diagnostician to problem solver. We are problem-solving constantly. And it's a whole conglomeration of everything that we do. Very hard to define as this is the job." Karina also speaks of the impact from changes happening in education and the district where she is employed: "Our job is very sensitive to the

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changes that are happening in education and the district. I think that we have to adapt like everybody else."

Karina has struggled with developing her personal identity and has spent time in honest reflection. She spoke candidly about personal weaknesses and their impact on her life and job:

> And so a lot of what I have become as a school psychologist started out as me trying to make sure everybody liked me. And it became who I am. Now I don't know how to do anything else. But it's not just here [at work]. I think that's where I have grown is that there are people now with opinions that do not matter."

Karina did not separate out the parts of her identity. She summed up the integration of personal and professional identity saying, "School psychology is not what I do; it's what I am."

The Themes

Throughout this research process the uniqueness of each participating individual school psychologist became more and more apparent even while their personal descriptions and accounts of what they did and of the functions of the job looked much the same. While they all were operating from the same framework and ethical parameters set by the profession and the professional organization (the NASP Practice Model-refer to appendix D), their practices were shaped by, implemented, and defined in ways interpreted through their individual perspectives. Through the collective discourse it became evident that (Theme 1) developing a definition of oneself as a professional school psychologist is a lifelong process of engagement, constantly evolving and adapting based on each person's accumulated lifetime and professional experiences and interpreted through their personal lens. (Theme 2) Each of the school psychologists interviewed shared an identity that was multi-faceted, defining roles that were in response to the needs of the people served and interpreted within the contexts in which they worked. (Theme 3)

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While all of them characterized themselves first and foremost as advocates for children, (Theme 4) they all depicted or identified their belief that leadership was the most important skillset needed in the performance of their practice.

Theme 1

Developing a definition of oneself as a professional school psychologist is a lifelong process of engagement, constantly evolving and adapting based on each person's accumulated experiences and interpreted through their personal lens.

Despite the fact that they started with interests in varied careers, ranging from Gwen's interest in becoming an attorney or engineer to Patrick's initial movement in the direction of architecture or medicine to those interested in the physical sciences (Lynda – medicine, Shelley – biochemistry), they all eventually found themselves drawn to the study of psychology via introduction to the subject through psychology classes. Five of the six participants earned undergraduate degrees in psychology, with the exception of Richard whose degree was in communication and education, all leading eventually to graduate degrees in school psychology with emphases on psychometrics and counseling. And, while they all professed caring about and having an interest in children, their personal direction and motivations drove their individual types and styles of engagement and perspective as the formation and delivery of their professional practices evolved over time. For example, Karina's emphasis within the job and in her personal life was about being invested with others and making emotional connections, with a particular focus on mental health. From the time of her internship throughout her career Karina's path has included involvement with troubled and needy children and their families, experiences she feels "have shaped the kind of school psychologist I am." Over time, through these experiences, she has developed and evolved to the point that she feels she is effective and "more capable of speaking up for what I believe is

right." Karina's investment in and caring for people is not restricted to children. She noted

concerns and a sense of increasing responsibility for the people with whom she works, "The job

is very sensitive to changes happening in education…the more stressed our teachers become with

the changes that happen, the bigger our job gets."

Just as Karina, Richard was drawn to education and a helping profession while in college upon

discovering how much he cared about working with people. However, while Karina's primary

focus was and is feeling "…it's the people that make it what it is," Richard's has been on

continued learning to know how to work with children and on lifelong engagement in learning.

As he said, "you need to be expanding what you know…." His "people" engagement is in

relation to the positive experiences and learning opportunities he has had with mentors and

colleagues as well as other people throughout his career, beginning during his internship and

continuing to the present. Just as Karina, Richard described how he has evolved both in terms of

his skills – "I feel like my ability to work with kids has gotten so much better since I first began"

- and in his confidence and ability to speak up when it is needed. As he said, "If I say something

maybe somebody doesn't like, I'm going to say it, and I'm not fearful anymore." While

Karina's first concern regarding the changes in education she has seen and experienced over the

years is a concern for others and the stressful impact on staff and co-workers, Richard voiced an

enthusiastic, positive personal reaction. For example, when speaking about the Response to

Intervention (RtI) mandate, he sees the opportunity to "sit on RtI teams and help with impacting

decisions and interventions" as an advantage.

Similar to Karina being drawn to children with mental health issues and needs, Patrick's interest

in the field was piqued when working with a special needs population and, as he said, "When I

started it, and you're working with all these special needs kids, it pulls you right in." Finding out

during his internship that the focus of the job was on diagnostics, and specifically, involved data analysis and statistics, "made the job more interesting for me" and seemed to resonate with his approach to problem-solving, that is, data driven decision-making.

Both Karina's and Patrick's experiences and understanding of the job have evolved over the years due to the types of settings in which they have worked and overall have been the result of the sociological differences related to the settings. Over the years Patrick has been engaged in the struggle to change students' lives by addressing their needs within the contexts of their environment, as he has moved from rural and small-town settings to urban and inner city areas impacted by the pressures from transiency, drugs, gangs, and poverty. As she recalled her career, Karina noted the move from a rural area to an urban center when hired by her current employer, causing her to reflect: "I had very little exposure to this…I mean we had poverty…but very little exposure to this kind of thing" referring to mental health and sexual abuse situations. Karina's and Patrick's foci have evolved from a narrow and singular perception to a much more expanded system awareness and standpoint. While Karina's experiences have led her to understand that mental health issues are huge in the schools and her job has evolved to where she is working more and more with families, Patrick's experiences have led him to explore the much broader sociological perspective of the school to prison pipeline.

For Lynda, choosing school psychology was not easy. She was torn between becoming a pediatrician or psychologist, with the decision ultimately based on her desire to eventually have a family and her feeling that being a pediatrician would not allow the time for that. Her choice of school psychology came about as the cumulative result of being around and working with children in various capacities since she was in high school and then working for a year before graduate school for an agency as a behavioral specialist. Lynda and Karina have worked with

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high-risk populations, that is, with troubled youth and children with behavioral needs since they entered the profession. They both spoke of becoming "invested" in their schools and the lower SES populations with whom they choose to work. Karina voices her preference, saying in reference to a difficult case, "That experience made me want to stay in that population-the lower SES populations- and work with these people," whereas Lynda's reason for preferring the population was in part, due to her feeling of being appreciated: "Working here, I just feel like the parents are just so happy with whatever you can provide them. They move a lot, so they're, 'whatever you can do for my kids.'" Patrick also prefers working with high-risk populations as evidenced by his current assignment where he works with youth offenders. Lynda's sense of the profession and the job is that it is always evolving, at the site level as well as at the system level. As she said, "What you see now may not be what you're going to be doing later on" and she feels her perception of the job has changed over time, "…just because [of] working and seeing so many different changes." Patrick also stated his perception has changed over time and he is less idealistic, in part because of a feeling that while the profession has changed for the better, he is not sure education has. Karina also expressed some disillusionment with the state of education, describing it as "being 'messed' up in this country" whereas Richard, in response to his observation regarding the "dyslexia movement" coming back said, "I get a kick of how things [in education] change, how the pendulum swings."

For Shelley and Gwen, engagement in a group or team-like situation along with caring about children was an initiating and on-going impetus behind their decisions to enter and continue in the profession. Their engagement in the collective, that is, in being part of a professional organization and community, however, was for different reasons. As with Karina, Shelley found she wanted to work where there were people with whom she could interact. However, her social

contact needs appeared to be from the standpoint of belonging to a collective, to a professional community rather than from the basis of Karina's which focused on the establishment of deep emotional relationships. She told of a summer internship when she worked in a lab and came to the realization that pursuing a lab science career was probably not for her: "You're alone in the lab and it was boring. I need the people interaction, and I didn't have that." Throughout her career, Shelley has sought out engagement with and recognition of being aligned with and belonging with her colleagues and other professionals, informally and through membership in professional organizations. She also takes great pride in a feeling of representing the profession at conferences not specific to school psychology: "I was the only school psychologist there" in reference to a summer workshop.

In contrast, Gwen's early experiences in team sports piqued her curiosity about the psychology of team engagement as well as in the human dynamic and interactions between athletes and coaches, leading directly to her interest in school psychology when she was led to believe she would be able to continue working as a coach while doing counseling. She often stressed how she was encouraged to understand and first realized during her internship the importance of being part of a community of professionals – "It was important to have that community, to know you weren't alone." She continued to emphasize and express how fortunate she feels in working in her current school district, partly because of the opportunity provided by belonging to a large school psychology department "to collaborate, to work with each other in a way that many other psychologists throughout the country would not have" and to access a larger school psychology community via the internet.

Gwen described herself as having a competitive nature when younger. This competitive nature takes on the challenge of ensuring the job is done by the rules, that is, legally, a carry-over from

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her early interest in law. Gwen's ultimate question is, "Could you testify and support what you are doing right now?" When she talked about evolving and adapting, Gwen's first comment was about challenges related to changes in education and to special education law as she referenced differences and changes coming from the 9th Circuit Court since she started in the profession. Just as Karina, Lynda, and Patrick, Gwen spoke of having developed in the profession based on the population and settings in which she has worked and how what she now does is different from what she did 15 or 20 years ago. Her move from working with adolescents at the university level to working with preschoolers is a dramatic example of these changes.

While she did not make reflective observations or comments about experiences that show how her practice has changed over time, Shelley did speak to the impact of relatively current changes in education and education law and of current local political situations. She stated that she is doing a lot more consultation with teachers as a result of the federally mandated Response to Intervention requirement and process. Her comments indicated her sense of responsibility for assuming leadership of the implementation of this and she voiced her frustrations about getting others "on board" with it. Shelley's responses to changes and the need for adaptation differed from those of the other participants in this study. Whereas Karina addressed adapting as a matter of course - "I think we have to adapt like everybody else…" and Rob did so with positive anticipation - "I get a kick out of how things change," Shelley's response indicated apprehension and hesitance when she spoke about the possible need to deal with and adapt to local political and organizational change: "I'm scared to see what's coming next year. What does that mean for us? Is our job gonna change with how we function or not?"

Reflection. The entire process of this study might be considered an exercise in self-reflection on the part of the participants who were asked to take time to recall and think about their career

paths and journeys. Holland et al. (2012) asserted that antecedents to developing professional confidence in a field included general life experiences prior to entering the field and when young, such as being involved in and seeking out leadership opportunities in projects and being willing to venture into and learn about unknown and unfamiliar areas. Each of the participants in this study shared pre-college experiences that ultimately led them to the field of school psychology, ranging from Patrick's summer camp jobs and working with intellectually disabled young people, to Lynda's babysitting and work at a behavioral center, and Gwen's participation in and coaching of team sports, all of which required personal confidence. The participants in this study were mostly candid in sharing insights into how personal and professional experiences and identities ultimately became integrated and drove what they chose and continue to do. For example, Shelley reflected on becoming aware and recognizing in college her need to be around people in whatever work she did while Richard's experiences teaching languages at his church training center made him realize he wanted to go into education and psychology because of his enjoyment in working with young people. When reflecting on significant events in his life, he described this as an "experience [that] set me up for life" and "a critical life-changing decision" for him.

In spite of their experiences in the field and sense of professional self-confidence, the school psychologists in this study shared reflections of having some degree of concern about others' opinions. Karina's and Richard's reflections were more critically introspective as they spoke about personal "weaknesses" that they have generally overcome but that continue to be issues they still think about. Both described struggles they have had with allowing other people's opinions to influence them. Both described themselves as being "people pleasers." Richard related, "When I first started, it was a concern for me and … a weakness of mine," while Karina

noted, "I think I'm a pleaser. I think I don't want people to be angry with me. And so that affects a lot of things." She noted, this occurs "… not just in my job but in my life." However, both reported feeling they have been able to overcome or manage it in their professional lives because of the child centered focus of their practices and their roles as advocates for children. As Richard said, "I may have disagreements with people, but I've come to the point now where who I'm supposed to advocate for are the kids. If I always take the position what's best for kids than I'm never going to be in trouble." Karina also shared,

> I consciously have to work on [that] sometimes; I have to tell myself it doesn't matter what that person thinks. If I see them as doing something wrong and ineffective or hurtful, I can stand up to that person and not worry about the conflict.

While Karina and Richard reported these as personal and relatively significant weaknesses, Lynda and Gwen acknowledged caring about others' opinions to varying degrees. Lynda spoke of caring about what others think but primarily from the standpoint of wanting recognition that she is doing her job and advocating for children: "You don't want to be seen as, you know, that you're not out there for the kids. I mean, just like anybody, someone tells me something nice, you're like, 'Oh they really do notice.'" But regardless, she states, "I know I'm doing the best I can with the resources I have been given." As for caring about others' opinions, both she and Karina reported having become selective about who they will listen to. Lynda noted, "I have to stop and pause, but it all depends on who it's coming from. If I respect that person, then it holds more weight than if someone I didn't know said something" while Karina noted she feels she has matured and become confident, "I think that's where I have grown is that there are people now with opinions that do not matter."

Gwen does not feel her perception of her self-concept as a professional school psychologist is influenced by others' opinions of her. She said she feels she does not "rely on external influences" in terms of how she sees herself. However, she does feel the strength of character and confidence are needed in order to deal with the complexities of the job and especially when working with diverse teams of people. Similar to what Richard contended, she asserted, "You can't be responsible for how other people may take something" adding "I think that you have to learn not to take things personally" but also acknowledged, "sometimes [that is] hard." She also shared this is especially difficult when first coming into the field because "you haven't had any experience to develop the confidence."

In addition to reflecting on their journeys, the stories and experiences shared by the six participants that occurred over time and in their practices also served to support the observation of Holland et al. (2012) that "continual reflection-in and reflection-on practice [is] critical in order to learn more about the self " (p. 220). For these professionals, continued reflection was manifested in continual learning and questioning in order to keep up with the changes in education and in the field. In addition, Lynda spoke of how her work site is unique because of the "interesting cases" she has encountered and from which she has advanced her knowledge. Karina spoke of learning lessons about herself and the necessity of "compartmentalizing" her feelings so she could remain effective when dealing with particularly difficult cases involving mental health and abuse issues as she learned about working with and accessing a resource in this area. Shelley spoke of seeking relevant information and knowledge by attending conferences that were outside of the area of school psychology specifically.

Gwen and Richard both spoke about how continual learning, reflection, and self-questioning are part of professional responsibility. As Richard stated: "That means keeping abreast of being

aware of what changes are going on. It's looking at if things are done better, not doing it the same way, but actually trying to expand your horizons and develop." He added, "That's what I think constitutes someone that's a true professional, when they can look around and see what works and go with that, rather than just feeling comfortable and never really reaching out to find out what else is out there." Gwen referenced the need to keep current with the law when speaking of the need for continuous learning: "Things change – look at ideas changed over…when I first started, some of the nuances and the things that have gone to the 9th Circuit Court, so it's made differences and changes as the pendulum has swung from here to here." She went on, "I'm consulting with people when something comes up that is very unusual to me. I'm like, wait a minute. Because with regard to the law, or district policy, or procedures, or NAC. Has this changed?" She sumed up: "It's all about being informed and having ethics and integrity. I mean, that's just part of our profession."

Theme 2

Each of the school psychologists interviewed shared an identity that was multi-faceted, defining roles that were in response to the needs of the people served and interpreted within the contexts in which they worked.

The Best Practices Model for Comprehensive and Integrated School Psychological Services delineates the services the school psychologist practitioner might be expected to deliver along with knowledge and skills in the 10 domains that "provide a general framework of basic competencies that practitioners should possess upon beginning practice as school psychologists" (NASP download on 3/31/2018, p. 3). Each of the school psychologists interviewed during this study shared an identity that was divers, defining roles that were in response to the needs of the people served and put into action upon interpretation within the settings in which they worked

and, while they did not necessarily state specific domains, what the participants described as parts of the job touched on all of those domains.

All of the participants in this study reported graduating from school psychology programs where the focus of study was psychometrics and counseling. When asked about the job, they all reported doing less counseling than they had expected to be doing and reported that a large percentage of the job entailed assessment. Shelley, for example, listed consultation, doing interventions, and counseling "if needs be" as part of her day to day role, but stated assessment was her preferred function. "That's the piece I really enjoy because I actually get to work with kids at that point." She added, "If we weren't doing assessments we wouldn't have a job." Richard professed the same thing about the assessment part of the job. At his public middle school, he is responsible for re-evaluations and at the Child Find site assesses preschool age children. He noted, "I love assessment. I really do like my role and what I do." Patrick related that he came to understand the job was more about diagnostics and data based decision-making and less about counseling in contrast to what he had initially thought.

Karina's description of her sense of what she does and how the role is defined could be considered a collective summary of what all the participants reported. She stated, "We are problem solving constantly…and it's a whole conglomeration of everything we do; very hard to define as **this** is the job." Patrick also described his practice as having a problem solving focus: "It's constant problem solving. And being prepared for what's coming, because you don't know. It's hard." Richard referred to the problem-solving role but as an additional function, unlike Karina who placed consultation and collaboration under the umbrella of problem-solving. Richard's graduate training and internship experiences included assessment and counseling, as did those of the other participants, and when asked about what he does, these continue to be on

his list along with consultation and collaboration. He emphasized his pride in being someone teachers can approach for assistance with developing intervention and study plans for helping students or just for his opinion. Lynda identified serving as an advisor and consultant to school administration in addition to educating parents as a function of the consulting role. She and Karina specifically referenced doing behavioral consultations and serving as behavior mentors and Karina also reported she served as an autism consultant to her peers as did Gwen.

All of the participants in the study spoke about their roles and functions based on the needs of their immediate context or setting. Karina generally sees her role as "multi-faceted" and defined herself within the context of the school setting, serving as a "sounding board" for teachers, parents and children, consulting on school related and personal issues. She refered to herself as "invested" in the school and in the people and relationships within her school setting, and in her opinion, it is, "the needs of the people around you that define that role." Lynda was very definite in how she defined the role of the professional school psychologist: "It's a combination of things. It really depends on the need of the school." She described her day-to-day role when telling others about what she does but noted, "I give them basically the things that I do every day. And that could change, depending on the needs. What you see now may not be what you're going to be doing later on." She too spoke about being "invested" in the school. Whereas Karina and Lynda spoke about their roles being a function of the needs of the people and the school, Gwen felt the role could not be defined over a period of time but should be on a day-to-day basis because of different students and cases encountered and "things change and every day is a new day." Over time and experience, Patrick had come to the realization that his job has been impacted primarily by sociological differences that create different kinds of needs for students. Although the contexts in which he has worked have changed significantly, the components of his

practice (collaboration, data gathering, and interpretation) have remained constant and have been adapted to settings ranging from one room schoolhouses in rural areas to facilities and elementary and secondary schools as well as jails and prisons.

Frustrations. The six participants in this study proudly talked about their sense of being professionals within the field, describing their dedication and championing of the children and youth they serve. They also spoke of advancing and supporting their community of practice through leadership, encouragement, and mentoring. Each of them reiterated a commitment to their profession. However, they also candidly spoke of some of the frustrations resulting from feeling inadequate to meet the increasing demands being made of them, especially in terms of time. All six of them spoke of entering the profession because of a desire to work with children, and all six spoke of other responsibilities and demands taking precedence over that. They spoke of the frustrations of dealing with a bureaucracy rife with political agendas that again, appear to have little to do with what is good for kids. Despite the frustrations, they reaffirmed their dedication to the profession and their demonstrated ongoing thoughtful reflection of what they are about.

Each of the professional school psychologists spoke first about their training as being essentially in the areas of counseling and assessment, expanding and explaining as they described what they actually do. Karina had summed up the core function of the job as "We are problem solving constantly…and it's a whole conglomeration of everything we do." Patrick also described his practice as having a problem solving focus: "It's constant problem solving. And being prepared for what's coming, because you don't know." As the participants described what they do, it became increasingly clear as Karina had said that it was hard to be specific about what the job actually is.

Gwen's explanation clarified this statement somewhat. She noted that the role and job could only be explained from what occurred on a daily basis "because of different students and cases encountered and things change and every day is a new day." When speaking of the complexities of their roles, experiences, and situations encountered, the six participants spoke positively and with pride about what they had done and were continuing to do as professionals. Each also indicated the intention of continuing in the profession because of their belief in the importance of what they do as Patrick so eloquently stated: "It changes lives for the better, and not just students but families. It can even save lives."

One of the characteristics of a profession and ultimately the responsibility of the professionals within it is an obligation to serve and promote the public good and to be accountable to that public as well as to peers within the profession. Therefore, reflecting on what is happening within the field of school psychology as well as education becomes the responsibility and duty of practicing members. As Richard said, being a professional means, "being abreast or being aware of what changes are going on. It's looking at if things are done better, not doing it the same way, but actually trying to expand your horizons and develop." However, he learned early on in his career that sometimes doing so is not easy, especially when the reality of having no control over situations, particularly at a systems level, becomes apparent. He expressed his frustrations with the inherent shortcomings of the special education system in its ability to provide quality services, in part, due to inconsistencies caused by working with the turnover of substitute teachers rather than licensed staff. He and Karina both expressed their frustration with working within a system where administrative leadership changes constantly and where decisions about children are made by people who are removed from students and who do not consult with the people who work directly with the students. As Richard pointed out, "I think there's middle and

upper management … that start making decisions based off of, 'Hmmm, maybe we'll try this,' instead of consulting with people and thinking what will really work." Karina had also experienced a change in administration and commented on the impact on school teams resulting from apparent "power trips," on the part of the new administration: "It's a lot of ego, power trips. They don't make good decisions for kids. It has nothing really to do with what's best for kids." The study participants also spoke about their concerns regarding the impact of changes in education on the staff with whom they work and on the children. They all commented on the Response to Intervention (RtI) mandate. Richard expressed enthusiasm for being able to participate in planning to intervene with children early on before their difficulties resulted in referrals for special education. Shelley, on the other hand, expressed her frustration with feeling the responsibility of getting her site administrator to "get on board" as she said. She expressed further concern regarding the quality and validity of the data she received from teachers who "think they know what they're doing and they don't" due to a lack of administrative involvement: "they [the teachers] are not being held accountable." One of Karina's concerns about changes in education is focused on the impact of the Read by 3 program which mandates retention of children who are not reading on level by third grade. She projected, "I think it will have a huge impact on us. I think we're gonna have to go to bat for some of our special ed kids because they're not gonna read by three and they can't stay in third grade until they will."

A source of frustration and stress for the six school psychologists in this study centered around a lack of time. Patrick commented he is stressed by "the fact that everyone else has a priority for me within an already heavy work load" while Lynda noted she has difficulty with choosing what to do first, that is, whether to assist in a classroom with behaviors or complete evaluations for meeting compliance dates. She noted that often when she starts to do something on her to-do

list, someone will pull her aside to talk about a student or an intervention, so she is always behind. She commented that it seems the school psychologists are "so stretched thin that we don't make as big of an impact as we'd like." She also voiced concerns about the clerical paperwork required of the school psychologist: "It's more paperwork for paperwork than I thought. You're paying very high educated, higher paid people to take care of paperwork." Richard stated simply, "That would be one thing that I wish that I had more time. Sometimes your time is limited" when working with students.

Karina and Patrick shared a reality check of sorts during their comments about their professional experiences, indicating some disillusionment with the entire education system. Patrick commented that his perception of the job since beginning his career is that he is less idealistic. He went on to say he advises people he is mentoring and training that there are systems problems they cannot solve. When asked if she would enter the field of school psychology again if she knew what she knows now, Karina responded, "I might have chosen to do industrial psychology, just because education is so messed up in this country. And it's frustrating. But then again, this is where I can do the most good."

Theme 3

Each of the participants in this study was drawn to the profession because they wanted to work with children or students. During the interview process, all of them verbalized a desire and an investment in caring about and advocating for children, either through direct statements or as part of the descriptions of having done so. All of them characterized themselves first and foremost as advocates for children or indicated that the profession was all about championing children and doing what was best for them.

Patrick's "fun" work with the Boy Scouts aquatic camp program kindled his interest in working with youth, although at the time he was not aware of the direction in which he was moving. The realization did not occur until he discovered the pleasure in working with mentally disabled adults about which he said, "I absolutely loved it." He sumed up how he feels about what he does, stating that working with kids "is the core of the profession." Just as Patrick, Lynda's early experiences with children, which included babysitting and working at a daycare center, encouraged and maintained her desire to work with children as did working at an agency as a behavioral specialist prior to entering graduate school. From the age of 10 years, she declared, "I liked kids and babies" and declared even more determinedly when speaking of the agency work, "So I worked there, and that's when I was like, I **really** like kids." She described school psychology as a "good fit. It was so compatible with what I wanted for myself. I still work with kids, make a difference, and I can still have a family life." While she did not call herself an advocate for children, she summed up her feelings about why she remains in the profession, saying, "I love psychology and kids; I still work with kids and make a difference."

Shelley described school psychology as a good fit just as Lynda had but for different reasons. She stated that she "fit" into school psychology with her personality and interests: "I just liked kids and wanted to work with kids and I liked just the description of the job and what it entailed." After ten years in the field, she still feels the same: "I love working with students and I feel that what I do is important and helps them. I really like the kid aspect. That's why I went into the field. It was working with kids." Lynda, Patrick, and Shelley did not call themselves "advocates" for children but related experiences and frustrations that demonstrate their roles and responsibilities in that regard. Shelley voiced her frustration about the RtI process, saying, "Kids are losing out because teachers aren't doing what they're supposed to be doing because there's

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nobody to tell them you have to do it." She spoke about advocating for a child when the multidisciplinary team is having difficulty making a decision: "We have to find something, guys. We have to find something. This kid is not functioning in the classroom." Lynda spoke of the need for more time in order to make a bigger impact on children: "I just feel like we're stretched so thin that we don't make as big of an impact as we'd like." Finally, Patrick defined a professional school psychologist as "a leader in education to enhance student learning" and avers that what he does is valuable, as "it changes lives for the better, and not just for students, but families and can even save lives."

In addition to speaking about what they do to support children, Richard, Karina, and Gwen speak directly and with passion about the need to be advocates. Richard wanted to go into education because he enjoyed working with and wanted to help children, and he feels working with kids has affirmed his belief in what he is doing as a school psychologist. When speaking about standing up for what he thinks, he said "I've come to the point now where who I'm supposed to advocate for are the kids that I'm working with. If I always take the position what's best for kids, then I'm never going to be in trouble." He reiterated, "You have to stand up for what you believe in and advocate for the kid. … Think, what's the best thing I can do for this child?" Karina also knew she wanted to work with children when she was young, and upon discovering school psychology, realized the job provided the "ideal situation" for her to practice psychology, in a school setting, and work with students with disabilities, fulfilling all her career interests. Experiences during her internship and early career provided the direction that led her to become a champion for a specific population, students with behaviors and mental health issues. She said, "Our kids are under so much stress all the time." She spoke about new mandates and the impact on children, adding, "I think we're going to have to go to bat for some of our special ed kids…."

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She expressed frustration about those times when leadership ego gets in the way: "It has nothing really to do with what's best for kids." Just as Karina and Richard, Gwen is passionate about advocating and caring for children and, in her role as mentor and intern supervisor, she emphasizes the responsibility. She helps guide her mentees by challenging them to consider, "You are the person that is ultimately responsible for the benefit of this child. You're there for the child. What can you bring to this team so that you can advocate for this child?"

Professional Confidence. According to Holland, Middleton, and Uys (2012),

> Professional confidence can be defined as a dynamic, maturing personal belief held by a professional or student. This includes an understanding of a belief in the role, scope of practice, and significance of the profession, and is based on their capacity to competently fulfill these expectations, fostered through a process of affirming experiences (p.222).

As they told their stories, the participants in this study made declarations about their practices and shared experiences that impacted, affirmed, and demonstrated how they evolved in their journeys to become the professional school psychologists they feel they now are and always with a focus on caring for children. Shelley noted that her experiences with other school psychologists helped shape her practice and develop an understanding of the profession. She stated that this continues to be so: "It is the collaboration and experience of others that also shape how I currently function and allow me to grow, learn, and change. She went into the field to work with children and continues to believe in what she does. "I love working with students, and I feel that what I do is important and helps them.

Richard, Karina, and Gwen spoke openly about the process of gaining confidence through experience over time while Patrick's description of his diverse collective experiences in multiple settings spoke for themselves in terms of how he has come to believe in what he does. He has

worked in rural areas with one room schools and with homogeneous populations (largely white farm workers) as well as in urban settings including large secondary schools, prisons, and youth offender facilities where impacting factors include a second language, transiency, and poverty related issues, and drugs and gang pressures. Broad experiences have shown him "It changes lives for the better, and not just students but families." His feelings of professional confidence are supported and confirmed by his peers in his opinion. As he said, "I think my work's respected. I seem to get that kind of feedback. I think people look to me for direction, answers." Richard and Karina's growth in confidence has been a result, not only of hands-on experiences but also through interactions with colleagues and peers. Richard acknowledged that when he first started, he had concerns about others' opinions of him. "When I first started, it was a concern for me, and I think that was a weakness of mine." Richard spoke of his growth in understanding and now being able to navigate the politics of schools and educational systems, relating, "That's what I've become more aware of, just how buildings work and how staffs work and stuff like that through the years. That's been a big difference from when I first started." Karina also addressed what she feels is a weakness:

> I think I'm a pleaser. I think that I don't want people to be angry with me. So a lot of what I have become as a school psychologist, particularly in this building, started out as me trying to make sure everybody liked me. And it became who I am.

However, her positive experiences working with children with mental health and behavioral issues since discovering her interest in that population during her internship have contributed to building her professional confidence. She said, "I learned that I am good with that population. Those kids like me and respect me and bond to me. And bond to me in a way that they don't with their other teachers. So it made me want to be working with those kinds of kids more." She

identified the growth and direction these experiences have led to, "I think my job has been evolving over the past 20 years, and particularly the last five, working more and more intensive in the whole family as opposed to just the kid."

Just as Karina, Richard described how he has evolved both in terms of his skills – "I feel like my ability to work with kids has gotten so much better since I first began" – and in his confidence and ability to speak up when it is needed. As he said,

> If I say something maybe somebody doesn't like, I'm going to say it, and I'm not fearful anymore. If I have a position I feel really strongly about, and I'm able to advocate for it, I know I've done my best to present a position that I felt was right and I feel good about it.

He did acknowledge, however, that being in that situation when you first practice can be intimidating. Over time, through her experiences, Karina also has become "more capable of speaking up for what I believe is right." She reflected,

> I think that's where I have grown is that there are people now with opinions that do not matter. And if see them as doing something wrong and ineffective or hurtful, I can stand up to that person and not worry about the conflict.

Gwen's experiences as an athlete and team player helped her in developing confidence when young and continuing into college. She related having the support of a well-structured and guided internship experience: "We had supervision when we were working with the child, doing the assessment, and received feedback on whether or not we followed the standardized procedures, when this happened with this child, what I could have done differently." But even with this support, she noted, the strength of character and confidence needed to stand up to others who feel differently "doesn't come easily when you first come into the field, because you haven't had any experience to develop the confidence." She has learned through experience that "First of

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all, you have to love what you do. In order to do a bang-up job, you have to be able to work with diverse personalities. You have to be so child-centered so that that is your focus." The scope of Gwen's job is different from what she was doing 15, 20 years ago "just because I've .... Well, but I think as you develop in this profession you choose, based upon your preferences, the population you want to work with." When she first started in the field, she worked with college age students and adolescents, later moving to middle school and elementary age students, and now with preschoolers and students with autism. As she said,

> It [confidence] developed over time. I mean, I've always had an affinity with working
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> with children but.... When I first came out, I was so concerned about following the
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> standardized procedures, making sure I did everything correctly and going back and
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> checking and double checking, a little bit of OCD, to make sure that I was doing it.

While Gwen demonstrates professional confidence through her actions, she is cautious about being overly confident, declaring, "I think, in this position, you walk a fine line if you are overly competent and overly self-assured. It's a mistake to be so self-assured and overly confident." At the same time, she feels the school psychologist must have confidence in her professional knowledge and have inner strength, regardless of others' opinions or views.

Theme 4

All six of the participants in this study depicted or identified their belief that leadership is the most important skillset needed for or in the performance of their practice.

The participants in this study were asked to reflect not only on their journeys and experiences to becoming school psychologists but on how they define themselves within the profession and within the contexts of their practice roles. Much of the focus centered on what they did in the performance of their practice, sometimes on a day-to-day basis. While each entered the field of

school psychology to help children, the unique personalities and differences of each had an impact on how they perceived and therefore, defined themselves as professionals within their individual contexts. Following suit, from their individual perspectives, each claimed traits, and skills relative to who they were as necessary for functioning and performing successfully in their given situations where they worked primarily as independent practitioners. Lynda recounted that during her internship she felt she had been pretty much on her own at both of the schools she had serviced. She maintained she now feels more a part of the school community rather than the school psychologists' community, in part because of the limited time spent with other school psychologists and also because of her sense of obligation to her school. Karina reported she often feels separated from the larger community of school psychologists as well because of her investment in her school and her heavy sense of obligation to the children and staff. She stated, "Sometimes I feel like everything is on me," when speaking of the responsibilities.

As noted above, Karina and Lynda both reported often feeling separated from the larger community of school psychologists and at times having a sense of isolation because of not having someone nearby with whom to collaborate from within the same professional framework. Because of this sense of solitary understanding of issues and problems from the school psychologist's viewpoint, much of the problem solving, consultation, and decision-making that is the responsibility of the school psychologist during the day-to-day lived experience has an inferred or implied sense of "leadership" when leadership is defined or described as synonymous with influence, guidance, direction, supervision, or initiative and with associated attributes including self-motivation and independence. Most of the time the school psychologist must make decisions and solve problems that impact and influence other people "on the fly" and then act on them.

Karina, Patrick, and Shelley indicated the necessity of being able to prioritize as well as establish and maintain boundaries and to stand up for one's beliefs in their settings, while at the same time, for being adaptable and having the flexibility to change direction in "midstream." As Patrick added, it is about "always being prepared for what's coming, because you don't know." Patrick's experiences across settings cemented for him the understanding of the need to think analytically and to be independent while being guided and abiding by the NASP standards. He emphasizes and advises the interns with whom he works and the people he mentors to be realistic and understand there will be pressure from school personnel to try to sway their thinking. As he explained, the job is not all about playing with kids, hence the importance of being able to make data-driven decisions, to think analytically, and to be independent.

Lynda had reported feeling she had been an independent practitioner since her internship and, as Karina had indicated, actually feels more a part of the school community than the community of school psychologists, although she feels she can go to them for help. She is very dedicated to her school site where she has been since her internship, speaking with a sense of ownership of the school, the staff, the programs, and the children, referring to "my teachers," "my RtI." Adding to her sense of belonging to the school is her feeling of being valued by the administrator who seeks out her input regarding staff needs. Lynda found managing her day-to-day caseload and responsibilities requires having to have strong organizational and time management skills starting with knowing how to prioritize, and again, just as Karina and Patrick reported, being adaptable and having the flexibility to change direction. She noted, "You may plan on doing one thing on a day and then it doesn't happen." Shelley identifies herself as a "school psychologist in the schools" and, spoke about her assignments from a position of ownership, just as Karina and

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Lynda do. In addition to flexibility, she described prioritizing from the standpoint of time management, as necessary tools for managing her day-to-day job as an independent practitioner. In concert with Richard, Karina, and Patrick, Gwen also emphasized the need to have inner strength and self-confidence to stand up for and support beliefs and decisions, particularly when having to deal with those situations where others disagree and possibly try to change one's way of thinking. Gwen's perspective regarding the need for being adaptable and flexible goes beyond changing direction and solving whatever problem is presented during the day's tasks and through encounters with staff. Gwen instead emphasized the need for these as she encourages the interns she supervisors and peers she mentors to be adaptable and flexible as well as sensitive and compassionate when dealing with children and their parents.

All of the participants in this study remarked on or alluded to working with others as a member of a site's multidisciplinary group and most often in making reference to being in the position of team leader. Karina acknowledged the need for being able to work as a team leader and representative to support and defend decisions made by herself and the team if need be to authorities beyond the boundaries of the school site. Lynda emphasized the importance of being able to work as part of a group and to be able to assume team leadership and delegate. She stated, "It is team work, and I think people forget that." She added, "You have to be able to delegate…Other people are there; things actually get done faster if you work as a team." As do both Karina and Lynda, Shelley feels strongly about being able to work with and be part of a team as well as of the necessity to use good people skills for encouraging and supporting staff. She stressed the importance of establishing connections with people: "Get out and meet your staff. They'll be much more willing to work with you if they know you. Sometimes it's hard, but you have to get out there and make yourself visible. Talking with others is very important."

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In contrast to Karina's and Lynda's sense of isolation and being on their own, Richard stressed the idea that the school psychologist is not a loner, but is someone who works within an educational community. He expressed how important it is to understand everyone else's role on the team as well as to understand oneself in relation to other team members. He also noted how important and necessary good social skills are for helping with team promotion and with getting people to see your point. However, as he related that decisions about students are supposed to be made by the team, he alluded to what Karina had mentioned about feeling as if the responsibilities fell on her as he described what happens when decisions need to be made: "I try to do that [engage the team]; there's a lot of pressure on the school psychologist because of being the person who has done the diagnostics and the one that understands and can explain to other team members." Gwen also stressed the importance of having strong people skills, as well as being organized and conscientious as advantageous for being able to work with and lead a team. Finally, Patrick stated directly and emphasized that he feels his team leadership skills have grown: "I know I bring unique talents and knowledge to a team that needs that."

In addition to this theme's discussion about leadership, three subthemes were identified in the data: Gatekeeping, Collegiality, and Mentoring.

Gatekeeping. Historically, the school psychologist has found himself or herself placed in the position of making a final decision about a student's eligibility for special education services, although theoretically, and according to the law, all decisions about eligibility and placement are made by a team of people called the multidisciplinary team. While all of the participants in this study spoke about and embraced the importance of functioning as part of the team, most acknowledged assuming a leadership role on the team and in some instances in the role of gatekeeper. Shelley identified herself as doing so "to a point, but sometimes, no." She went on

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to clarify: "…a lot of times it boils down to, do I see a disability or not and the team will generally go with me, actually, at this school about 100% of the time." Lynda stated she tries to wait to give her opinion on very complicated cases but felt that the team looks to her to see what she recommends. "There are times when they'll be like, so does he qualify or not?" She reported also having to assume the role of gatekeeper at times with parents who try to "push" eligibility in an effort to collect Social Security benefits due to the child's disability. Finally, Richard discussed the stress he feels resulting from teachers blaming him when a child is not eligible: "This kid's not eligible, and it's your fault because I've done everything." He noted the decision is supposed to be based on everyone contributing information but added, "[Ultimately] you're the one that's done a lot of the diagnostics, and you're the one that understands that and explaining it to the other team members. With that comes a lot of stress."

Mentoring. A mentor is generally thought of as a person who can provide support and direction as well as help problem solve. Mentoring can be provided through a formal on-going mentoring program as many businesses provide to their new employees or can be informal. In higher education, mentoring relationships may occur between trusted professors and their students. Informal mentoring does not have a timeline or set of rules and may be the result of modeling or even a one-time encounter when a conversation provided insight. The topic of mentoring as part of the conversation with the school psychologist participants in this study addressed some of the individual experiences with being mentored as well as of their own experiences providing mentoring for others. Only Richard named two of his professors specifically from his university program as being mentors who not only guided his program but also provided emotional support for him as he went through difficulties encountered during his internship. He spoke of peers from whom he feels he has learned since going to work for the school district. He stated, "I've

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watched people and people that were around me that I respected. I learned a lot from it." He added supervisors to his mentor list: "I've had wonderful experiences with supervisors. I've worked with great people, and they've encouraged me to be independent and to work hard." He addd, "I know there are certain people I can go to to get help. That helps me to feel more secure in what I do." Gwen and Karina each spoke generally of supports provided by their intern supervisors. Karina noted, in reference to a specific skillset, "My practitioners that I worked with modeled that for me." Gwen related she "ended up in school psychology" after meeting with a school psychologist and "talked to her about in her position she was able to do a lot more counseling than traditional testing," essentially describing a single mentoring session. Finally, Lynda acknowledged the importance of the supervisors she had worked with in helping shape her practice, "…and I've had two that I've worked directly under. So their feedback was very important, cause you take on their habits I guess." She added, "I've been lucky. I was lucky I had some strong supervisors."

Gwen, and Karina shared their experiences of providing mentoring for people new to the job and intern supervision for others as did Patrick who felt it was important to be encouraging and positive. He noted, "So as a mentor you kind of want to maintain [their] enthusiasm or encourage it, of course." He does so by assuring the mentees their professional practice is separate from performing the technical tasks of the job, "That does not reflect on you just because you're learning a new report writer or a new data management system. And it's difficult, but it's not a reflection of your practice." Karina's idea of being a mentor extends to teachers: "We're trying to help teachers come up with new interventions." She sees herself as a "sounding board for teachers, parents, and kids and also as a behavior mentor." She has served as a supervisor for several interns over the years and commented on each experience being different

depending on the needs of the individuals, "So I've had lots of interns, and they've all had a different experience with me." She continued to extend the support and mentoring to many of them after the internship is completed. Gwen spoke of mentoring psychologists with whom she works and discussing situations and cases with them. She also spoke about the differing skillsets and resulting needs of interns with whom she has worked. Just as Patrick does, Gwen tries to encourage the new hires, telling them, "You're going to have a mentor when you first come in. Find out you're not alone in this profession," adding the caveat, "But make sure you connect with someone that values and has integrity in the field."

Collegiality. The school psychologists who participated in this study all subscribe to the tenets of the profession's representative organization, the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) and are members as well. Membership in an organization implies an understanding of having something in common with a group of professionals and can imply professional legitimacy and promote a sense of identity, particularly when first starting in the profession. Belonging to a community of professional peers provides built-in support and net-working system, common language, and common ground for social connectedness. When queried about their sense of belonging to the profession, Gwen was the most vocal of the study participants in describing her understanding of what belonging to a professional organization looked like in a universal sense in light of her current employment. She commented,

> I think that we're in a unique position here because of the sheer numbers. I feel like I do belong in this profession as far as being able to bounce ideas off others, to collaborate, to work with each other in a way that many other psychologists throughout the country probably would not have that opportunity. And now the technology is great because you can go on NASP and you can talk to other individuals through email.

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Gwen also addressed her positive sense of working with a group of professionals who have high standards and regard for the profession, saying, "You have people that truly want the profession to continue to be highly regarded. I think that comes from our department, as well as all of the people that are involved with NASP and NVASP," referring to her local peers.

Shelley's sense of belonging was described from the standpoint of membership in representative organizations: "I think so because I'm part of NASP and APA [the American Psychological Association]." However, she went on to comment that she does not attend the NASP conferences as much because of the cost. She does go to conferences not specific to school psychology that she feels are more relevant to her actual job and practice, noting "I'm like generally the only school psychologist there." She addd, "So that's how I feel connected. And I socialize with some school psychologists." Patrick addressed his sense of belonging from his understanding of his reputation: "Well I do feel well-integrated into the profession. I think my work's respected. I seem to get that kind of feedback. I think people look to me for direction, answers."

Lynda and Karina spoke of feeling isolated from the local professional community group, in part due to the intensity of the job, leaving little time for gathering and meeting with other school psychologists. Lynda stated she felt more a part of her school site community: "I think this is where we stay the majority of the time; when [do] we get together how many times as a whole?" She did go on to say she did like the group of her peers of which she is a part, commenting, "That's kind of like a family, you know. I know if I need something I can always call up someone, and they're very willing to help." Karina also reported feeling invested in and more a part of her school community than the local community of school psychologists. She explained, "I do think we are pretty isolated out in the field. I think a part of it is because we don't meet as

often." She commented on the required weekly site based collaborative time meetings where small groups of school psychologists meet:

> I am kind of enjoying the SBCT, not for what they're telling us, but to see other psychologists. Sometimes I feel like everything is on me. So it's nice to go out and kind of be with other psychologists who are having the same experiences.

However, Karina expressed mixed feelings about the small versus larger group school psychology gatherings due, in part to her husband's administrative position within the school district and also, possibly to burnout. She spoke of self-imposed isolation and withdrawal when in large group meetings: "I do it to myself to some degree. I tend to stay by myself. Or gravitate to you because I've known you a long time." She stated apologetically,

> I know it's gonna sound grandiose on my part, I don't want to reach out to other psychologists because when I do, they want something from me. I don't want more people coming to me for advice. I can't take more of that.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to explore and describe the lived experiences and resulting perspectives of practicing school psychologists in developing and defining their professional identities. The primary focus or aim of this qualitative multiple-case study was to increase understanding of how experienced school psychologists define themselves, taking into consideration the profession's theoretical collective/organizational identity, the influences that impact the growth and performance of the job, and the actual performance of the job within the context of an educational setting.

Research into questions regarding its development and meaning stems from recognizing the importance and impact of professional identity. In the teacher education literature, Beijaard, Verloop, and Vermunt (2000) posited that teachers' sense of their professional identity impacted their effectiveness, as well as their ability to cope with change and to try out new ideas and practices in their teaching. Just as it is in teaching, research in the field of counseling supports the idea that presenting with professional confidence and identity as a counselor conveys capability.

According to Ritchie (as cited in Shallcross, 2013), a strong professional identity is critical to the development and presentation of self-esteem and a confident attitude in the profession so that practitioners enter the work setting having a clear understanding of what they are part of, how that is defined, and are capable of articulating what they do rather than having that be shaped by their work setting and by others' interpretations of what they are about. Strong professional identity encourages practitioners to become active within their representative professional organizations in support of building a stronger and more politically effective and vocal profession as well. As observed during a review of the literature regarding the evolution of

school psychology as a profession over at least the last 50 years, the founding members of the profession were keenly aware of the importance of collective and individual professional identity and worked tirelessly to help establish it. Still, members of the professional community of school psychology continue to have a responsibility to reflect on if and how they define and redefine themselves within the parameters of their organizational identity.

As previously noted, Van-Zandt (1990), in an attempt to clarify what professional identity was, described it as the development of and acceptance of personal responsibility for a role in a profession, including the pursuit of opportunities to increase and improve upon and further develop related skills. Slay, and Smith (2011) explained it simply as the individuals' images of who they are as professionals and, as Bowman (2013) and Wiersma (as cited in Bowman, 2013) wisely observed, "Self-images have transformational power: they define whom we think we are" (p. 17). Upon reflection then, it seems that a discussion of the significance of the results of this study must begin with talking about what it means to be a professional and to develop "professional" identity. A clearer understanding of this will demonstrate the ways in which the six participants perceive and describe living their professional identities and facilitate placing the results of this research into a more recognizable and relatable context for the reader. According to Bowman in 2013,

> Being a professional is not merely an intellectual exercise but…involves a commitment to being something compelling and transformative in the workplace….[It] is animated by an inner commitment that is deeply personal. In that sense, professionalism is less a matter of what professionals actually do and more a matter of who they are as human beings (p.17).

The experienced counselors in Alves and Gazzola's study of professional identity development were reported to feel strongly about the close and one-way relationship between their personal and professional identities as were the counselors-in-training in Gibson, Dollarhide, and Moss's 2010 study. Both studies also reported that participants had "an attitude of reflective awareness and ongoing commitment to lifelong learning and to developing as professionals" (Alves & Gazzola, 2011, p. 196, Gibson et al., 2010). All of the participants in this study of school psychologists spoke of the integration of their personal and professional selves as they described their journeys to becoming and experiences of being school psychologists. Richard's realization that he enjoyed working with people through his church experiences led to the awareness of wanting to work with children in education, and ultimately to school psychology. He very clearly stated that being a professional means reflecting not only on what one knows but also on the understanding there is always more to learn. He is committed to advocating for children, regardless of the cost. He used the analogy of donning comfortable shoes to describe his professional commitment:

> Once you put something nice on, and you enjoy it and feel comfortable with it…That's
> why I've done it forever. I just feel like it's something I can do, something I know, and
> the more I do it, the better I feel about it.

Karina's desire to help others, particularly those with mental health needs, her enjoyment of people, and her intrinsic belief in the importance of relationships all combined to create an invested professional with an understanding of the integration of personal and professional selves. She stated, "School Psychology is not what I do; it's what I am."

Bowman's (2013) contention that "in daily practice, professionals are results centered, internally directed, other focused, and externally open" (p. 17) was also reflected in the description of the

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practicing professionalism stage in the emergence of mental health interns' development process of recognition of themselves as professionals. Koltz and Champe (2010) reported that in this stage, the interns showed an increased awareness of the need for and practice of self or internally directed behaviors. One of the themes that emerged from this study of school psychologists was the belief that leadership was the most important skill set needed in the performance of their practice. Bowman's description of "results centered and internally directed" practice was consistent with descriptions of the day-to-day performance of each of the six participants in the study and equated with leadership. Lynda and Karina both spoke of feelings of being separated from the larger community of school psychologists and closeness to a school they serviced because of the time spent there and because of the investment in the schools. Karina, Gwen, and Patrick described the frequent occurrence of not only being part of a school multidisciplinary team but also assuming the leadership role, which Bowman (2013) associates with professionalism: "professionals… collaborate as contributing team members…[but] also want to control their own destiny" (p. 18). On a day-to-day basis, because school psychologists are by themselves at assigned sites, problem-solving and decision-making are on-going and sometimes require immediate responses. Essentially they are thrust into roles with no authority and must independently assume responsibility. Patrick described the situation as "constant problem-solving. And being prepared for what's coming, because you don't know."

A theme that emerged from this study of school psychologists was the fact that defining oneself as a professional school psychologist is a lifelong process of engagement, constantly evolving and adapting. This was a recurring theme in the counseling and teacher development as well. Alves and Gazzola (2011) noted the need to allow time for accumulating experiences as an influence for even experienced counseling practitioners while the counselors-in-training reported

to Gibson et al. (2010) that developing professional identity was a process of transition and growth. Lamote and Engles (2010) noted significant shifts in student teachers' attitudes and feelings about their teacher identity after workplace and hands-on experiences over a three-year period. The school psychologists in this study also spoke of gaining confidence over time. Gwen spoke of being conscientious to avoid legal ramifications but noted, "It takes time and practice in the field to be able to get a handle on that" and spoke further about the importance of experience in developing the overall confidence needed for doing the job. Richard and Karina both related having grown over time and through accumulated knowledge and experience from being people pleasers to being able to stand up confidently for what they believe in. Richard noted, "I do think when you're first practicing it can be intimidating if someone disagrees with you or your decision" but now said, "If I say something maybe somebody doesn't like, I'm going to say it, and I'm not fearful anymore."

The profiles and described lived experiences of the participants in this study are similar to those seen in other professions. The term "professional" and related traits appear to be universal, only to be made specific within the context of individual professions. Even with individuals' expressions based on their unique personalities and histories, their behaviors and philosophical positions remain within the parameters of what it means to be a professional.

"Human life needs knowledge, reflection, and thought to make itself knowable to itself," (van Manen, 1990, p. 1**7).** Life is not static. All living things and processes within it are constantly changing, evolving and adapting. The study described in this paper was prompted in part by the researcher's reflection on her quest to redefine and refine her own professional identity as a school psychologist within the rapidly changing and more demanding context of political, sociological, and resulting educational reform. It was based on her firm belief that, as stated by

Van-Zandt (1990), members of the professional community of school psychology continue to have a responsibility to reflect on if and how they define and redefine themselves within the parameters of their organizational identity, particularly given the acute sense of rapid and confusing sociological changes. Van-Zandt (1990) proposed that professional identity was all about the development of and acceptance of personal responsibility for a role in a profession and continuing to pursue opportunities to increase and enhance related skills. It is also about maintaining high moral and ethical standards and behaviors and demonstrating pride in that profession. School psychologists are members of a community of practice, practicing within the parameters of the representational organization's guidelines and model. However, they are autonomous individual practitioners, with day-to-day practice based on each individual's interpretation of self as a professional within that community.

Implications

Results of this study are intended for school psychologists, particularly those who wish to engage in further research in the area of the profession's development. Ultimately the information generated can serve to help university trainers as well as field supervisors and mentors who work with novices in determining how they can enhance the learner's experience to promote the development of a stronger sense of what it means to be a professional and to being part of the profession of school psychology.

Implications for school psychology practitioners, trainers, and program coordinators emerged from the data collected during this study, essentially focusing on the needs expressed by the study participants as they reflected on their career development and actual job performance. The stories, observations, and opinions of the study participants overwhelmingly pointed out the chasm between current university school psychologist preparation and training programs and

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what the practitioner encounters in the field. The six school psychologists in the study reported

coming from programs with emphases on counseling and psychometrics. They all reported

extensive training in counseling and expected to be engaged in providing this once in the field.

However, this was not the case, according to their recall. In addition, they underwent a culture

shock of sorts upon being confronted with an overload of evaluations and unexpected day-to-day

problem-solving challenges for which there had been no preparation: Gwen recalled, "Oh, yeah.

I remember, oh, gosh, I don't remember learning this in school; and the application of what you

learned, and there's actually the real-life situation. What do I do now? That was never talked

about. They never talked about this." The participants also observed that the rigor and demands

of the job have steadily increased as a result of changes in education, in policy, and with

awareness and emphasis on mental health needs in the schools. They spoke about specific areas

they felt unprepared for as they came from their programs such as interviewing and engaging in

mediation as part of problem solving. As Richard noted, in his experience he "got that on the fly

from being out in the field."

Reynolds (2011) had observed that the nature of the field is such that it is not possible for school

psychologists to keep up with the knowledge base and science related to the field as it rapidly

increases and changes. It also stands to reason that the current length of school psychology

training programs will not allow for all the instruction needed by practitioners to prepare them

adequately for entering the field. Reynolds (2011) proposed a change in training such that

school psychologists are instructed in foundation knowledge and skills and then are given the

opportunity to specialize and develop special competency in a particular area. The six

participants in this study demonstrated a dedication to children, a desire to promote the

profession, and a commitment to see that it is highly regarded. It is likely that many of their

colleagues are equally dedicated and would be more than willing to work with graduate program coordinators to help school psychology students gain not just a theoretical understanding of their roles and functions, but also help clarify what their responsibilities will be in the field. Establishing consistent communication and a strong relationship between graduate programs and field practitioners would also allow for exploration and development of possible changes in training as Reynolds suggested and for additional training in the development of human relationship skills as is seen in organizational and industrial psychology programs. Responses and comments by some of the participants in this study regarding their engagement in the study indicated positive feelings and the value for them of the opportunity to participate in reflection with other school psychologists both during the individual interviews and the focus group. Patrick commented, "It reminds me that I really love what I do," while Karina noted, "It's been kind of a recentering of what brought me here." Gwen enthusiastically stated, "This has been great. This has been like group therapy, like a support group." It is easy to get caught up in the busyness of the job and daily obligations within what feels like a very short day. However, it appears that opportunities for school psychologists to gather as these study participants did to reflect and share are important for helping to ease the stress of the job and increase coping with the intensity of the challenges and problem solving encountered on a daily basis.

Future Research

Because there is limited research into school psychologists' perception and interpretation of their lived experiences, the current study could be expanded to include a larger sampling size and be conducted in a broader context, using the NASP membership from which to select participants and different age groupings.

As the practice of school psychology continues to experience "service creep" (Reynolds 2011) and school psychologists are asked to expand services and diversify, particularly into the area of mental health, the question of further "identity" arises and might warrant exploration: do practitioners consider themselves "school psychologists" or "psychologists in the schools and how do the two differ?

Literature related to identity development in other professions such as counseling and teaching indicated stages of growth and development in acquiring an identity related to a profession. Future research into the early development of school psychologists, such as those with three to five years of practice, would be beneficial for addressing possible ways of encouraging and developing what it means to be a professional during training and realistically looking at how that is actualized to lessen the gap between theoretical and actual practice.

This study will be a start to informing the literature and generate additional research such as that suggested, encouraging members of the school psychology profession and community in the understanding that they are united as members of an elite professional family whose responsibility it is to reflect on, promote, and increase their investment and pride in who they are.

Appendix A

Demographic Data

Age: _____ 34-40   _____ 41-47   _____ 48-54   _____ >55

Gender: _____ Male   _____ Female Ethnicity:

_____

Undergraduate Major: _____

Graduate Level:
_____ Master   _____ Educational Specialist   _____ Doctorate

Institution: _____

Jobs held since earning undergraduate degree:
_____
_____
_____

Current Professional Setting:

_____ Elementary   _____ Middle School   _____ High School   _____ Other (please specify)

Years of Service in School Psychology: _____

Years of Service in Clark County School District: _____

Previous Service Locations and Settings:
_____
_____
_____

Specialized interests/training/experiences in Education and School Psychology:
_____
_____
_____
_____

Association Membership(s):
_____
_____

Consent Form

UNLV

INFORMED CONSENT

Department of Educational Psychology & Higher Education

TITLE OF STUDY: A Qualitative Study of School Psychologists' Perception and

Interpretation of their Professional Identity

INVESTIGATOR(S): Elizabeth A. Sanders

For questions or concerns about the study, you may contact Dr. Scott Loe at 702-895-2949
For questions regarding the rights of research subjects. Any complaints or comments
regarding the manner in which the study is being conducted, contact the UNLV Office
of Research Integrity – Human Subjects at 702-895-2794, toll free at 877-895-2794 or
via email at IRB@unlv.edu.

Purpose of the Study
You are invited to participate in a research study. The purpose of this study is to explore
how individual school psychologists define themselves as professionals within the field and
to explore the influences that contributed to and impact this identity.

Participants
You are being asked to participate in the study because you fit this criteria: You are a
practicing school psychologist with 10 or more years of experience.

Procedures
If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to do the following:
participate in an interview of approximately 1 to 2 hours. You may also be invited to
participate in a follow up interview and focus group.

Benefits of Participation
There are no direct benefits to you as a participant in this study. However, we hope to learn
how school psychologists describe their experiences within the field of school psychology.

Risks of Participation
There are risks involved in all research studies. This study may include only minimal
risks. You may become uncomfortable when answering some questions; however, you
may decline to answer if this does occur.

Cost /Compensation
There will not be financial cost to you to participate in this study. The study will take
between 3 to 4 hours of your time in total.

Confidentiality
All information gathered in this study will be kept as confidential as possible. No reference
will be made in written or oral materials that could link you to this study. All records will
be stored in a

#932907-1, Exempted: 08-11-20/ 6

Page I of 2

TITLE OF STUDY : A Qualitative Study of School Psychologists' Perception and Interpretation of their Professional Identity

Locked facility at UNLV for 5 years after completion of the study. After the storage time has elapsed the information gathered will be destroyed.

Voluntary Participation
Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may refuse to participate in this study or in any part of this study. You may withdraw at any time without prejudice to your relations with UNLV. You are encouraged to ask questions about this study at the beginning or any time during the research study.

Participant Consent:
I have read the above information and agree to participate in this study. I have been able to ask questions about the research study. I am at least 18 years of age. A copy of this form has been given to me.

_____   _____
Signature of Participant   Date

_____
Participant Name (Please Print)

Audio/Video Taping:

I agree to be audio taped for the purpose of this research study.

_____   _____
Signature of Participant   Date

_____
Participant Name (Please Print)   Page 2 of 2

Appendix C

Interview Questions
Tell me a little about yourself.

- As a child, what did you want to be when you grew up?

- What were your earliest career plans?

- What other work have you done? Have you worked in more than one profession?

How did you first learn about the field of school psychology?

- Who or what influenced your decision to become a School Psychologist?

- What is your definition of a Professional School Psychologist?

- Describe your sense of belonging to your current profession.

- Do your personal values and personality match your current profession? Explain.

- What events or experiences have had an impact on shaping your definition of a School Psychologist?

- In what ways does what you actually do differ from what you thought you would be doing?

- How have the changes in education influenced your practice?

Have there been times when you have thought about leaving the field? Explain.

- If you could go back in time would you enter the field of school psychology again?

What would you tell candidates considering coming into school psychology?

What advice would you give to new or entry level School Psychologists?

- What attributes or personal traits would benefit someone coming into the profession?

Appendix D

Focus Group Questions
Do you identify as a school psychologist or as a psychologist who works in a school?

Have your perceptions of personal identity and self-awareness changed or been affected

as a result of being in the profession/practicing your profession? If so, in what ways?

If you could change anything about the profession, what would it be?

Describe your ideal role as a School Psychologist.

NASP as a representative organization? Impact on actual practice?

Theory versus practice (practicality) – how to bridge the gap

Where do you see school psychology going? Systems change agent?

- Changes needed in training programs?

Has your participation in this study, with its opportunity for reflection, impacted your

perceptions of yourself as a professional school psychologist? If so, in what way?

Appendix E

NASP Practice Model 10 Domains
The following domains, while described below as distinct, regularly interact and intersect within the context of service delivery. Understanding the domains helps inform the range of knowledge and skills school psychologists can provide. The NASP Practice Model outlines how services are integrated to best meet the needs of students, families, and the school community.

Practices That Permeate All Aspects of Service Delivery

Domain 1: Data-Based Decision Making and Accountability-School psychologists have knowledge of varied models and methods of assessment and data collection for identifying strengths and needs, developing effective services and programs, and measuring progress and outcomes. As part of a systematic and comprehensive process of effective decision making and problem solving that permeates all aspects of service delivery, school psychologists demonstrate skills to use psychological and educational assessment, data collection strategies, and technology resources and apply results to design, implement, and evaluate direct interventions, psychological services, and programs.

Examples of professional practices include:

- Using the problem solving framework as the basis for all practices.

- Systematically collecting data from multiple sources and using ecological factors as the context for all assessment and intervention decisions.

- Using assessment data to understand students' problems and to implement evidence-based instructional, mental, and behavioral health services.

- Using data to analyze progress toward meeting academic and behavioral goals.

- Evaluating treatment fidelity of student interventions.

- Evaluating the effectiveness and/or need for modifications to school-based interventions or programs.

- Conducting valid and reliable assessments for the purpose of identifying student's eligibility for special education services.

Domain 2: Consultation and Collaboration-School psychologists have knowledge of varied models and strategies of consultation, collaboration, and communication applicable to individuals, families, schools and systems, and methods to promote effective implementation of services. As part of a systematic and comprehensive process of effective decision making and problem solving that permeates all aspects of service delivery, school psychologists demonstrate skills to consult, collaborate, and communicate effectively with others. Examples of professional practices include:

1. Using a consultative problem-solving process for planning, implementing, and evaluating all instructional, and mental and behavioral health services.

2. Facilitating effective communication and collaboration among families, teachers, community providers, and others.

3. Using consultation and collaboration when working at the individual, classroom, school, or systems levels.

4. Advocating for needed change at the individual student, classroom, building, district, state, or national levels.

Direct and Indirect Services for Children, Families, and Schools: Student Level Services

Domain 3: Interventions and Instructional Support to Develop Academic Skills-School psychologists have knowledge of biological, cultural, and social influences on academic skills; human learning, cognitive, and developmental processes; and evidence-based curricula and

instructional strategies. School psychologists, in collaboration with others, demonstrate skills to use assessment and data collection methods and to implement and evaluate services that support cognitive and academic skills. Examples of professional practices include:

1. Implementing evidence-based interventions to improve student engagement and learning.

2. Using assessment data to develop and implement evidence-based instructional strategies that will improve student performance.

3. Working with other school personnel to ensure attainment of state and local benchmarks for all students.

4. Sharing information about research in curriculum and instructional strategies.

5. Promoting the use of instructional strategies for diverse learners and to meet individual learning needs.

Domain 4: Interventions and Mental Health Services to Develop Social and Life Skills-School psychologists have knowledge of biological, cultural, developmental, and social influences on behavior and mental health, behavioral and emotional impacts on learning and life skills, and evidence-based strategies to promote social–emotional functioning, and mental and behavioral health. School psychologists, in collaboration with others, demonstrate skills to use assessment and data collection methods and to implement and evaluate services that support socialization, learning, and mental and behavioral health. Examples of professional practices include:

1. Providing a continuum of mental and behavioral health services, including individual and group counseling, behavioral coaching, positive behavioral supports, and parent education.

2. Integrating behavioral supports and mental health services with academic and learning goals for students.

3. Facilitating the design and delivery of curricula to help students develop effective skills, such as self-regulation, planning, organization, empathy, social skills, and decision making.

4. Using systematic decision-making to consider the antecedents, consequences, functions, and causes of behavioral difficulties.

5. Developing and implementing behavior change programs at individual, group, classroom, and school-wide levels.

6. Evaluating evidence-based interventions to improve individual student social, emotional, and behavioral wellness.

Systems-Level Services

Domain 5: School-Wide Practices to Promote Learning-School psychologists have knowledge of school and systems structure, organization, and theory; general and special education; technology resources; and evidence-based school practices that promote learning and mental and behavioral health. School psychologists, in collaboration with others, demonstrate skills to develop and implement practices and strategies to create and maintain effective and supportive learning environments for children and others. Examples of professional practices include:

1. Using knowledge of universal screening programs to identify students in need of instructional and behavioral support services.

2. Promoting policies and practices that support effective discipline, instructional support, grading, home–school partnerships, student transitions, and more.

3. Collaborating with other school personnel to create and maintain a multitiered continuum of services to support academic, social, emotional, and behavioral goals for students.

4. Advocating for policies and practices that promote positive school environments.

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Domain 6: Preventive and Responsive Services-School psychologists have knowledge of principles and research related to resilience and risk factors in learning and mental health, services in schools and communities to support multitiered prevention, and evidence-based strategies for effective crisis response. School psychologists, in collaboration with others, demonstrate skills to promote services that enhance learning, mental and behavioral health, safety, and physical well-being through protective and adaptive factors and to implement effective crisis preparation, response, and recovery. Examples of professional practices include:

1. Using knowledge of risk and protective factors to address problems such as school completion, truancy, bullying, youth suicide, and school violence.

2. Developing, implementing, and evaluating prevention and intervention programs that address precursors to severe learning and behavioral problems.

3. Participating in school crisis prevention and response teams.

4. Participating and evaluating programs that promote safe and violence-free schools and communities.

   Domain 7: Family–School Collaboration Services-School psychologists have knowledge of principles and research related to family systems, strengths, needs, and culture; evidence-based strategies to support family influences on children's learning and mental and behavioral health; and strategies to develop collaboration between families and schools. School psychologists, in collaboration with others, demonstrate skills to design, implement, and evaluate services that respond to culture and context and facilitate family and school partnerships and interactions with community agencies for enhancement of academic and social–behavioral outcomes for children. Examples of professional practices include:

1. Collaborating with and engaging parents in decision making about their children.

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2. Promoting respect and appropriate services for cultural and linguistic differences.

3. Promoting strategies for safe, nurturing, and dependable parenting and home interventions.

4. Creating links among schools, families, and community providers.

Foundations of School Psychological Service Delivery

Domain 8: Diversity in Development and Learning-School psychologists have knowledge of individual differences, abilities, disabilities, and other diverse student characteristics; principles and research related to diversity factors for children, families, and schools, including factors related to culture, context, and individual and role difference; and evidence-based strategies to enhance services and address potential influences related to diversity. School psychologists provide professional services that promote effective functioning for individuals, families, and schools with diverse characteristics, cultures, and backgrounds and across multiple contexts. Understanding and respect for diversity in development and learning, and advocacy for social justice, are foundations for all aspects of service delivery. Examples of professional practices include:

1. Addressing individual differences, strengths, backgrounds, and needs in the design, implementation, and evaluation of all services.

2. Using a problem-solving framework for addressing the needs of English language learners.

3. Promoting fairness and social justice in school policies and programs.

Domain 9: Research and Program Evaluation-School psychologists have knowledge of research design, statistics, measurement, varied data collection and analysis techniques, and program evaluation sufficient for understanding research and interpreting data in applied settings. School psychologists demonstrate skills to evaluate and apply research as a foundation

for service delivery and, in collaboration with others, use various techniques and technology resources for data collection, measurement, and analysis to support effective practices at the individual, group, and/or systems levels. Examples of professional practices include:

1. Using research findings as the foundation for effective service delivery.

2. Using techniques of data collection to evaluate services at the individual, group, and systems levels.

3. Assisting teachers in collecting meaningful student data.

4. Applying knowledge of evidence-based interventions to evaluate the fidelity and effectiveness of school-based intervention plans.

Domain 10: Legal, Ethical, and Professional Practice-School psychologists have knowledge of the history and foundations of school psychology; multiple service models and methods; ethical, legal, and professional standards; and other factors related to professional identity and effective practice as school psychologists. School psychologists demonstrate skills to provide services consistent with ethical, legal, and professional standards; engage in responsive ethical and professional decision-making; collaborate with other professionals; and apply professional work characteristics needed for effective practice as school psychologists, including respect for human diversity and social justice, communication skills, effective interpersonal skills, responsibility, adaptability, initiative, dependability, and technology skills. Examples of professional practices include:

1. Remaining knowledgeable about ethical and professional standards, and legal regulations.

2. Assisting administrators, other school personnel, and parents in understanding regulations relevant to general and special education.

3. Engaging in professional development and life-long learning.

4. Using supervision and mentoring for effective practices.

Appendix F

Participants' Demographic Data

Table 1

Participant's Personal Data

Participant (Pseudonym)	Gender	Age Range	Ethnicity	Highest Degree	Years of Service
Shelley	Female	34-40	Caucasian	Ph.D.	10
Lynda	Female	34-40	Caucasian	Education Specialist	11
Gwen	Female	48-54	Caucasian	Education Specialist	24
Karina	Female	48-54	Caucasian	Education Specialist	25
Richard	Male	55+	Caucasian	Masters	31
Patrick	Male	55+	Caucasian	Education Specialist	35

Table 2

Education and Employment Background

Participant	Institutions Attended Undergraduate & Graduate	Undergraduate Major	Employment History	School Psychology
Karina	Drake University University of Northern Iowa	Psychology	Graduate Assistant	Bellevue Public Schools – Nebraska
Patrick	Moorhead State University Moorhead State University	Psychology	Aquatics programs*	Minnesota N. Dakota
Richard	Brigham Young University Brigham Young University	Communications and Education	Teaching at Language School	N. Sanpete School District-Utah
Gwen	University of Montana University of Montana	Psychology	Basketball Coach	No Information Given
Shelley	Cal Lutheran University University of Nevada Las Vegas	Psychology	Substitute Teacher; Preschool Aide	CCSD – Internship
Lynda	University of Arizona University of Nevada Las Vegas	Biology and Psychology	Child Behavioral Specialist**	CCSD - Internship

Note. * The Aquatics programs with the Boy Scouts; Summer Camp working with ID adults; highway construction. ** Supervisor at Nevada Children's Center; Preschool Teacher at Daycare Center; Summer work at Wellish Vision Institute.

Table 3

Current Assignment

Participant	Years of Service	Type of Setting	Caseload Ratio	Specialties, Interest Areas, Trainings	Professional Associations & Memberships ***
Karina	24	Elementary ****	1:2000	Autism; Serious Emotional & Disturb, Severe to Profound Intellectual Disability	NvASP, NASP
Patrick	26	Juvenile Offenders *****	1:2000	School to Prison Pipeline	NvASP NASP NCSP
Richard	30	Elementary & Middle, private sector servicing K-8 Charter	1:1300	Positive Behavior Support, Response to Intervention	NASP, NCSP
Gwen	18	Child Find Project; preschool, elementary, secondary	No caseload identified	Autism Spectrum Disorders, Autism Consultant	NvASP, NASP NCSP
Shelley	10	Elementary schools – Title I, low SES, medium ELL population	1:2000	Response to Intervention, Specific Learning Disability, Autism	NvASP, NASP APA
Lynda	11	Elementary Title I, low SES, high ELL population	1:1000	CHAMPS training, ******	NvASP, NCSP

Note. ***The Professional Associations are as follows: NvASP - Nevada Association of School Psychologists, NASP - National Association of School Psychologists, NCSP – Nationally Certified School Psychologists), APA – American Psychological Association. ****Interacts with Middle Schools: Title I, medium ELL population; and International Baccalaureate. ***** Interacts with grade 6 through age 22: behavior schools; juvenile offender facilities; jail; State prison; Virtual (on-line) schools Previous settings: rural schools, elementary and comprehensive high schools. ******Respond to intervention training, AIMS web training and Mental Health.

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