

**ENHANCING THE EXPERIENCE
OF CHILDREN AND YOUTH
IN TODAY'S SCHOOLS**

**THE ROLE OF PSYCHOLOGY
IN CANADIAN SCHOOLS**

A POSITION PAPER

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Canadian Psychological Association
Société canadienne de psychologie
151 Slater St., Suite 205
Ottawa, Ontario
K1P 5H3

Tel: (613) 237-2144
1-888-472-0657
Fax: (613) 237-1674
E-mail: cpa@cpa.ca
Web site: <http://www.cpa.ca>

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This paper was prepared for the Canadian Psychological Association by Frederick French and Juanita Mureika, Psychologists in Education Section.

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CONSIDER... Almost every segment of Canadian society is insisting on educational reform. Some focus on reports that question Canadian children's ability to compete in the global market academically and socially. Others support the need for a change of values in education in Canada. Still others are concerned about the role of Canadian schools in addressing social issues of poverty, race and gender. Others are concerned about the effectiveness of practices aimed at meeting a wider range of learner strengths, needs and styles. In response to these challenges, segments of the Canadian educational system have undergone significant and profound change in a short time in selected areas and yet many other areas remain untouched.

Many of the resulting changes have had a positive impact on the lives of children and youth. Because education is a provincial responsibility in Canada, a wide diversity exists relative to principles, practices and outcomes. In part, this is a positive feature in that educational practices can be more responsive to provincial and local priorities. However, this also can lead to differences in the national educational agenda.

It is critical to highlight that schools provide services to children and youth in a relatively universal and captive environment and that these children do not work in isolation of a wide variety of psycho-social-cultural factors. Not all children and youth come to school physically and mentally well. For example, recent epidemiological surveys have shown that 15 to 20% of children have a diagnosable psychological problem. Researchers estimate that as many as one half of these children have significantly impaired functioning due to emotional distress, yet only 5% receive any form of psychological care and only 1 to 2% are treated by mental health specialists. Adding to these concerns are findings from several countries that primary care pediatricians identified only 11 to 27% of known cases resulting in as many as 80% of cases going undiagnosed and hence untreated. Yet many of these children for a period of time attend school and on a more promising note, one research group has found that children who were assessed in a multi-disciplinary setting were more likely to be referred to specialized services.

The educational system deals with a wide variety of issues necessitating proactive, preventative and life affirming child and youth developmental approaches to learning. The educational system has both the challenge of and opportunity for addressing the educational, psychological, behavioural and lifestyle issues of Canadian children and youth.

THE NEED FOR A PROACTIVE BALANCED RESPONSE ... Given the variety of needs, strengths and resources of children, families, communities and the system, a balanced proactive approach will afford the most diverse and reasonable solution. Many provinces and many school jurisdictions attempt to provide this balance through a continuum of programs and services. Included in this balanced proactive approach are programs and services that focus on prevention, systematic intervention, individual and group approaches, postvention as well as direct services for chronic and severe developmental problems.

THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF PSYCHOLOGY IN THE SCHOOLS ... Psychology has much to offer in contributing to a balanced proactive approach. Psychologists bring much to the process based on sound generalist and specialist backgrounds affording unique contributions from a variety of perspectives. These perspectives include:

- specialized theoretical and research knowledge about child and adolescent development and various principles of learning and behavior as provided by developmental and educational psychologists;
- specialized knowledge of best practices relative to individual and small group psychological interventions, behavioral problems and socialization;
- specialized knowledge of children's thinking and problem-solving skills principles of learning and child and adolescent development

- specialized knowledge and skills in the organization and management of children's and adolescents' behavior;
- specialized knowledge in the assessment, diagnosis and program planning for children and youth with exceptionalities;
- specialized knowledge and skills in systems consultation, program evaluation and research methodologies.

CURRENT REALITY OF PSYCHOLOGY IN THE SCHOOLS AND MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES TO CHILDREN AND YOUTH ... The current situation for psychology in Canadian schools is one of promise and problem. The promise lies in the fact that psychological knowledge continues to grow rapidly, bringing new solutions, assessment, technologies and interventions. Canadians highly value the services provided by psychologists as demonstrated by opinion polls and survey results and by the strong demand for services.

Despite this reality, access to psychological services is increasingly problematic. Psychology in the schools and in particular the services of school psychologists are limited by large ratios of psychologists to students spread over large geographic areas limiting access to the full potential of psychological program and service delivery. This results in long waiting periods for services, difficulties in appropriate follow-up and a narrowing of the potential roles and services.

ACTION-PLANNING TO STRENGTHEN THE SCHOOL-BASED LEARNING EXPERIENCES OF CHILDREN AND YOUTH ... timely access to psychological services and programs is an essential part of the foundation children and youth receive in schools. To accomplish this ...

- each province/territory must establish a comprehensive human resource plan to provide psychological services in all schools;
- the plan must include reasonable work loads, ratios and geographic distribution that enables effective service and program delivery incorporating opportunities for effective diagnosis, intervention, follow-up and evaluation;
- the plan must outline core services while addressing the unique strengths, resources and needs of the diverse communities being served;
- the plan must identify and reinforce appropriate qualifications of personnel providing psychological programs and services and the appropriate supervisory relationships;
- the plan must address the full range of psychological programs and services aimed at proactive prevention, intervention and crisis management that is appropriate to the various levels of development intervention for children and adolescents and must effectively include families/guardians, teachers, schools and school districts;
- the plan must provide for a coordinated and integrated system of mental health services and programs for children and youth in all Canadian communities.