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| <p>EDUCATIONAL AND SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGY SECTION OF THE CPA</p>  <p>PSYCHOLOGIE ÉDUCATIONNELLE ET SCOLAIRE SECTION DE LA SCP</p> | <p>Psychology Month Profile 2022</p> <p><u>Educational and School Psychology Section</u></p> <p>Canadian Psychological Association</p> <p>https://cpa.ca/?s=Psychology+Month</p> |
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By Eric Bollman

Dr. Maria Rogers and Dr. Maria Kokai, Educational and School Psychology Section

While the terms Educational and School Psychology are sometimes used interchangeably, they can also refer to the two parts of psychology in the education system – the researchers who come up with evidence-based best practices, and the practicing school psychologists who implement that research. Dr. Maria Rogers and Dr. Maria Kokai joined us to explain further. “It’s like teaching children how to swim way before they have a chance to fall into deep water.”

Dr. Maria Kokai is a school psychologist who spent 30 years at the Toronto Catholic District School Board, the last 14 as the board’s Chief Psychologist. Now retired, she is now the chair-elect of the CPA’s Educational and School Psychology Section. Over the course of her career, she has seen a shift in the field of school psychology, as it has been moving away from a focus on assessments and dealing with children in crisis toward more of a prevention model, however this move is happening too slowly.

“COVID has really drawn attention to the importance of mental health and addressing it on a regular and consistent basis. It has also shone a light on the inequities that resulted from all the school closures and other consequences. One lesson for us and for schools I think is to make sure that mental health is addressed in a preventative way on a regular and intentional basis – as we did with anti-bullying – so that children learn coping skills, relationship skills, problem-solving. They can then apply these skills in challenging situations (which COVID has been) so they can adapt more easily with less stress.

School psychology across Canada is very different in different places. In some places we have the full range of services school psychologists are capable of providing, and in others there’s a very narrow focus on assessments and problems. What we would like to see in the profession is consistently across the board being able to provide equitable and accessible services to all students regardless of where they live, which province, a city or rural. Everybody should have access to services in an equitable way in the future. We’re not there yet.

This focus on prevention is something school psychologists are advocating to see across all school boards across Canada. There has been significant progress in this direction over the past decade or so, but there is still a lot of work to do. Dr. Maria Rogers is a professor in the school of psychology at the University of Ottawa. She is the current Chair of the Educational and School Psychology Section at the CPA. She says,

“This really points to larger systemic issues within the field. There are not enough school psychologists, and not enough are coming out of graduate programs in Canada. There aren’t enough resources allocated toward mental health in schools. We really want to move toward a preventative mental health student success approach. There are some boards and districts that are better able (better resourced) to take a preventative approach. But many larger school districts are working under a wait-to-fail approach, which is really unfortunate. There are parallels with our health care system, where we often wait for someone to be really sick instead of taking preventative measures ahead of time.”

Some of the delays in implementing preventative programs stem from a fundamental misunderstanding in the public about what it is school psychologists do. In the minds of many, school psychology is all about testing and psychoeducational assessment. This turns out to be a rather narrow and inaccurate description of school psychology, and of what school psychologists are trained to contribute to the educational system. This idea originates from a much earlier model of school psychology work, one which arose around the mid-20th century. At that time, many schools categorized students based on their abilities and their disabilities, and they required school psychologists to participate in this classification by testing students for their eligibility for various programs. But school psychologists have a much wider range of skills and expertise. And misunderstanding or underutilizing that expertise can deprive students of a wide range of services they could otherwise be receiving. Dr. Kokai explains further.

“A lot of the public still thinks school psychologists deal primarily with students who are having problems. That’s one reason people talk a lot about assessment waitlists which are endless and a constant problem. If school psychologists had the opportunity to focus on preventative measures – mental health prevention, promotion, and early identification and intervention of potential learning and mental health problems – then those severe problems could often be prevented and there would be less need for assessments for severe problems. We advocate for a full range of school psychology services and it is for this reason – shifting the focus from strictly problems to a more preventative approach means we don’t wait for those problems to become more severe.”

Some regions have moved faster than others in focusing on student well-being, and Dr. Kokai points to one place where it is working.

“A good example is an organization called School Mental Health Ontario, which has an advisory role to the ministry of education and a resource to school boards. About a

decade ago, the ministry of education in Ontario added student well-being to their goals in addition to student achievement. This meant that schools are now required to focus on student wellness and mental health and also address issues related to mental health. During that decade, a lot of progress has been made in general, and some progress in terms of using the skills of school psychologists to support the prevention and early intervention areas.”

The biggest change in school psychology in the past, say, 30 years is the narrowing of the research-to-practice gap. There has been a larger systematic effort to translate knowledge from researchers to practitioners, to make sure those psychologists and other education professionals who work with children can access research findings and apply this knowledge in evidence-based practices with kids in schools. Dr. Rogers wears both hats, as both a researcher and a practitioner.

“I do research in educational psychology as well as being a practitioner. I think that overall, the research has led us to a deeper understanding of the intersections between children’s mental health and children’s learning. At one time the two constructs would have been considered separate elements. The research has brought those disciplines together to understand how those are inseparable domains of a child’s life. What I’m seeing as well is more of a focus on researchers from around the world working together and learning from one another. We’re pooling data and resources from regions around the world to allow for larger-scale and bigger-picture investigations.”

The difference between ‘educational psychologists’ and ‘school psychologists’ is not quite as simple as the idea that ‘educational’ refers to researchers and ‘school’ refers to practitioners. Some regions in Canada and elsewhere in the world use the terms interchangeably. For the CPA’s Educational and School Psychology Section though, ‘educational – research’ and ‘school – practice’ has become a useful shorthand and is understood well by those in the field. Researchers create the science, practitioners apply it. Dr. Kokai explains,

“School psychology is applying the science of psychology in school settings. School psychologists apply knowledge and expertise in the areas of learning, mental health, behaviour and child development to help all students thrive and become the best they can be. They also connect with and support those who are most important in the children’s lives – parents, teachers, communities. It’s a very collaborative type of work in the interest of our children and youth.”

That collaboration has borne a lot of fruit over the past few decades, as practices change and focuses shift in the goal of best helping students to maintain well-being and thrive in a school setting. Dr. Rogers gives an example.

“Starting in the early 2000s, researchers started to really look at the concept of self-regulation or emotion-regulation. Some researchers started to look at it in a classroom context, and how self-regulation impacts learning. A number of researchers, and more

practice-focused people like Stuart Shanker, built curriculums and supports for teachers around understanding self-regulation and how it impacts behaviour. That allowed for an improved understanding for educators.”

Psychologists and researchers have also been involved collaboratively in new methods for teaching children how to read. One of the places where a lot of this work has been done is at Sick Kids in Toronto. When Dr. Kokai was the Chief Psychologist of the Toronto Catholic District School Board, they were one of Sick Kids’ experimental sites. It was a direct link between educational practitioners and researchers. Dr. Rogers was doing her internship at Sick Kids about fifteen years ago when this new program began. She says,

“There has been a tremendous amount of attention in recent years around how we should be teaching children to read. A lot of researchers in Canada, primarily out of Sick Kids, did years of research on phonological processing and reading comprehension. They developed a program called ‘Empower’ which is an extremely rigorous and evidence-based reading remediation program. When I was doing my internship at Sick Kids about fifteen years ago, Empower was just starting to be implemented in schools in Toronto, and now it’s being used in schools across the country and teachers are being trained in the program.”

The influence of science on school psychology is just one part of this large collaborative system. Psychologists of all kinds collaborate and learn from one another. The skills imparted by a school psychologist can be useful for more than just the student. Dr. Kokai recalls assisting families in the context of helping a child.

“If you are a parent, you would use similar communication and behaviour management practices that we would maybe recommend with teachers. How to communicate, how to establish positive relationships with children, to help them become more independent and deal with peer pressure or bullies. Many of these skills very much apply to adults as well. Your relationships in your workplace, your community, and so on.”

Dr. Rogers, who works as a clinical psychologist in addition to her work at the University of Ottawa, sees the influence this kind of collaborative mindset has had on all parts of the discipline.

“One of the things clinical psychology may have learned a little bit from school psychology is this holistic viewpoint of the child within their system. When we’re working with a child in a school psychology setting, we’re working with them in the context of the school environment, or their families, or the educational system as a whole – often all three. Traditionally, clinical psychology tends to be more individual-focused, and there have been some great lessons that have come from schools.”

You have probably seen parents complaining online about the “new math”. The way math is being taught in many schools is changing and many parents, particularly millennial parents, are finding it hard to grasp – what do you mean you’re not carrying the one anymore? That’s how I learned it, it worked for me! (We’re of course referring to millennials who talk like 19th-century prospectors.) There really isn’t a ‘new math’. Math remains the same. $2+2=4$. $n!$ is equal to $n \times (n-1) \dots 1$. What has changed is the method in which it is delivered, which puts a greater focus on understanding the concepts than it does on arriving at the correct answer. But the resulting process is different enough that parents and children now have something of a disconnect when trying to work together on math homework. Dr. Kokai says that while researchers have been studying this for a while, as far as she knows psychologists were minimally or not at all involved in the implementation of these new programs.

“This seems to be an example of ‘silos’, that we sometimes talk about in education. In this math silo, psychologists were not involved. What we are trying to do as school psychologists is trying to support students with learning disabilities to help them acquire math skills. But I know that there are researchers here in Ontario and likely elsewhere who are focusing now on math and the basic skills in math. We will have to listen to these scientists and researchers and build a math curriculum that takes those findings into account.”

There are many good reasons to get psychologists involved – in all areas of education, of course, but specifically in math. Dr. Rogers says that “unlike other most other subject areas, there’s a cognitive-psychological aspect to math where you either feel like you’re good at math or you’re not. And that self-perception seems to start very young.” Helping kids through that from a very young age goes right to the heart of the prevention argument – the earlier you can intervene, the better the outcome for the student both emotionally and academically. And the more likely they will be able to swim once the deep water arrives.