

JOB SATISFACTION AND ATTRITION  
AMONG SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGISTS

By

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ABSTRACT

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Legislative changes, especially within the past decade, have placed an increased emphasis on public schools to integrate those children requiring special education services into general education classrooms. School psychologists play a significant role in this decision by helping to determine the eligibility of children for services. They also develop and oversee many interventions necessary for these children to function effectively within an inclusive educational environment. Shortages in the profession, however, remain prevalent despite a mounting need for qualified practitioners. Given the number of children affected by such shortages nation-wide, a study of the factors related to attrition among school psychologists is worthy of investigation.

This research project reviewed the prevailing literature on attrition and job satisfaction in the field of school psychology. It examined the personal and professional

factors related to the decision to remain in the profession. It concluded with recommendations for future research and practice.

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## Chapter I

### Introduction

Attrition, defined as “leaving a profession before retirement or not entering the profession at all following graduation,” seriously influences the ongoing shortage of practicing school psychologists in the United States (Lund & Reschly, 1998, p. 3).

However, to what extent attrition is a factor in the current shortage of school psychologists remains unclear (Huebner, 1993).

Statistics indicate that the ongoing deficiency in the present number of school psychologists has created a stronger than usual job market for this particular field of education (Lund & Reschly, 1998). Unfortunately, new personnel can also expect a higher than usual backlog of cases due to losses from attrition (Kaplan & Wishner, 1999). Although enrollment and graduate statistics for school psychology programs have remained stable since the late 1980’s, increases in student-to-practitioner ratios have increased the demand for personnel in this profession. Thus, new applicants are needed to lessen the immediate caseloads of those currently employed (Lund & Reschly, 1998).

The specifics surrounding the occupational well being of school psychologists currently employed within the nation’s public school systems are often misunderstood (Mills & Huebner, 1998). The occupation of the school psychologist is often beset by stress and emotional taxation for those involved in this educational career (Sandoval, 1993). Current changes in the profession, including demographic shifts in student populations, changing socioeconomic conditions, state and federal regulations, and various public school reforms have created additional responsibilities and time

constraints for school psychologists (Kaplan & Wishner, 1999). These factors coupled with the lack of qualified personnel necessary for filling vacant positions paint a troublesome future for the profession of school psychology.

Lund and Reschly (1998) indicate there likely would be no shortages of school psychologists if the schools employed every graduating student from a school psychology program. This has not been the case. Many school psychology graduates choose not to enter the public school system even though a significant loss of personnel from the profession is expected through 2010 (Lund & Reschly, 1998).

Candidates entering the schools as new practitioners typically display a pattern of job stability for at least five years before such factors as job dissatisfaction or advancement to other positions within education prompt them to pursue employment in other areas (Wilczenski, 1999). This implies that the period between the sixth to tenth year of employment is that most prone to attrition, though the specific reasons for this remain obscure (Heubner, 1993).

According to Huebner (1993), of those surveyed after such departures, many school psychologists report a lack of proper preparation for the problems they encounter in the profession. Whether or not forewarnings of this possibility prevent potential school psychology graduates from further pursuing practice in the public or private schools is unclear. A better understanding is required of the characteristics associated with individual personalities, and how these characteristics relate to sources of attrition-related stress on the job (Huebner, 1993).

Research examining the factors leading to attrition among school psychologists has been limited (Wilczenski, 1997). Information regarding the current sources of stress

for school psychologists could offer new insight for graduate programs attempting to provide sufficient preparation for the occupation (Kaplan & Wishner, 1999). Although numerous stressors have been identified among practitioners, how these stressors affect each individual remains inconclusive (Wilczenski, 1997). To better understand attrition, the specific sources of stress for school psychologists must first be identified (Lund & Reschly, 1998).

In addition, little is understood about the environmental factors that may exacerbate the attrition rates of school psychologists in various regions of the country (Lund & Reschly, 1998). For example, previous research has been conducted to explore the possible differences between those working in metropolitan areas versus rural settings (Reschly & Connolly, 1990). According to Reschly and Connolly, a significant drawback to rural practice includes a lack of adequate testing materials and office staff to ease time burdens on rural school psychologists. Other issues in the rural areas include few immediate outlets for professional support, lower salaries, and difficulties dealing with the mistrust that many rural parents have about school psychologists (Reschly & Connolly, 1990).

Most of the schools in the United States are classified as rural (Reschly & Connolly, 1990). This raises the question of whether or not large numbers of school psychologists who work in these areas are at a greater risk for job-related stress and early attrition. Self-reported data taken from school psychologists in different areas of the country continue to generate speculation about the differences in job satisfaction between rural, suburban, and urban school psychologists (Huebner, 1993).

Empirical studies conducted by Maslach and Jackson (1998) yielded three important variables related to burnout and eventual attrition among practicing school psychologists. These included emotional exhaustion, an increased sense of depersonalization, and a sense of reduced personal accomplishment. In addition, such factors as differing personality traits, specific working conditions, a lack of proper peer support, limited supervision, and unrealistic expectations by those unfamiliar with the specific purpose of the profession likely have contributed to the early departure of many newly arriving professionals (Kaplan & Wishner, 1999).

Investigating the entrance and exit data for the profession is necessary to determine such factors as employment statistics, the current composition of the profession (age, ethnicity, experience, etc.), district needs, and the quality of service provided to children in particular schools (Wilczenski, 1997). Further, it is imperative to identify the factors leading to poor job performance and attrition in school psychologists before they begin to negatively impact the children these professionals are intended to help (Huebner, 1993).

The purpose of this study is to examine the factors related to attrition and job satisfaction among school psychologists. If the factors can be identified, the needs of the profession may be addressed by implementing new school reforms or by making curricular adjustments within school psychology training programs.

To obtain more information about the factors related to the job satisfaction and attrition rates of school psychologists, a review of the relevant literature follows. Three research questions guided this study:

1. What is known about attrition and the profession of school psychology?

2. What is known about job satisfaction and the personal characteristics of individual school psychologists?
3. What is known about the job satisfaction of school psychologists and the unique characteristics of specific schools, districts, and regions of the country?

## Definition of Terms

**Attrition:** Leaving a profession before retirement or not entering the profession at all following graduation (Lund & Reschly, 1998).

**Burnout:** A term used to describe an emotional state often associated with human services personnel in which the individual begins to experience heightened levels of emotional exhaustion, a sense of growing depersonalization and an increased sense of reduced personal accomplishment (Sandoval, 1993).

**Job Satisfaction:** An emotional state whereby the individual both enjoys his or her occupation, experiences a sense of self growth and accomplishment in their work, and would choose that occupation again if given the opportunity.

**Job Stressors:** Those variables related to the three aspects of burnout and eventual attrition from the profession.

**Specialist-Level Certification:** A credential given to those who have completed sixty graduate-credit hours of training before beginning practice (Curtis, Walker, Hunley & Baker, 1999).

**Discrete Time Hazard:** A conditioned probability that individuals will leave the profession of school psychology within a certain amount of time provided their departure has not already occurred (usually most critical between the 6<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> year of employment in the field) (Wilczenski, 1997).

**Transactional:** A term used to describe attrition as a condition dependent upon both environmental and personal variables (Mills & Huebner, 1998).

Five-Factor Model: A model based on five personality styles including (a) neuroticism, (b) extraversion, (c) openness, (d) agreeability, and (e) conscientiousness (McCrae, et al., 1999).

Interpersonal Skills: The ability to listen well, participate with others in discussions, convey information effectively and work with others effectively at the individual, group and systems level (Dixon, 2002).

Bem Sex-Role Inventory (BSRI): A self-report method designed to measure individual levels of androgyny within an individual (Schuttenberg & O'Dell, 1990).

Self-Directed Search: A self-report method designed to help individuals select the career environment best suited to their specific type of personality (Schuttenberg & O'Dell, 1990).

Million Index of Personality: A self-report method designed to examine normal behavior based upon individual levels of motivation, different ways of thinking, and interpersonal behaviors (Dixon, 2002).

Student-to-Practitioner Ratio: A ratio based on the number of school psychologists to students within a given school or district.

## Chapter II

### Literature Review

This literature review will examine past and present sources of research regarding the multiple variables associated with the job satisfaction, stress, and attrition rates of school psychologists. First, the employment statistics and attrition rates of school psychologists will be reviewed. Next, the personal characteristics of school psychologists and their relation to job satisfaction within the profession will be examined. Finally, any environmental factors thought to be related to the job satisfaction of school psychologists will be reviewed.

#### *Employment Statistics*

Significant changes regarding the employment statistics of school psychologists have occurred within the past decade. Because of this rapidly changing climate, the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) established a national database in 1992 to monitor employment trends. Surveys of employment conditions and job satisfaction are now conducted every five years. They involve samples of randomly selected NASP members in various demographic regions of the country (Curtis, Walker, Hunley & Baker, 1999). Although NASP initially surveyed individuals from its own five regions of membership, current surveys are now derived from the nine separate districts organized by the United States Census Bureau (Hosp & Reschly, 2002). According to Hosp and Reschly (2002), these nine districts are (a) the Northeast Region, (b) the Mid-Atlantic Region, (c) the South Atlantic Region, (d) the East South Central Region, (e) the East North Central Region, (f) the West South Central Region, (g) the West North Central Region, (h) the Mountain Region, and (i) the Pacific Region.

Curtis and his colleagues emphasize that the information gathered from these surveys focus exclusively on NASP members. In this respect, and since NASP members represent only 70% of all practicing school psychologists, the survey data may not accurately represent the employment characteristics of all school psychologists. This information, however, is invaluable in providing some basis from which to study regional differences that either contribute to the longevity of employment in school psychology or result in early attrition from the profession. The data obtained as a result of the NASP surveys include specific areas of employment and the amount of education achieved by school psychologists. They also report demographic information related to the gender, ethnicity, age, years of experience in the field of school psychology, and any prior experience within other areas of education for the respondents. The work location of practitioners is one specific area of interest (Curtis, et al., 1999).

The most frequently reported area of employment for most school psychologists is in suburban school districts. Urban areas represent the next most commonly reported areas of employment for this profession (Curtis, et al., 1999). Whether this indicates a preference among practitioners to work in more populated areas is unclear; however, statistics indicate that rural school systems serve a slightly higher margin of students than school districts located in urban or suburban areas combined (Sutten, 2002).

Curtis and associates (1999) estimate that greater than 44% of the practicing school psychologists work in suburban school districts, while roughly 30% work in urban school districts. Concerns over excessive student-to-practitioner ratios do not appear to be a factor in the decision to work in suburban, rural or urban districts. A majority of the smaller districts offer far lower student to practitioner ratios than do their urban and

suburban counterparts (Hosp & Reschly, 2002). Therefore, it may be more realistic to suggest that differences in these employment statistics may be related to a preference on the part of practitioners to reside in, and seek employment in, more populated areas.

Credentialing requirements represent an aspect of practice in school psychology that have changed over the past three decades (Curtis, et al., 1999). Most current school psychologists working in the public schools have obtained the specialist-level certification. Roughly 80% of those surveyed indicated that they had completed programs involving a minimum of sixty graduate hours of credit before entering the field. This represents a remarkable shift from survey results of the early 1970's. At that time, only 4% reported specialist-level training (Curtis, et. al., 1999).

According to Curtis, et al., 12.7% of school psychologists with less than specialist-level training at the time of job entry continue to practice even though they have chosen to not complete specialist-level credits while employed. In contrast, an estimated 33% indicated they completed thirty or more credit hours beyond the specialist level through their participation in ongoing training while employed (Curtis, et al., 1999).

Once a predominantly male-dominated profession, the majority of practitioners (roughly 70%) are now women (Curtis, et al., 1999). Further, a 25% increase in the number of female graduates from school psychology programs has occurred since the mid 1970's. At that time, women represented only 40% of the overall population of new graduate students from school psychology programs. Women currently represent roughly 80% of the graduate students in school psychology programs (Reschly, 2000).

Credentialing differences have been found between male and female school psychologists. Although women represent the majority of practicing school

psychologists at the specialist level, men continue to represent the majority of doctoral level school psychologists (Curtis, et al., 1999). This trend is also changing, albeit gradually (Reschly, 2000).

Wilson and Reschly (1995) speculate that male school psychologists are more likely to earn doctorates because women find it difficult to pursue educational goals due to family obligations. It also has been suggested that increases in the number of women entering the profession of school psychology may reflect similar increases in the number of women entering other professions (Curtis, et al., 1999). Regardless, predictions indicate that women will continue to comprise the majority of practicing school psychologists beyond the next decade, and they may eventually overtake men in holding doctorates (Reschly, 2000).

In contrast with gender differences, ethnicity represents an employment factor in school psychology that has undergone minimum changes. Despite growing numbers of minority children in American public schools, Euro-American school psychologists continue to dominate the field. This demographic remains unchanged from previous decades despite modest increases in enrollment by minorities in school psychology programs over the past few years (Reschly, 2000).

Minorities continue to comprise only 5.5% of the total number of school psychologists practicing in the United States (Curtis, et al., 1999). Reschly (2000) indicates that only one in ten of these practitioners are African American, and only a slightly higher percentage of the school psychology populace (1.5%) is of Hispanic heritage. Further, only 10% of the total population of school psychologists, regardless of cultural heritage, is bilingual (Curtis, et al., 1999). The increasing numbers of minority

applicants to school psychology programs is encouraging; however, predictions indicate that Euro-American practitioners will continue to represent the school psychologist majority well into the next decade (Reschly, 2000). Some would argue that a persistent lack of cultural awareness issues among school psychologists, despite efforts to create a greater understanding for diversity, will continue to substantiate the need for greater minority representation among school psychologists in the future (Palmer & Hughes, 1991).

According to Curtis et al. (1999), the current average age of practicing school psychologists appears unrelated to education, gender or ethnicity. The median age of practicing school psychologists seems to have been influenced by the limited entry of new personnel into the profession. The current median age for school psychologists ranges from the early to mid forties, with an estimated 70% of practitioners grouped within this age range (Curtis, et al., 1999). Statistically, the age of school psychologists has steadily increased over the past two decades when the median age for practitioners ranged from the mid to late thirties. Research indicates that those who filled badly needed positions following the development of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act in the mid 1970's will soon be leaving the profession, thus increasing the demand for new school psychologists in the near future (Hosp & Reschly, 2002).

The length of service in the profession, as might be expected, also coincides with practitioner age (Curtis, et al., 1999). Among those school psychologists surveyed, roughly one in every three practitioners indicated they had been in the profession greater than fifteen years. Roughly 14% of the practitioners surveyed reported being in the profession in excess of twenty years. In addition, those entering the field with prior

teaching experience and those entering the field without prior experience in schools were approximately even (Curtis, et al., 1999).

### *Attrition*

To improve the quality of employment for school psychologists, the variables related to burnout need to be understood. They, therefore, are the most frequent focus of study (Wilczenski, 1997). This possibly relates to the logical assumption that the decision to leave a profession is not spontaneous, but based upon multiple factors over time.

Many appear to presume that burnout always precedes attrition. However, as Wilczenski (1997) states, retirement is one type of job departure that contributes to the overall attrition rate of school psychologists. Furthermore, retirement can occur after a lifetime of fulfilling employment in the same occupation without job dissatisfaction or burnout. Sandoval (1993) described burnout as a continuous rather than dichotomous variable in that individuals can experience various subjective levels of burnout throughout their careers, and these may or may not result in attrition.

Wilczenski (1997) indicates that little or no research has been conducted to shed light on when factors of burnout result in attrition for school psychologists. Lacking a better understanding of attrition and the factors that influence attrition limits the ability to predict which school psychology candidates might be most prone to early departure. Current statistics indicate that the overall attrition rate for practicing school psychologists is 5% annually (Lund & Reschly, 1998). This would seem a modest estimate considering 48% of practitioners in a recent survey reported they planned to leave the profession within five years (Wilczenski, 1997).

In addition to those who decide to leave the profession early, there are those who do not choose to enter the schools or become school psychologists following graduation from school psychology programs. It appears that 10% of specialist level graduates, and 50% of those with earned doctorates, choose to not seek employment in the schools. Another 10% of the overall population of school psychologists are employed in settings other than the schools (Lund & Reschly, 1998). According to Lund and Reschly (1998), the loss of qualified personnel to other areas of practice, combined with the stagnate growth in the number of applicants to school psychology programs since the 1970's, adds to the present concern over attrition in the profession.

Lund and Reschly (1998) suggest that vacant positions for school psychologists are on a gradual decline nationally. This does not imply that qualified personnel are abundant, or readily available, where they are needed most. Wilczenski (1997) indicates that most new practitioners choosing to leave the profession often do so early. She cautions about the existence of a "discrete time hazard" referring to a "conditioned probability" that new applicants will leave the profession of school psychology within a specific time period provided their departure has not already occurred (Wilczenski, 1997, p. 7). The assumption here is if new applicants can overcome the adjustment typical during the early years of employment, they will likely remain in the profession (Wilczenski, 1997). Mills and Huebner (1998, p. 105) suggest that attrition is "transactional," referring to its dependency on both environmental and personal variables. A similar explanation has been used to describe how different effects of burnout may occur among school psychologists depending upon their particular work environments.

Since it is often difficult to conduct longitudinal studies with school psychologists who remain in and leave the profession, further research continues to be necessary to fully understand the various reasons for departure (Wilczenski, 1997). A lack of significant growth in the number of new applicants to school psychology programs and continued attrition due to increasing practitioner age and job dissatisfaction are expected to exacerbate the problem (Lund & Reschly, 1998).

### *Personal Characteristics and Job Satisfaction*

Given the increasing concern over practitioner shortages in the profession of school psychology, job satisfaction continues to be of interest to researchers. A child's dependency on the men and women who serve as school psychologists makes it necessary for each practitioner to perform at his or her best. Job dissatisfaction can increase the likelihood that mistakes will result from a lack of interest in the overall work routine (Brown, Hohenshil & Brown, 1998). According to Huebner and Mills (1994), instances of client maltreatment and interpersonal problems with other educators are more frequent among those suffering from job dissatisfaction (Huebner & Mills, 1994).

Job satisfaction among school psychologists remained largely overlooked until 1982. At that time, a survey using the Minnesota Satisfaction Questionnaire was given to school psychologists to investigate employment satisfaction within the profession (Brown, et al., 1998). Responses by 84% of the surveyed school psychologists indicated that they would choose to remain with the profession for at least another five years. The Brown study also indicated that most respondents maintained a high level of job satisfaction (Brown, et al., 1998). Brown et al. (1998) points out, however, that significant changes have occurred in the profession since the early 1980's. They assert

that these changes have exacerbated the dissatisfaction of school psychologists during their early years of employment.

Misconceptions about job expectations may lead to role confusion and job dissatisfaction for new school psychologists. A research survey conducted by Huebner and Mills (1994) suggests that many new practitioners enter the profession of school psychology with the intention of immediately exercising their new skills to the fullest extent possible. They often come to realize that larger than expected caseloads and responsibilities can tax both their time and ability to cope (Huebner & Mills, 1994). These new practitioners also may find their skills limited by administrative policies, with neither the added money nor personnel to implement their new ideas (Brown, et al., 1998).

The relation between job satisfaction and the personal characteristics of school psychologists has received attention in previous studies of burnout (Huebner & Mills, 1994). Gender and ethnicity are two of the demographic variables investigated in studies examining job satisfaction and burnout. Personality differences related to age and developmental considerations also have received attention (McCrae & Costa, 1999). However, Huebner and Mills (1994) concede that research investigating job satisfaction and its relation to the personal characteristics of school psychologists was limited during the early to mid 1990's.

Few statistical differences have been found between male and female school psychologists in their perceptions of job satisfaction. Male and female practitioners were polled in a 1992 survey regarding the influence of gender on the practice of school psychology (Wilson & Reschly, 1995). Roughly 77% of each gender stated that they

were satisfied with their choice of occupation. Male respondents indicate slightly higher satisfaction with promotional opportunities while women reported greater levels of satisfaction with the teaming opportunities of the profession. Both genders indicated a similar desire to conduct fewer assessments in order to create more time for direct interventions with children (Wilson & Reschly, 1995).

A 1994 survey, conducted to reexamine data taken from a 1984 study on job satisfaction among school psychologists, investigated differences in satisfaction according to age. Age was correlated with job satisfaction among those school psychologists surveyed, with older school psychologists reporting higher levels of job satisfaction (Brown, et al., 1998). Whether or not the job satisfaction endorsed by these particular school psychologists was directly related to their work or to other factors (e.g., establishment of family, location, community involvement outside of work, etc.) was not clarified in this study.

Another issue related to the age of school psychologists is life experience and the environmental influences (global, historical) of different generations. These ecological, historical, and environmental events can influence personality types throughout the lifespan (McRae, et al., 1999). McRae et al. (1999) assert that important developmental changes occur in the adult personality until the age of thirty. These changes are heavily influenced by sociocultural events. They argue that these events are less influential in changing the personalities of those age thirty-one and older (McRae, et al., 1999).

In the McCrae et al. study (1999), respondents of various age levels and from various cultures and various occupations were evaluated using the “Five Factor Model,” (p. 467). The five factors involve questionnaire items measuring an individual’s

neuroticism, extraversion, openness, agreeableness and conscientiousness. Results indicate that older men and women (those above the age of thirty) rated themselves lower in the categories of openness and extroversion, but rated themselves higher in the categories of conscientiousness and agreeability than those below the age of thirty. Those age thirty or below rated themselves higher on the categories of extroversion and openness than did their older counterparts (McRae & Costa, 1999). McRae and Costa's study may have implications for the field of school psychology, but no definitive research has been conducted to investigate the impact of developmental factors and life experience on the job satisfaction of school psychologists.

Minimal information is available regarding the job satisfaction of practitioners in school psychology according to ethnicity. It can be speculated that ethnicity does not represent a significant factor in job satisfaction given that intrapersonal factors associated with one's personality may play a more significant role than those associated with race, gender or age (Sandoval, 1993). However, further investigation into the impact of ethnicity appears warranted.

Characteristics related to different personality types between school psychologists is an area of research gaining more attention. Previous research placed far greater emphasis on environmental issues regarding the profession and the ambiguity of role expectations among school psychologists as factors related to attrition (Huebner & Mills, 1994). Sandoval (1993) implicated the importance of personality in his suggestion that burnout was likely a subjective experience, and one strongly influenced by differences between the personality types of practitioners (i.e., not just environmental factors). He further suggested that those suffering the effects of burnout and attrition often were those

who are highly competitive, highly egocentric, and have lower levels of conscientiousness (Sandoval, 1993).

Mills and Huebner (1998) indicate that the personality characteristics of neuroticism and introversion contributed significantly to job dissatisfaction and burnout among school psychologists in their longitudinal study. Those respondents who described themselves as more introverted reported fewer positive life experiences than those who reported higher levels of extroversion (Mills & Huebner, 1998).

Sandoval (1993) suggests that neurotic individuals also report lower levels of self-esteem and self-confidence. According to this author, neurotic individuals often are uncomfortable in situations requiring them to make important decisions on their own. Thus, they may react to stressful situations with overt hostility or by taking an entirely passive stance on issues requiring greater assertiveness (Huebner & Mills, 1994).

According to Sandoval (1993), school psychologists who exhibit greater flexibility in their responses to life stressors are less susceptible to eventual burnout. Research has shown that those considering themselves more extroverted than introverted appear to use a more effective range of coping skills when faced with complex problems (Huebner & Mills, 1994). Extroverted school psychologists also appear to demonstrate greater restraint when angered, and they promote positive thinking when involved in group situations (Mills & Huebner, 1994). Therefore, personality also may relate to the type of employment one is best suited for as an individual.

Schuttenberg and O'Dell (1990) assert that educators who most enjoy their jobs are likely those who maintain a general interest in social occupations (e. g., a general enjoyment derived from working with people). This hypothesis was derived in part by

the work of John L.Holland, Ph.D. He observed that the most successful career choices are those described as an “extension of one’s own personality into his or her career choice” (Schuttenberg & O’Dell, 1990, pg. 3).

Matching appropriate personality styles to the profession of school psychology may have merit. Whether or not the traditional graduate-applicant interview can provide a sufficient means of identifying suitable personality characteristics is unclear. According to Dixon (2001), those with limited social skills can be overlooked in the application process and go on to receive training in school psychology programs. Although these students may succeed to become competent in the technical requirements of the profession, the question remains whether their lack of interpersonal skills will make them ineffective as practitioners and candidates for job dissatisfaction early in their career (Dixon, 2001). Sandoval (1993) similarly argues the importance of evaluating personality traits for prospective school psychology applicants to prevent later problems due to limited interpersonal skills.

Dixon (2001) defines interpersonal skills as “the ability to listen well, participate in discussions, convey information, and work together with others at the individual, group and systems level” (p.3). He suggests that the ability to work effectively in this regard represents one of the ten “core” values required in the profession (domains), and one of the four most important to master as early as possible (Dixon, 2001, 3). Graduate-level school psychology trainers often find it difficult to change personality styles (Weissenburger, personal communication, 2002). Therefore, identifying those personality characteristics most frequently associated with ineffectiveness and early burnout in the profession is gaining momentum (Dixon, 2001).

Schuttenberg and O'Dell (1990) reported the results of the Bem Sex Role Inventory and the Self Directed Search in a 1987 survey of teachers, school counselors and administrators. This research evaluated the relations between individual personality characteristics, sex-role perceptions, and job satisfaction among this sample group of educators from Ohio. Job satisfaction among school psychologists was associated in the literature with all "school-counseling professionals" (Schuttenberg & O'Dell, 1990, p. 2). However, whether or not any school psychologists were among those in the counseling segment of the sample is unknown.

Results from the Schuttenberg and O'Dell study indicated that 95% of the educators in the sample derived "moderate to great" satisfaction from their work, (with 55% reporting that they were greatly satisfied with their career choice) (p. 9). Self-reported evidence of a social vocational orientation was most significant among the school counselors in the sample, with 76% reporting that they derived their greatest job satisfaction from working with others (Schuttenberg & O'Dell, 1990).

Dixon (2001) reported using the Million Index of Personality Styles (MIPS) in a more recent study of personality characteristics and job satisfaction among school psychologists. This self-report questionnaire was designed to identify the personality characteristics of "normally functioning adults" (Dixon, 2001, pg. 6). Dixon reports that his sample group was comprised of sixteen students in a school psychology-training program. This group was given the MIPS as part of a study regarding personality characteristics among its program applicants. The results indicated lower scores for items associated with the less desirable traits and higher scores for those characteristics the applicants considered more favorable, indicating subjective bias. As a result, all of

the applicants used in the sample produced responses indicative of those with personality types well suited for their chosen occupation (Dixon, 2001). Therefore, additional studies using inventories such as the MIPS are warranted.

Whether formal assessment of personality characteristics in school psychology applicants would prove beneficial to school psychology training programs and the overall profession remains undecided. Given the ongoing shortage of applicants at the present time, however, training programs are likely to remain cautious about using any technique that could further jeopardize enrollment figures (Dixon, 2001). Additional studies are needed to examine the relevance of personality characteristics, burnout and competency in the profession.

#### *Environmental Characteristics and Job Satisfaction*

School psychology is not a static occupation. Practitioner responsibilities often differ depending upon their geographic area of employment. These differences often reflect a particular state's policies regarding assessment and placement criteria for special education services. However, licensing and credentialing requirements for school psychologists per state are additional factors related to service, as is the type of training a practitioner has received prior to employment. Further, student-to-practitioner ratios vary by region (Hosp & Reschly, 2002). Recent changes in the roles expected of school psychologists also have created ambiguous job responsibilities and time limitations in many districts (Fagan, 2002). These differences can affect the level of job satisfaction experienced by school psychologists and the likelihood of burnout and possible attrition (Mills & Huebner, 1998).

Student-to-practitioner ratios continue to be an ongoing controversy in the profession of school psychology. Although the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) recommends ratios of not more than one thousand children per practitioner, this is not the case in most school districts (Lund & Reschly, 1998). Figures of greater than 2,000 to 1 are not uncommon. Improvements in student to practitioner ratios have been noted over the past three decades. According to Lund and Reschly (1998), ratios during the mid 1970's averaged 8,100 to 1, whereas student to practitioner averages in 1993 were reduced to 1,875 to 1. Ratios too, however, are dependent upon where a practitioner chooses to work (Lund & Reschly, 1998).

Increasing caseloads coupled with backlogs created by attrition and the ongoing lack of new practitioner hiring appear to have created excessive assessment responsibilities for school psychologists, which may be another primary factor in early departure (Kaplan & Wishner, 1999). Currently, one-half of the average practitioner's time is devoted to special education assessment (Curtis, Hunley & Chesno-Grier, 2002). According to Kaplan and Wishner, job dissatisfaction is further compounded when practitioners are not allowed to implement the quality interventions their particular training may have emphasized due to time constraints and inflexible administrative policies (1999).

Urban versus rural practice is another factor related to the demographic differences and job satisfaction among school psychologists. Information regarding rural school psychology, however, remains limited. An increased need for qualified rural practitioners has occurred since the mid 1980's, influencing a growing interest in the level of job satisfaction experienced by rural practitioners in various regions of the

country (Reschly & Connolly, 1990). Reschly and Connolly (1990) indicated in their survey of 605 randomly selected rural school psychologists that a school psychologist's job satisfaction was generally lower than that of urban and suburban school psychologists in similar studies. The reasons for the job dissatisfaction ranged from having less desirable employment conditions (e.g., lack of testing materials and clerical staff, etc.) to limited supervision and lower salaries (Reschly & Connolly, 1990).

Morrisette (1997) asserts that culture shock often compounds the usual problems associated with getting started in a rural school. The culture shock results from being unfamiliar with the aspects associated with rural living. A school psychologist may experience isolation until he or she comes to feel accepted by a smaller, close-knit community. Another challenge of working in a rural setting is the potential difference in the way rural students and their parents perceive any type of mental health service (e.g., the ethic of keeping emotional problems private and in the home, etc.) (Sutton, 2002).

According to Sutton (2002), many positive features also are associated with rural practice for educators such as school psychologists. For example, rural areas can no longer be typified as primarily agricultural economies with lower educational standards. Sutton argues that many rural areas are now appealing to commuters working in larger cities whose education and socioeconomic levels are quite high. In addition, rural areas are often located in close proximity to smaller, nationally recognized colleges. Therefore, a wider variety of cultural amenities are available to these rural community residents (Sutton, 2002).

Sutton (2002) reports other benefits to rural practice are often overlooked. Rural schools frequently serve as the hub of the community for social functions beyond that of

school-related events. In this respect, higher levels of community support can exist for schools, and rural community officials or organizations are often readily approachable and empathetic of concerns related to educational issues and suggestions for improvement (Sutton, 2002). In addition, school psychologists in rural areas often are called upon to fulfill a wide range of services, including counseling. Many of these services may be prohibited in larger school districts. Rural school psychologists may also participate in more administrative decision-making than their urban counterparts (Reschly & Connolly, 1990).

A survey of school psychologists, conducted by Curtis et al. (2002), indicates that urban practitioners are not necessarily exposed to a greater variety of job responsibilities than rural school psychologists despite the services available in larger school districts. In addition, urban school psychologists may find less parental investment. Urban practitioners may receive less support from teachers and administrators, and they may be less likely than suburban school psychologists to conduct direct interventions with students referred for reasons other than special education placement (Curtis, et al., 2002).

Another concern associated with demographic differences is the school psychologist's training. Graduates from school psychology programs that offer a greater emphasis on counseling and behavioral assessments will likely look for positions that will provide them with the opportunity to use these skills (Hosp & Reschly, 2002).

Furthermore, Hosp and Reschly (2002) stress that many school psychology graduates often choose to remain in close proximity to the region where they received their training. Therefore, school systems in a certain region may come to expect that every applicant,

regardless of where he or she attended college, will have skills similar to those trained within that region (Hosp & Reschly, 2002).

Salary also is a factor associated with job satisfaction among school psychologists. Lund and Reschly (1998) assert that 90% of school psychologists are employed by regional agencies supported by state funding. Factors such as student enrollment, the availability of new personnel, general economic cycles nationwide, and salaries can vary significantly from region to region (Lund & Reschly, 1998).

Salary is not always related to higher student-to-practitioner ratios. A recent survey of school psychologists working within the nine separate census regions of the nation indicated that school psychologists with the lowest student-to-practitioner ratios received higher salaries (Hosp & Reschly, 2002). Higher salaries are more prevalent in the Northeast and the Mid-Atlantic regions of the country. Regions with the lowest salaries (the East South Central, the South Atlantic, and the West South Central) also reported the highest student-to-practitioner ratios among the nine census regions (Hosp & Reschly, 2002).

Population trends and demographics can play a significant role in the job satisfaction of school psychologists. Schools and regions reporting the greatest number of minority children often place a great deal of assessment responsibility on the school psychologists they hire (Hosp & Reschly, 2002). Assessment responsibilities can result in limited opportunities for school psychologists to expand their role. Assessment duties may also represent one of the most significant reasons for early burnout and job departure among new school psychologists in these regions (Kaplan & Wishner, 1999).

## Chapter III

### Summary and Discussion

The information gathered in this literature review indicates there is an increasing interest in researching the job dissatisfaction, stress, and attrition rates in the profession of school psychology (Huebner & Mills, 1994). Statistical evidence suggests that the attritional loss of qualified school psychologists is only 5% annually. However, insufficient growth in the number of qualified applicants to school psychology programs, coupled with early departures of personnel, makes attrition an important area of study. In addition, the research indicates a significant number of practicing school psychologists are likely to retire within the upcoming decade. This is expected to further exacerbate school psychologist shortages in the future (Lund & Reschly, 1998).

Significant changes have occurred in the practice of school psychology over the last thirty years (Brown, et al., 1998). Licensing requirements now emphasize that school psychologists complete specialist-level training in order to practice in most states. The profession also has gradually transitioned from a primarily male-oriented occupation to one that is now predominantly composed of women (Curtis, et al., 1999). Such changes are expected to continue in the profession of school psychology over the next decade.

Social, political and fiscal reorganizations of the public school environment have placed a significant emphasis on school psychologists to further diversify their skills and broaden their roles. Role expansion will provide school psychologists with the opportunity to adopt job responsibilities less specifically focused toward the assessment of children for special education services. More attention can then be given to developing direct intervention programs designed to benefit every child with a learning or behavioral

problem (Yssledyke, Dawson, Lehr, Reschly, Reynolds & Telzrow, 1997). This may not, however, be possible for practitioners in every region of the country. Persistent shortages in the number of new psychologists, coupled with the additional attritional losses each year, create backlogs of cases in certain areas. This can limit the feasibility of promoting such changes in the role of every practicing school psychologist (Kaplan & Wishner, 1999).

Research by Sandoval (1993) describes three important conditions among school psychologists that may exacerbate burnout in the profession. These include (a) emotional exhaustion, (b) depersonalization, and (c) a sense of reduced personal accomplishment. Excessive student-to-practitioner ratios that exceed the 1,000 to 1 ratio suggested by NASP contribute to these conditions (Hosp & Reschly, 2002). In addition, misperceptions by new practitioners about their specific duties as school psychologists may contribute to burnout and attrition rates (Huebner & Mills, 1994).

Research related to job dissatisfaction, burnout, and attrition often focuses exclusively on factors directly associated with the work environment (Huebner and Mills, 1994). Practitioner responsibilities are known to differ depending upon the region of their employment.

Huebner and Mills (1994) report that research conducted on attrition and the relation between attrition and the personal differences of individual practitioners is limited. Although gender has been investigated as having a possible influence on job satisfaction, minimal evidence was generated to suggest that women are any more or less satisfied than men in the profession of school psychology.

Personality characteristics are also receiving greater attention as possible indicators of those most prone to early attrition from the service-related professions like school psychology (Dixon, 2001). Earlier investigations into personality traits noted that extreme competitiveness and egocentricity were frequently associated with premature practitioner burnout among school psychologists (Sandoval, 1993). Mills and Huebner (1998) assert that neuroticism and introversion also contribute to burnout in that individuals with these traits often have difficulty coping with difficult decisions and situations. Dixon (2002) argues in favor of assessing the personality traits of applicants to school psychology programs in order to better determine which applicants may be likely candidates for early departure.

### *Discussion*

Recent survey data indicates that a majority of school psychologists polled from different regions of the country generally enjoy their work despite an almost universal desire to move beyond the traditional role of testing and assessment (Fagan, 2002). Fagan asserts that surveys of school psychologists often fail to question whether their job satisfaction would improve if their testing responsibilities were reduced to provide the opportunity for exercising other skills. However, surveys often fail to acquire information about job responsibilities beyond the amount of testing that a school psychologist may perform within a given amount of time (Fagan, 2002).

Despite environmental conditions that can lead to job dissatisfaction, practitioners often underestimate their own ability to effect change and improve their work environments (Curtis, et al., 2002). Although many may lack the initiative to suggest changes, much of the problem may be attributable to a lack of information. For example,

a survey of school psychologists conducted by NASP found many practitioners had no understanding of the sources of funding that contribute to their salaries. In addition, few were readily aware of how budget limitations affect such factors as salaries, adequate testing materials and clerical staff. Further, few were knowledgeable about which community services or administrative officials they could contact to initiate necessary changes (Curtis, et al., 1999). Curtis, et al. (2002) emphasize the need to better educate practitioners to recognize the position they are in to effect change in school systems that may lack the necessary amenities, staff, or knowledge of alternative delivery systems.

### *Limitations*

Although surveys have been conducted to determine which factors relate to job dissatisfaction and attrition among school psychologists, additional information is required. Hosp and Reschly (2002) concede that the survey data gathered by NASP focuses exclusively on its membership. Since NASP members represent only 70% of the practicing school psychologists employed within the United States, the resulting data fails to account for over one-fourth of the entire population of school psychologists nationwide (Curtis, et al., 1999). In addition, NASP uses the nine regions of the U.S. Census to select its membership samples (Hosp & Reschly, 2002). Thus, each state's particular job requirements and attrition rates are not adequately addressed within the professional literature.

In much of the prevailing literature, minimal specifics are given about where the sample members are employed (whether they work exclusively for a single school or are employed by two or more schools). It could be speculated that those who work for two or more school systems establish less familiarity with the children and the other

employees within those systems,, resulting in less job satisfaction. Further, no study has been conducted to examine the effects of working full or part time.

The discussion of age among practitioners also requires some clarification as it relates to job satisfaction. Brown, et al. (1998) reports that a positive correlation exists between age and the number of years in the profession of school psychology. This may indicate that a familiarity with the responsibilities of the occupation over time, coupled with a greater recognition of one's abilities by other school employees and parents, sets the stage for higher job satisfaction. It also implies that those who choose to remain in the profession are likely those who have successfully overcome the typical obstacles associated with beginning any new career. Although previous surveys have focused on median age as it relates to those who remain in practice, little research has been conducted regarding the age of graduating students and the relation this variable might have on future job satisfaction (Reschly, 2002).

Huebner (1993) reported that the risk of burnout in the profession of school psychology decreases over time. However, job satisfaction is not as dependent upon the variable of age as is longevity in the profession. Furthermore, if longevity is the key to job satisfaction, it still fails to explain why the fifth through sixteenth year of employment among school psychologists represents the most crucial period for burnout and attrition (Wilczenski, 1997).

Another significant limitation to the research involving attrition is the lack of longitudinal studies investigating those who leave the profession (Wilczenski, 1997). Factors such as case overload, time constraints, unrealistic expectations by administrators, and boredom are posed as reasons for departure from the profession of

school psychology (Kaplan & Wishner, 1999). More information is needed to investigate whether many practitioners leave school psychology positions to accept similar positions in other school systems or leave to accept other positions within the field of education (e.g., principals or special education directors). Longitudinal research would shed more light in this area.

Schuttenberg and O'Dell (1990) hypothesize that school counselors, teachers and administrators who demonstrate greater longevity may have a socially orientated personality style. Their hypothesis was not substantiated in their sample, however, and further research is needed to rule out this hypothesis with school psychologists.

Research on the effects of personality as it relates to job satisfaction and attrition for school psychologists is limited (Huebner & Mills, 1994). However, according to Dixon (2002), personality factors may affect the ability of school psychologists to perform at their best (Dixon, 2002). Therefore, further investigation into the personality characteristics of those in the profession appears warranted.

#### *Implications for Future Research*

Upcoming research regarding the profession of school psychology will likely continue to explore the factors affecting attrition as the profession continues to develop. A better understanding of the changing forces of attrition will make it possible for school psychology training programs to better prepare their graduates for the realities of the profession (Kaplan & Wishner, 1999). A lack of understanding about why many new school psychologists leave the public schools early in order to pursue other areas of employment also complicates the estimation of future personnel needs (Reschly, 2002).

Lund and Reschly (1998) assert that a lack of information about the profession of school psychology in undergraduate coursework contributes to misinterpretations about the job responsibilities of school psychologists. Kaplan and Wishner (1999) report that those already working in the school systems often do not agree on the sources of stress most often emphasized in school psychology training programs.

A further analysis of job dissatisfaction and attrition also may dispel some of the myths associated with the profession. New evidence suggests that school psychologists are gradually branching into different areas of responsibility. A steady reduction in the amount of time devoted to assessments, along with increases in the amount of time spent in other activities including direct interventions, problem-solving strategies, and a greater involvement with organizational policy-making appear as trends (Reschly, 2002).

Reschly (2002) also asserts that individual “attitudes and beliefs” can have a significant effect on how each school psychologist perceives his or her practice (p. 514). A better understanding of the attritional factors associated with the past three decades compared to the expected changes to come in the profession may create a different image of school psychology for future candidates. Future research will contribute to a less ambiguous understanding of the unique factors contributing to job dissatisfaction and attrition in various areas of the country.

### *Implications for Practice*

Changes in practice of school psychology are expected to continue well into the next decade and likely beyond (Ysseldyke, et al., 1997). The ongoing shortage of qualified practitioners has persisted since 1976 (Reschly, 2002), and has generated some concern that future “short cuts” may be needed in order to insure that adequate numbers

of school psychologists are available for upcoming generations of children (Lund & Reschly, 1998, p. 4). Possible alternatives include a return to graduate-level certification for licensing, a reduction in graduate-school admission requirements (for school psychology programs), and relaxing state regulations regarding hiring standards. These are but a few of the options being considered should the number of new practitioners remain inadequate (Lund & Reschly, 1998). Although role responsibilities are likely to broaden in light of serious debate over the viability of testing children, testing and assessment continue to represent at least 60% of the average practitioner's time (Reschly, 2002).

For those working in two or more school systems, factors such as excessive travel times may contribute to burnout and attrition. Traveling can become especially problematic during inclement weather, and particularly affect rural areas where the travel time may become excessive. Another contributing factor may be the need to carry testing materials and cumbersome files to several schools due to a lack of office space.

Administrative policies can also differ between schools. As such, school psychologists often are required to understand the unique policies in each of his or her schools. Those school psychologists who fail to establish close working relationships with the key administrators responsible for policy changes at each school would likely find it difficult to make recommendations with any hope that the suggestions will be implemented. It can also be assumed that unique stress-related issues are likely to be present in more than one school environment, and those with less flexibility to adapt to such issues may experience more job dissatisfaction than those working full time in one school.

Whether an improved understanding of attrition will lessen its occurrence in the profession of school psychology is open to speculation. Certainly, the identification of the factors leading to attrition can provide graduate-level school psychology students with information they can use to make informed career choices. Those who understand the differences between real and ideal work environments may be better prepared for the stressors they encounter in actual practice.

### *Summary of Study*

Increased legislative changes, especially within the past decade, have placed an emphasis on public schools to integrate those children requiring special education services into general education classrooms. School psychologists play a significant role in this decision by helping to determine the eligibility of children for services. They also develop and oversee many interventions necessary for these children to function effectively within an inclusive educational environment. Shortages in the profession, however, remain prevalent and on the rise despite a mounting need for qualified practitioners. Given the number of children affected by such shortages nation-wide, a study of the factors related to attrition among school psychologists is worthy of investigation.

This research project reviewed the prevailing information on attrition and job satisfaction in the field of school psychology. It further examined the personal and professional factors related to the decision to remain in the profession, and concluded with recommendations for future research and practice.

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