Perspectives Regarding the Role of School Psychologists: Perceptions of Teachers, Principals, and School Psychologists in Victoria, Australia

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School psychologists have a unique and multifaceted role within schools and must work with a variety of stakeholders. Therefore, it is important to explore and understand the perspectives of other educational professionals regarding the roles of school psychologists. This study examined the perspectives of principals (N = 21), teachers (N = 86), and school psychologists (N = 81) regarding what they believe should be the role of school psychologists. Participants were working in Catholic, Independent, and Government primary and secondary schools across Victoria, Australia. Results revealed both similarities and differences between the three groups regarding perspectives about school psychologists’ role. For instance, the three groups shared similar perspectives that school psychologists should: (a) conduct research on issues relevant to the school, (b) be up-to-date on relevant research, (c) conduct psychological assessments, (d) provide counselling to students, (e) organise group programs for students, (f) organise workshops and provide information to teachers on issues of students’ welfare and (g) inform primary students’ parents of their child’s participation in counselling. However, the three groups also differed in their perspectives about some aspects of the school psychologists’ role. It was notable that each of the differences in perceptions between the groups had implications for potential ethical dilemmas, for instance: (a) boundaries, (b) dual relationship, (c) confidentiality/who is the client? and (d) informed consent. Implications for practice and scholarship in the field of school psychology are discussed.
There is an increasing need for the provision of school-based psychological services in Australian schools (Farrell & Care, 2000). This reflects an international trend revealing that schools in many countries would like to have more funding to utilise the professional expertise of psychologists (Farrell & Kalambouka, 2000). The Australian Psychological Society (APS) describes the role of school psychologists as ‘employed to apply their psychological and their educational expertise to assist students, parents and siblings, teachers, and school administrators to achieve the most beneficial outcome for students’ (APS, 2000, pp. 1–2). Research shows that psychologists are recognised as having an important and highly valued role within schools (Farrell, Jimerson, Kalambouka, & Benoit, 2006; Gibson, 1990) and many school psychologists report a high degree of professional satisfaction in their work (Thielking & Moore, 2005). Australian research into the roles of Queensland school counsellors reveal that they are required to work as ‘multi-specialists’ within schools due to the types of student and organisational issues that they are dealing with (Barletta, 1996). However, many feel inadequately trained or supervised for the quantity, complexity and variety of issues that come their way (Bramston & Rice, 2000). Additionally, there may also be a lack of role clarity and understanding amongst teachers and principals and amongst psychologists themselves (Cooper, Hough, & Loynd, 2005; Gibson, 1990; Jacob-Timm, 1999) with studies showing that counsellors do not always agree with principals on what constitutes the activities of a school-based counselling service (Kaplan, 1995; Kirchner & Setchfield, 2005). The diverse perceptions of responsibilities may be further confounded by the various titles referring to professionals providing school psychology related services to children across Australia. Only Western Australia consistently uses the title school psychologist, New South Wales uses school counsellor, and most other locations across Australia use the term guidance officer (Faulkner, 2007).

Studies have shown that ethical dilemmas may occur when the various stakeholders in a school community do not fully understand the role and responsibilities of a school psychologist and thus expect certain practices of the psychologist that could be deemed unethical (Gibson, 1990; Glosoff & Pate, 2002). For example, a survey of 180 American secondary school teachers revealed that they strongly believed that counsellors should share more information with teachers about student issues that arise in counselling, thus raising the issue about the role of confidentiality in school settings (Gibson, 1990). Maintaining a student’s right to confidentiality and administrative pressure to act unethically has been noted as the two most difficult ethical issues facing school psychologists (Davis & Mickelson, 1994; Pope & Vetter, 1992). Glosoff and Pate (2002) assert that school psychologists are often involved in a ‘complex balancing act’ in regard to maintaining the confidence of student clients whilst also working with teachers and families of students. School psychologists having dual relationships, competing ethical principles of psychologists and schools, conflicting obligations to client and employer, and having to make decisions around complex and ambiguous issues are examples of other situations that cause ethical problems for school psychologists (e.g., Jacob-Timm, 1999).

**Previous Research Examining Teachers’ and Administrators’ Perspectives**

During the past five decades researchers have investigated teachers’ perceptions of school psychologists and the function of these perceptions in mediating the relationship
between these two groups. In 1964, upon examining the relationship between the school psychologist and the teacher Reger emphasised: ‘… it is the teacher and not the school psychologist who carries out the day-by-day business of education’ (p. 13). The point he makes is that the importance of the professional relationship between the teacher and the school psychologist cannot be overstated because of the countless hours teachers spend interacting with students in the classroom. Furthermore, teachers are often the primary source of referrals for psychological services for students. A collaborative relationship with classroom teachers may facilitate the success of the school psychologist in many facets of the job of school psychology including, but not limited to, information gathering, planning, implementing, and evaluating interventions. Thus, teachers’ attitudes towards, and perceptions of, school psychologists are a significant factor influencing the effectiveness of school psychologists. As early as 1977, Medway highlighted that analysing the impact that school psychologists have on other professionals is instrumental in defining and characterising the profession. Medway also emphasised that ‘… perceptions of, and reactions toward, school psychologists by teachers have received considerable attention since teachers’ attitudes are especially influential in determining the diversity and usefulness of psychological services … ’ (1977, p. 301).

In an early study of teachers’ impression of the role of the school psychologist, Styles (1965) examined teachers’ perspectives regarding the helpfulness and level of training of school psychologists in the United States. Styles indicated that teachers generally reported that the school psychologist was most helpful in cases of emotional disturbance and in consultation. Styles also found that teachers usually estimated the school psychologists’ training to be at the master’s level and that teachers had a tendency to attribute more training in clinical psychology than the school psychologists actually possessed. At the time of the study, 60% of the teachers who participated in the study indicated that they had not consulted with a school psychologist in the year prior to the study and this may be reflected in the discrepancy between the teachers’ perceptions and the psychologists’ actual roles.

In 1977 in the United States, Medway compared the amount of time that school psychologists spent on professional activities during a 6 week period with teachers’ perceptions of the time that school psychologists actually spent on these activities. Medway reported that teachers were unaware of the service priorities among school psychologists and that teachers had inconsistent attitudes regarding preferred activities of school psychologists. In particular, teachers reported perceptions indicating that school psychologists did more interviewing, teacher consultation and counselling, and less testing and report writing than they actually did.

When Dean (1980) investigated the difference between preservice teachers’ and experienced teachers’ perceptions of the role of school psychologists in the United States, he found a similar discrepancy between what role the school psychologist played on a day-to-day basis and what the teachers expected and perceived them to be doing. Dean also reported that experienced teachers had a significantly more negative opinion of the school psychologist’s knowledge of classroom problems, social groups and school-related problems in general. On average, the experienced teachers also reported that school psychologist provided less helpful advice regarding student learning problems and reporting the results of psychometric assessments. Conversely, both experienced and novice teachers reported high satisfaction with
the school psychologists’ ability to assist students who had emotional or behavioural problems.

A Greek study by Gavrilidou, de Mesquita and Mason (1994) revealed that teachers believed the largest contribution made by school psychologists was in the remediation of conduct problems. However, the teachers indicated that school psychologists were less helpful when assisting with academic problems. Gavrilidou and colleagues hypothesised that this may be due to teachers having received more preparation in dealing with academic difficulties, therefore they felt most competent to handle these types of issues. Based on their results, Gavrilidou and colleagues suggested educating teachers about the school psychologists’ expertise in assisting with both conduct and academic problems. It is apparent that, in some instances, the role of the school psychologist has not been clearly articulated to teachers either before or during their tenure at a school, thus exacerbating the discrepancy between the actual job function of the school psychologist and teachers’ expected or perceived ideas about their role.

The perceived importance and helpfulness of the varying functions of the school psychologist has also been investigated. Ford and Migles (1979) found that, as a group, teachers in the United States considered academic screening services that facilitated an appropriate placement for students as one of the most important functions of the school psychologist. The roles of the school psychologist as a psychodiagnostician, counsellor and case consultant were also identified as being important to teachers. In contrast, school psychologists and supervisors of psychological services rated in-services and preventative services as being the most important job tasks; thus not agreeing with teachers on the most important job functions of the school psychologist. Based on the findings from their research, Ford and Migles concluded that teachers place great value on services that provide immediately observable relief to problematic situations and also those services that are least intrusive to the teacher.

Borghese and Cole (1994) surveyed Canadian teachers and school psychologists in an attempt to identify variables that affect teachers’ implementation of psychoeducational recommendations. They found that teachers did not consider psychologist related variables to be an important part of the implementation of school psychologists’ recommendations. However, the school psychologists identified psychologist related variables and the relationship with the teacher as key variables affecting the implementation of recommendations, thus finding a similar discrepancy in the perception of the importance of job tasks between psychologists and teachers.

Leach (1989) surveyed 289 teachers and principals from Western Australian primary and secondary schools. He found that teachers perceived that school psychologists mostly participated in student-centred activities such as counselling, rather than broader systemic activities such as consultation and school-wide assessment. Furthermore, teachers perceived school psychologists as being more competent in performing student counselling and assessment activities than the more systemic types of activities. However, when the teachers were asked which activities they would like to see the psychologist to engage in more frequently they responded in the affirmative to all of these activities. In fact, many of the activities that were rated as being needed ‘more often’ were the same ones that were also rated as being carried out least competently. Leach interpreted these findings as being representative
of the expanding job role of the school psychologist and a need to inform the educational community on the nature of activities that make up the role of school psychologists.

In Estonia, Kikas (1999) found that teachers appreciated the child-centred nature of the work of school psychologists (such as counselling and assessments) but did not want other services from them. However, school psychologists wished to take on broader roles. Research in the United Kingdom undertaken by the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) provides valuable information regarding educational psychology services in England (Kelly & Gray, 2000). The qualitative and quantitative data gathered from a wide group of representatives who use educational psychology services (e.g., parents, teachers, other agency professionals) in this project contributed information regarding the scope and balance of work of educational psychologists in England; views of future priorities and directions for educational psychology services; and barriers effecting the balance of educational psychologists’ work. The key findings were that:

- The knowledge and skills of educational psychologists were generally highly regarded by users of their services. In particular, school psychologists’ advice provided at the early stages of intervention, strategies given for students with emotional and behavioural difficulties, and knowledge of the school organisation and how schools work were highly valued.

- Many educational psychology services contribute to raising standards of achievement and supporting government policies regarding inclusion and social inclusion (peer relationships).

- There is a notable mismatch between what educational psychologists think they should be doing and what users perceive their role to be. For instance, among teachers there is often an overemphasis on assessment, which is in contrast to school psychologists’ desire for a broader role.

- Parents value educational psychologists and indicate that they are a key link to schools and other agencies.

In addition to the key findings, there was a great deal of consensus between local education authorities, educational psychologists, and users of their services regarding future priorities. For instance all groups agreed that (a) a commitment is needed which focuses on preventative and early intervention services, rather than reactive services; (b) consultation and problem-solving are recognised as important aspects of educational psychology services; and (c) services are needed that focuses on behaviour management at the individual, group, and organisational level. Based on the information provided by schools, parents, other professionals, and educational psychologists, the 2000 report (Kelly & Gray) concludes that for educational psychology services to provide an enhanced role it will be important to establish a clear statement regarding roles and functions, work collaboratively with other support services agencies and demonstrate the added value of the contribution of educational psychologists beyond their core functions.

A recent study from the United States (Gilman & Gabriel, 2004) reported on the results of a survey of school psychologists (N = 87), teachers (N = 1,533), and
administrators \((N = 90)\) regarding their perceptions of the roles and functions of school psychologists. In relation to the perceived value of traditional psychoeducational assessments, the majority of teachers either wanted school psychologists to do the same amount, or more, individual assessments that they do at present. In contrast, school psychologists wanted to do less of this work. The teachers also wanted school psychologists to undertake more consultation-based activities. Administrators, however, indicated that individual assessments for special education were the most important aspects of the role and were not in favour of consultation. The authors suggested that teachers may be an ally to school psychologists by supporting school psychologists in their desire for more consultation. Gilman and Gabriel also recommended that school psychologists need to engage in ongoing collaborations with key stakeholders, such as teachers and school administrators, in order to promote the development of school psychological services.

Farrell, Jimerson, Kalambouka, and Benoit (2006) reported the findings of a survey of over 1100 teachers from 8 countries on their views of school psychologists. Their findings indicated that there is considerable variation between countries in the amount of time school psychologists spend in schools and that this is related to the extent to which teachers value their services. Overall, teachers appreciated the quality of the service they received from school psychologists and indicated that they would like to receive more of these services (such as assessment and counselling). In addition, teachers reported that they would like school psychologists to spend more time on activities that they perceived them engaging in less frequently (such as working with teachers on school-wide development, curriculum development, teacher training, vocational guidance and working with parents).

Clearly, there are numerous and diverse roles and responsibilities that school psychologists are engaged in. However, teachers and psychologists may not be placing priority on the same functions, nor may they be interpreting the actual daily activities of the school psychologist in the same way. As the needs of children change, the professional activities of the school psychologist will likely adapt and expand to address these needs. This evolution will have an effect on the relationship that the school psychologist has with teachers and principals. Therefore, the definition of a school psychologist is dynamic and ideally reflects teachers’ and principals’ views and needs. Additional international investigation is warranted to further understand teachers’ perceptions regarding the activities of school psychologists around the world. This present study examined the perspectives of Victorian teachers, principals and school psychologists about what they believe should be part of the professional responsibilities of school psychologists.

**Method**

The sample consisted of 81 psychologists, 21 principals and 86 teachers. The majority of psychologists were female \((N = 67)\) with 41\% working in government school settings, 14\% in independent school settings and 46\% in Catholic school settings. In regards to principals, there were 11 males and 10 females, with the majority working in secondary schools \((N = 17)\). Twelve principals worked in Catholic schools, 5 in government schools and 4 in independent schools. Finally, the teacher
sample consisted of 24 males and 64 females. The majority of teachers worked in secondary schools (N = 65). Fifty-three teachers worked for Catholic schools, 17 for government schools and 16 for independent schools.

As there is no list of school psychologists employed in Victoria, sampling proceeded through a snowball technique in which school psychologists known to the authors were invited to participate. Each participant was asked to pass on details of the study to other school psychologists, who in turn could contact the researcher. In addition, some psychologists were contacted directly through schools, or through the Victorian Department of Education, or via recruitment at a counselling conference. Principals were contacted separately and sent a Principal Survey as well as six Teacher Surveys for distribution to teachers. A response rate of 64% for psychologists, 49% for principals and 34% for teachers was obtained. The measure described here only forms part of the survey.

Psychologists, principals and teachers completed surveys which each included the School Psychologists’ Responsibilities Measure (SPRM). The SPRM is an author-designed measure, developed from published research on the types of activities that make up school psychologists’ roles (Gibson, 1990; Hall, 2002; Partin, 1993; Valine, Higgins, & Hatcher, 1982), research on common ethical dilemmas faced by school psychologists (Davis & Mickelson, 1994; Jacob-Timm, 1999) and from informal interviews with a small group of school psychologists. As it was used for the first time in this study, there is no previously derived psychometric information of the SPRM. The measure was developed to test respondents’ opinions on what they believe should be the role and responsibilities of school psychologists and to compare the opinions of psychologists, teachers and principals. The SPRM is a 30-item measure where respondents were asked to indicate on a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree, their level of agreement with each of the given statements. Some were general statements about the school psychologist’s role (e.g., ‘school psychologists should provide career guidance to students’) while others were statements that if supported, may lead to ethical dilemmas (e.g., ‘school psychologists should administer discipline to students if it is necessary’).

Results

For the following analyses, ‘agree’ refers to the sum of ‘strongly agree’ and ‘agree’ ratings, and ‘disagree’ refers to the sum of ratings for ‘strongly disagree’ and ‘disagree’.

School Psychologists’ Opinions

What they believe they should do. The SPRM responses of school psychologists alone revealed most psychologists agreed that they should conduct research on issues important to their school (77%); be up-to-date on current research relating to the needs and issues of their school (98%); conduct IQ assessments (89%); conduct psychological assessments (74%); provide counselling to students (99%); organise group programs for students (88%); provide workshops to teachers about student welfare issues (94%); provide information to teachers about working with students’ varying social, emotional and learning needs (99%); be the main referring agent within the school when students’ issues are beyond teachers’ level of expertise
(96%); and inform primary school aged children’s parents that they are receiving counselling (90%).

**What they believe they should not do.** The majority of school psychologists believed they should not administer discipline to students (95%); have counselling included in disciplinary procedures (63%); ‘fudge’ IQ results in order to receive funding for students (93%); charge a fee to teachers for counselling (61%); allow teachers to access counselling records (98%); inform teachers of students’ attitudes towards them (84%); and be both a subject teacher and the school counsellor (88%).

**Mixed opinions.** There were also mixed levels of agreement amongst school psychologists for a significant number of items. Fifty-nine per cent of school psychologists agreed: they should assist teachers in handling discipline (28% disagreed); 35% believed they should be the main contact in the school for student problems (53% disagreed); 21% believed they should provide career guidance to students (53% disagreed); 27% agreed that they should be able to counsel teachers as well as students (57% disagreed); 37% believed that they should also counsel students’ families (28% disagreed); 54% believed that they should let the referring teacher know about how the student is progressing in counselling (31% disagreed); 53% believed that they should inform teachers of which students are receiving counselling (36% disagreed); 35% believed that they should inform secondary students’ parents of their child’s participation in counselling (38% disagreed); 20% believed that they should not give information or advice which is against the ethos of the school (49% disagreed); and 11% believed that they should not give information or advice to secondary school students which is against the values or beliefs of the students’ parents (52% disagreed).

**Comparisons Between Psychologists, Principals and Teachers**

For the following analyses, shared agreement and disagreement was decided through inspection of frequencies. Items for which more than 70% of the three groups agreed/disagreed were deemed as sharing agreement/disagreement.

**Shared agreement.** The majority of psychologists, principals and teachers in this sample shared agreement that school psychologists should conduct research on issues relevant to the school; be up-to-date on relevant research; conduct psychological assessments; provide counselling to students; organise group programs for students; organise workshops and provide information to teachers on issues of students’ welfare; and inform primary students’ parents of their child’s participation in counselling. The majority of school psychologists, principals and teachers also agreed that school psychologists should not administer discipline to students; teach subjects as well as counsel; and ‘fudge’ IQ results to receive funding for a student. There were, however, some significant differences in the level of agreement between psychologists, teachers and principals in these and other items in the SPRM, some of which may lead to ethical dilemmas for the school psychologist.

**Differences in opinions.** Differences in opinions about school psychologists’ responsibilities were explored by conducting univariate ANOVAs. The items that resulted in significant differences in opinion between psychologists, principals and teachers are
presented in Table 1. In order to reduce the chance of committing a Type 1 error, only alpha levels below \( p = .01 \) were considered significant. In order to isolate where the significant differences were, post-hoc comparisons were conducted using the Tukey HSD test. Furthermore, the significant differences between school psychologists, principals and teachers were then considered regarding how they may contribute to ethical concerns for school psychologists. There were four categories of ethical concerns stemming from the differences in opinions, and these related to role boundaries, dual relationships, confidentiality and informed consent.

**Role boundaries.** For the first two items in Table 1 — concerning school psychologists assisting with discipline or actually administering discipline — there were differences in opinion as to the psychologist’s role. For item 1, psychologists were more likely than teachers and principals to agree with the statement that psychologists should assist teachers in handling discipline \((p = .001, \eta^2 = .07)\). However, for item 2, school psychologists were more likely than teachers and principals to disagree with the statement that psychologists should be involved in administering discipline \((p = .000, \eta^2 = .13)\).

### TABLE 1

**Mean Scores for Psychologists, Teachers and Principals and the One-Way Between-Groups ANOVA Outcome for Each of the Significant SPRM Items**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Responsibility</th>
<th>Psychologist</th>
<th>Principal</th>
<th>Teacher</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The school psychologist should …</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Assist teachers in handling discipline</td>
<td>3.32</td>
<td>1.06</td>
<td>2.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Administer discipline to students</td>
<td>1.36</td>
<td>.66</td>
<td>2.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Counsel students’ families</td>
<td>2.89</td>
<td>1.07</td>
<td>3.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Let referring teacher know about student issues</td>
<td>3.28</td>
<td>1.14</td>
<td>3.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Allow teachers to access counselling records</td>
<td>1.33</td>
<td>.57</td>
<td>1.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Inform teachers of students’ attitudes about them</td>
<td>1.72</td>
<td>.83</td>
<td>2.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Teach subjects as well as counsel</td>
<td>1.51</td>
<td>.74</td>
<td>1.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Charge a fee to teachers for counselling</td>
<td>2.31</td>
<td>1.24</td>
<td>2.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Inform teachers of students receiving counselling</td>
<td>3.09</td>
<td>1.16</td>
<td>3.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Mandate counselling for some students</td>
<td>2.46</td>
<td>1.01</td>
<td>2.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Include counselling in disciplinary procedures</td>
<td>2.35</td>
<td>1.18</td>
<td>2.62</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Statements have been modified to fit into the table. For a full list of items please contact the author.

Scale scores ranged from 1–5 with 1 = Strongly Disagree and 5 = Strongly Agree.

Degrees of freedom = 2, 185.

\*\( p < .01 \). \*\*\( p < .001 \)
Dual relationship. For item 8, concerning school psychologists charging teachers a fee for counselling, psychologists were more likely than teachers and principals to disagree with this statement \( (p = .000, \eta^2 = .09) \). For items 3 and 7, concerning school psychologists providing therapy to the families of students and being a teacher as well as a school counsellor, school psychologists were more likely than teachers to disagree with these statements \( (p = .014, \eta^2 = .05; p = .003, \eta^2 = .06, \) respectively).

Confidentiality. For items 4, 5 and 9 — concerning psychologists informing the referring teacher about how the student is progressing in counselling, providing counselling records to teachers and informing teachers of which students are receiving counselling — school psychologists were more likely than teachers to disagree with these statements \( (p = .002, \eta^2 = .07; p = .000, \eta^2 = .26; p = .000, \eta^2 = .09, \) respectively). For item 6, concerning informing teachers about the attitudes students have towards that teacher, school psychologists were more likely than teachers and principals to disagree with this statement \( (p = .000, \eta^2 = .18) \).

Informed consent. For items 10 and 11 — concerning the school mandating students to see the school psychologist for counselling even if the students are unwilling, and including counselling in school disciplinary procedures — school psychologists were more likely than teachers to disagree with these statements \( (p = .003, \eta^2 = .06; p = .003, \eta^2 = .06, \) respectively).

Discussion

On the whole, psychologists, principals and teachers agreed that school psychologists should counsel students, conduct psychological tests, be up to date and conduct research and develop and implement group programs and workshops. All three groups also shared agreement that school psychologists should not administer discipline to students, teach subjects as well as counsel and alter test results in order to receive funding for students.

For some aspects of the school psychologist’s role, there were also significant differences between psychologists, principals and teachers. These differences were categorised under four areas of ethical concerns role boundaries, dual relationships, confidentiality and informed consent.

The first area of ethical concern, role boundaries, related to the issue of school psychologists administering discipline to students. The differing beliefs about discipline are somewhat subtle. Psychologists, in general, want to give advice or assistance to teachers about discipline for certain students; however, it seems that teachers and principals are wary about such advice. Perhaps psychologists feel that they can provide an educative role within schools by assisting staff with information and skill development on effective and noneffective disciplinary procedures or perhaps they are counselling certain students who are also ‘acting out’ and they want to assist teachers on how to work with such challenging behaviours. The idea that school psychologists should administer discipline is not highly supported by any group, but is more strongly rejected by psychologists. Administering discipline has
a powerful potential to break down counselling relationships with students and clearly should be avoided.

The differences in opinions about school psychologists providing a counselling service to students as well as to both teachers and students’ families highlights the ethical issue of dual relationships. For example, nearly half of the teachers agreed with the item ‘It is acceptable for the school psychologist to charge a fee to teachers that want to see them for counselling outside of working hours’. This shows a lack of understanding about the dilemmas which can result from dual relationships and how this can impact on the integrity of a psychological service. For instance, consider the professional dilemma that can result from a dual relationship if a teacher, who is being counselled by a school psychologist, reveals in therapy that he or she has an addiction to alcohol and is soon going on school camp. The fact that 21% of school psychologists also agreed with this statement points to a concerning lack of role clarity amongst psychologists themselves, thus supporting the findings of previous research (Jacob-Timm, 1999).

Teachers were more likely than psychologists were to agree with the statements that psychologists should inform the referring teacher about how a student is progressing in counselling, let teachers know about which students are accessing counselling, and make client records available to teachers. Furthermore, both principals and teachers were more supportive of psychologists letting teachers know about students’ attitudes towards teachers, thus supporting the findings of Gibson (1990) in regards to the somewhat complex and difficult issue of confidentiality within a school setting. There is a need for psychologists and school staff alike to be cognisant and supportive of students’ right to confidentiality and that information should only be shared with the consent of the client and/or the client’s parents on a ‘need to know’ basis, with client files only accessed by the psychologist unless statutory or legal obligations prevail (APS, 2000, p. 8).

Finally, teachers were more supportive of the idea that mandatory counselling should be an option for some students and that counselling could be included in disciplinary procedures. This highlights the ethical issue of informed consent and challenges the notion of the ‘voluntary’ nature of a counselling relationship. Perhaps some teachers view counselling as a beneficial means to ‘fix’ certain student issues, such as students who misbehave; however, counselling is as much a therapeutic tool as it is an educational process for some students, especially to those who have never been to counselling before. By including counselling in disciplinary procedures it may be teaching young people that counselling is a punitive measure and may prevent them from seeking counselling in the future.

In summary, the current study highlighted that although there are some similarities in opinions about the school psychologist’s role there are also some significant differences, including some mixed opinions amongst psychologists themselves. These differences have implications for psychologists who are providing an important and highly valued service within schools, but who are also trying to balance the needs of a number of stakeholders whilst working with a client group who often present with diverse and complex issues. Perhaps an important addition to the role of the psychological profession itself is to work together with the educational community to achieve a common understanding of the responsibilities associated with providing school-based psychological services and to educate the public, including
teachers, principals and other employers, about what is and is not appropriate for psychologists who are working in school settings. Further Australian research into the role of school psychologists will assist in this area.

References


