Supervision Experiences and Job Satisfaction of School Psychologists in Victoria

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Abstract

This study set out to examine the current supervision arrangements for school psychologists in Victorian schools. Frequency of participation in professional supervision was explored in relation to type of employment and job satisfaction. The findings revealed that the frequency of participation in supervision activities for Victorian school psychologists in this study was less than adequate, with many psychologists reporting that they were unsatisfied with their supervision arrangements. Although school psychologists reported that they were generally satisfied with the nature of activities that make up their role, psychologists in the Government school sector appeared to be less satisfied when compared to psychologists working in Catholic and Independent schools. Overall, more psychologists working in Catholic schools reported that they participated in supervision than Government and Independent school psychologists. Furthermore, more psychologists working in Catholic schools had their supervision paid for by their school. Implications for school psychology and future research were discussed.

More and more Australian schools are employing psychologists in counselling roles yet Australian research in this area is scarce (Farrell & Care, 2000). Although there are a multitude of American studies (eg. Bramlett, Murphy, Johnson, Wallingsford & Hall, 2002; Roberts & Rust, 1994), these may not always translate into the Australian context, because in America, school psychology is more established and accepted than it is here. Therefore, there is a need to develop an 'indigenous' model of school counselling that adequately reflects the Australian experience of school psychology (Humes, 1990).

Three important Australian studies, all of which come out of Queensland, are those of McMahon and Solas (1996), Bramston and Rice (2000) and McMahon and Patton (2000). First of its kind in Australia, McMahon and Solas investigated Queensland guidance officers' participation in and delivery of supervision and found that, amongst other things, the majority of guidance officers either did not receive supervision at all or if they did, it often occurred irregularly. In another Queensland study, Bramston and Rice showed that guidance officers were often expected to work as 'multi-specialists' due to the complexity of student issues that they were confronted with, with many feeling inadequately trained and/or supervised to deal with the demands of their role. This was supported by McMahon and Patton who interviewed Queensland guidance officers and found that although there was overwhelming support for the importance and practice of supervision, the majority of participants believed that the time devoted to their own clinical supervision was insufficient.

The above findings are concerning in relation to the Australian Psychological Society's (APS) Standards for the Delivery of School Psychological Services (2000) which recommend that probationary psychologists should receive a minimum of one-hour per week of supervision. When compulsory supervision requirements are met for full registration, school psychologists are advised to continue supervision on a regular basis. This recommendation for continued clinical supervision for school psychologists is clearly justified when one considers the degree of responsibility both professionally and legally that psychologists have in undertaking their important roles within schools (Barletta, 1996). In addition, there is some evidence that job satisfaction amongst school psychologists is related to the quality of supervision that they receive (Crutchfield & Borders, 1997).

This study set out to examine the current supervision arrangements for school psychologists in Victorian schools. The frequency of participation in professional supervision was explored in relation to type of employment and job satisfaction. Specifically, satisfaction of psychologists with different types of job roles, employed in different types of schools, and engaging in different levels of supervision were compared. The job roles analysed related to the extent to which psychologists engaged in assessment, counselling, program development and delivery, and consultations with the wider school community.

Method

The sample consisted of 71 psychologists, of whom seven were probationary, from 33 Catholic schools, 30 Government schools and 8 Independent schools. Twelve were male and 59 were female. As there is no list of

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school psychologists working 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. A total of 71 psychologists participated as part of a larger study in which teachers and school principals were also surveyed about the role of school psychologists. This represented a response rate of approximately 70 percent of school psychologists approached. The measures described here only form part of a survey given to psychologists.

Psychologists completed a survey comprising several sections, including:

(a) Demographic variables: gender, age, professional membership and registration, qualifications, number of years experience and type of school.

(b) Supervision variables: Respondents were asked to indicate whether or not they had a supervisor, the type of supervision that they engaged in (i.e. 1:1 or group), who paid for their supervision, frequency of supervision and whether they had read the APS Standards for School Psychological Services.

(c) Role variables: Participation in four types of roles was assessed. These were psychological assessment (4 items, for example 'how often do you engage in the administration of tests'), counselling (4 items, for example 'how often do you counsel students'), program development and delivery (2 items, for example 'how often do you engage in the development of group programs/workshops for students'), and consultation with staff, parents and the wider community (3 items, for example 'how often do you participate in individual student meetings with teachers'). Respondents were asked to indicate on a 4-point scale the degree to which they participated in each of 13 activities, ranging from 0 = never to 3 = often. Ratings for each item were added within the subcategories to produce four role scales (Assessment, Counselling, Programs and Consultation). The Cronbach alphas for each of these scales were 0.80, 0.67, 0.91 and 0.74 respectively.

(d) Job satisfaction: An 18-item list of aspects of the job (for example, variety, contact with other psychologists, support from teachers) was presented to respondents who were asked to rate on a 5-point scale (0= very unsatisfied to 4= very satisfied) their level of satisfaction with each aspect. A total score was calculated by adding item ratings. The Cronbach alpha was 0.85. High scores represented high job satisfaction.

Results

Supervision Experiences of Victorian School Psychologists

Nearly one third of the psychologists in this sample did not receive supervision ($N = 22$). Chi-square analyses revealed that there was a significant difference between type of school and receipt of supervision $\chi^2(2) = 13.82$, $p < .001$. Fifty percent of Government ($N = 15$) and Independent ($N = 4$) psychologists in the current sample did not receive supervision while only 9% of Catholic school psychologists ($N = 3$) did not receive supervision.

Of those who were supervised, 19% participated in group supervision, 46% in individual 1:1 supervision and 35% in both group and 1:1 supervision. Of those that participated in 1:1 supervision, 33% did so irregularly, 19% once a month, 33 % percent once a fortnight, and 15% once a week. Of those that participated in group supervision, 47% did so irregularly, 37% once a month, and 16 % once a fortnight. Psychologists with more years of experience ($M = 9.44$, $SD = 7.11$) were significantly less likely to participate in supervision than psychologists with fewer years of experience ($M = 5.70$, $SD = 4.77$), $t(69)=2.61$, $p < .01$. Furthermore, psychologists who were responsible for a greater number of students in their school or region ($M = 1678.26$, $SD = 1434.62$) were significantly less likely to participate in supervision than psychologists with fewer students in their school or region ($M = 877.89$, $SD = 526.67$), $t(61)=3.25$, $p < .01$.Thirty-nine percent of psychologists who received supervision payed for it themselves. Chi-square analyses revealed that there was a significant difference between the three types of schools and who paid for supervision $\chi^2(3) = 24.6$, $p < .001$. More Catholic school psychologists reported that their school paid for supervision ($N = 27$) than Government ($N = 4$) and Independent ($N = 1$) psychologists.

An analysis of probationary psychologists alone revealed that they all participated in supervision with the majority receiving supervision weekly ($N = 3$) or fortnightly ($N = 3$). Four out of the seven probationary psychologists paid for their own supervision.

More than one-third of psychologists (39%) had not read the APS Standards for the Delivery of School Psychological Services.

Satisfaction with Professional Supervision

Forty-seven percent of school psychologists indicated that they were either very unsatisfied ($N = 18$) or unsatisfied ($N = 15$) with the professional supervision that they received. Twenty-seven percent were satisfied with their supervision ($N = 19$) and eighteen percent were very satisfied ($N = 13$). Only four probationary psychologists were satisfied with their supervision, with one indicating a neutral response and two indicating dissatisfaction. Related to supervision is the level of contact that school psychologists have with other professionals, and there were mixed opinions in this area. A slight majority reported that they were satisfied with

the amount of contact that they have with other psychologists (N = 33), while others reported that they were unsatisfied (N = 30). Fifty-six percent of psychologists indicated that they would prefer more time to engage in supervision sessions (N = 40) and 55% indicated that they would prefer more time to participate in professional support meetings with other school psychologists (N = 39). Only one psychologist indicated that she would prefer less time in supervision or professional support meetings with other school psychologists.

What Do School Psychologists Do?

Table 1 shows the average scores on the role scales as reported by school psychologists from each type of school.

Table 1
Mean scores on role scales by school type

Activity and scale range	Government N = 30	Independent N = 8	Catholic N = 33
Assessment scale (0-12)	8.8	7.0	5.6
Counselling scale (0-12)	8.8	9.8	8.6
Programs scale (0-6)	3.5	3.9	3.7
Consultation scale (0-12)	7.8	7.5	7.2

Psychologists working in Government schools reported participating in significantly more assessment related tasks than psychologists working in Catholic schools (Table 1) $F(2,68)$ = 12.12, p < .001.

Regardless of school type, psychologists who participated and did not participate in supervision were compared. Psychologists who were receiving supervision were less likely to engage in assessment (M = 6.49, SD = 2.94), and consultation (M = 7.20, SD = 1.61), than those who were not being supervised (Assessment: M = 8.40, SD = 2.79; $t(69)$=2.59, p < .01 Consultation: M = 8.14, SD = 1.21; $t(69)$ = 2.43, p < .05).

Job Satisfaction

Table 2 shows the percentage of psychologists who indicated that they satisfied with various aspects of their role for each school type. Most psychologists, regardless of school type, were satisfied with the nature and variety of activities in which they engaged and the support that they received from teachers and the school community. There was a low percentage of psychologists from the three school types who indicated satisfaction with the amount of time they have to do activities and the pay and promotion opportunities. When comparing the average scores of each item for psychologists working in Government, Catholic and Independent schools, there were significant differences, with those employed by Government schools being significantly less satisfied with the security of their files ($\chi^2(8)$ = 15.8, p < .05), technological resources ($\chi^2(8)$ = 20.4, p < .001), psychological resources $\chi^2(8)$ = 17.8, p < .05), budget allocation ($\chi^2(8)$ = 20.4, p < .001), and professional supervision ($\chi^2(8)$ = 37.6, p < .000) than psychologists working in either Independent or Catholic schools.

Overall, psychologists working in Government schools scored significantly lower in the Job Satisfaction Scale (M = 38.67, SD = 10.61) than psychologists working in Catholic schools (M = 45.47, SD = 13.56), with Independent school psychologists rating similar levels of overall job satisfaction to Catholic school psychologists (M = 46.00, SD = 5.24), $F(2,67)$ = 3.0, p < .05.

Table 2
Percentage of psychologists who were satisfied with various aspects of their role related to the type of school that they worked for

Satisfaction Item	Government N = 30	Independent N = 8	Catholic N = 33
Office location in school	53	75	70
Amount of office space	43	75	70
Security of files	60	75	91
Technological resources	37	88	79
Psychological resources	30	88	79
Budget allocation	23	75	30
Professional supervision	10	38	79
Support from school management	63	88	76
Support from teachers	70	88	70
Support from school community	73	63	70
Contact with other psychologists	43	38	52
Frequency professional development	53	50	55
Quality of professional development	63	63	58
Nature of activities in role	87	100	73
Variety of activities	87	88	97
Time to do various activities	20	25	18
Pay and promotion	30	25	18
General satisfaction	83	88	79

Discussion

The current Victorian study supports the previous Queensland findings (McMahon & Solas, 1996; Bramston & Rice, 2000; McMahon & Patton, 2000) in regards to school psychologists' experiences of and satisfaction with their supervision arrangements. Within the current sample, nearly one-third did not receive supervision, nearly half were unsatisfied with either their supervision arrangements or degree of contact with other school psychologists and more than half wanted more time to participate in supervision. This suggests that many are feeling professionally isolated and unsupported in their roles. The following quotes come from school psychologists in the present study and illustrate the importance of supervision to allay feelings of stress and isolation that can come from taking on too much without support:

"...very isolated in my role. Especially being the sole counsellor for 600 students (on each campus), 200 staff, three campuses and being a probationary psychologist";

"too great a workload – high demand and high expectations...under-resourced, lack of appreciation";

"lack of supervision and professional management, lack of career structure, lack of resources..."; and

"no career structure, no professional development budget...too many schools to travel to (over 500kms per week), too little contact with other psychologists".

Interestingly, psychologists who were responsible for a greater number of students participated in less supervision, which may mean that they do not have enough time to participate in supervision. Another factor that was associated with less supervision was a greater number of years practicing as a school psychologist. The APS clearly promotes regular supervision for school psychologists due to the complex nature of the role, regardless of a school psychologist's years of experience. Even highly experienced psychologists need support and opportunities for both new learning and for debriefing. Furthermore, many psychologists were unaware of the existence of the APS Standards for the Delivery of School Psychological Services pointing to a lack of understanding of expectations for school psychological practice within the profession itself.

In regards to school type, the current study found that although Government school psychologists participated in significantly more psychological assessment tasks as part of their role than Catholic school psychologists, the job roles for all psychologists regardless of school type were relatively similar. However, Catholic schools were doing much better in supporting their school psychologists, both in acknowledging the importance of supervision and in paying for it. Psychologists in Catholic and Independent schools were also more satisfied with their work environment than psychologists in Government schools. Qualitative data from principals of schools who have employed psychologists, regarding their perceptions of the importance of having a psychologist on staff, will be analysed as a further addition to this study. This may shed light on the reasons why psychologists employed in Catholic schools perceive themselves to be more valued and why Catholic and Independent school psychologists perceive that they have better working conditions.

In conclusion, the results from this study highlight an area of psychological practice that is not receiving adequate professional support or recognition of the complex nature of this role. Further analyses of the data collected in this study will enable an exploration of relationships between models of service delivery, job satisfaction, supervision and burnout. Results from these additional analyses will be presented in further reports. It is hoped that through more research into the professional issues associated with the role of Australian school psychologists, a greater understanding of the role will be achieved which will assist in timely developments in this important area of psychological practice.

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