CHAPTER 1

Introduction to the Field of School Psychology

It is fitting for the first chapter of this introductory volume about school psychology to provide a general exploration of this exciting field. If you are investigating this field or are new to it, you probably have some basic questions, and this chapter is an attempt to answer some of them and to provide a useful orientation to this book. The chapter begins with a discussion of the various definitions of school psychology and how these definitions inform and shape the field. General characteristics of school psychologists are described, including such aspects as the number and location of individuals who work in the field, demographic characteristics of school psychologists, professional organizations, and level of training. To help provide a more direct introduction to the field, we present four composite vignettes of individuals who work in school psychology. These vignettes show the diversity, strength, creativity, and challenges within the profession. Some aspects of entry into the field are described, including graduate training and credentialing. School psychology is differentiated from some of the more closely related fields in psychology and education. Finally, we include a guide to using this book and an overview of some of the “big ideas” on which the book was developed.

Defining School Psychology

At the beginning of a book introducing readers to the field of school psychology, it is reasonable to consider the questions “What is school psychology?” and “What is a school psychologist?” Individuals who have worked in this field for several years might assume that the meaning and definition of school psychology are self-evident. However, a closer look at the development of the field, the evolution of a professional identity, and some of the controversies regarding issues that to outsiders appear to be straightforward show us that in order to define school psychology we must examine it closely and consider the importance of “what’s in a definition.”
Previous Definitions

It is interesting to look through the literature from a few decades ago to see how the defining characteristics of school psychology have evolved over time. In their 1961 book *The School Psychologist*, White and Harris stated, “In our view school psychology is that branch of psychology which concerns itself with the personality of the pupil in interaction with the educational process,” and argued that the field “encompasses not only the learning process, as part of education, but also the personality of the learner as a member of school society, as a member of a family unit, and as a member of the community” (p. 1). In her landmark book *The Psychologist in the Schools*, the original treatise on problem solving as the professional aspiration of school psychologists, Susan Gray (1963) posited that school psychologists had two primary roles: one as *data-oriented problem solvers* in schools and the other as *transmitters of psychological knowledge and skills*. Bardon and Bennett, in their book *School Psychology* (1974), wrote, “The specialty in psychology concerned with how schooling affects children in general and with the pupil in interaction with a specific school is called school psychology. The specialty includes knowledge about research and theory dealing with what happens between children and others when they are together in schools; more than that, school psychology deals with how school for a child in Jackson Junior High is different than school for a child in Wilson Junior High” (p. x).

Current Definitions

In contrast to these notable statements from the 1960s and 1970s, which tended to define the field by focusing on what school psychologists do or should do rather than on what the specialty is, the most current definitions of school psychology tend to be more direct in defining the essential characteristics of school psychology. In the About School Psychology section of the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) website, the answer to “What is a school psychologist?” is provided:

School psychologists help children and youth succeed academically, socially, behaviorally, and emotionally. They collaborate with educators, parents, and other professionals to create safe, healthy, and supportive learning environments that strengthen connections between home, school, and the community for all students.

School psychologists are highly trained in both psychology and education, completing a minimum of a specialist-level degree program (at least 60 graduate semester hours) that includes a year-long supervised internship. This training emphasizes preparation in mental health and educational interventions, child development, learning, behavior, motivation, curriculum and instruction, assessment, consultation, collaboration, school law, and systems. School psychologists must be certified and/or licensed by the state in which they work. They also may be nationally certified by the National School Psychology Certification Board (NSPCB). The National Association of School Psychologists sets ethical and training standards for practice and service delivery. (NASP, 2010d, paragraphs 1 and 2)

Another definition or description of school psychology is provided by the Division of School Psychology (Division 16) of the American Psychological Association (APA). In the Goals & Objectives section of their website, the archival description of the specialty of school psychology reads:

School Psychology is a general practice and health service provider specialty of professional psychology that is concerned with the science and practice of psychology with
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children, youth, families; learners of all ages; and the schooling process. The basic education and training of school psychologists prepares them to provide a range of psychological assessment, intervention, prevention, health promotion, and program development and evaluation services with a special focus on the developmental processes of children and youth within the context of schools, families, and other systems.

School psychologists are prepared to intervene at the individual and system level, and develop, implement, and evaluate preventive programs. In these efforts, they conduct ecologically valid assessments and intervene to promote positive learning environments within which children and youth from diverse backgrounds have equal access to effective educational and psychological services to promote healthy development. (APA Division of School Psychology, 2010, paragraphs 1 and 2)

Because these definitions are from the two most influential entities representing the field of school psychology in the United States, they have particular importance. What do these definitions have in common? They indicate that school psychology is a profession concerned with the development, mental health, and education of children and youth. They indicate that school psychologists provide services to children, youth, and their families within the context of educational settings but are not limited to those settings. They indicate that school psychologists are concerned with supporting children, youth, their families, and other professionals who work with them in educational and other settings. Importantly, these definitions tell us that school psychology is part of the broader field of psychology and that it also is connected to the field of education and to other professional fields as well. Formulating definitions of school psychology and subsequent efforts to refine these definitions have been exceedingly difficult at times. These issues are not trivial. Professional identity and activities are shaped in great measure by how a specialty is defined. The short answer to “What's in a definition?” is “more than you might think.”

Characteristics of School Psychologists

Definitions aside, another way to obtain a snapshot of the field of school psychology is to look at the characteristics of school psychologists. Like a good working definition of the field, it is surprisingly complex to provide a simple description of those who call themselves school psychologists. Because the practice of school psychology is governed by various credentialing bodies within the individual states and provinces, and because membership in professional organizations is voluntary, there is no unitary list or registry of school psychologists. This section provides some basic data regarding school psychologists, particularly the number of individuals who are estimated to work in the field, and some of their basic demographic characteristics, including gender and ethnicity. In Chapter 5, we provide more details regarding the characteristics of school psychologists, specifically in the context of employment.

Perhaps the most direct way to make inferences regarding basic characteristics of school psychologists is to look at available data from national organizations. However, even this method is fraught with challenges because the actual percentage of school psychologists who join professional organizations is unknown and many school psychologists (like ourselves) belong to two or more professional organizations that represent the field.

Data provided to the authors by the NASP’s Membership Department indicated that as of March 18, 2010, there were 26,085 members of the association. The majority of
these NASP members resided in the United States, but 300 lived in Canada and 133 were from other nations. On the basis of our own experiences and conversations with school psychologists, we estimate that 60 to 65% of school psychologists in the United States are members of NASP, and the figure for school psychologists in Canada is somewhat less. If we are correct, then a reasonable estimate of the number of school psychologists in the two nations ranges from 39,000 to 43,000. Of course, this number is nothing more than an educated guess. Not only do we not know the actual percentage of school psychologists who belong to NASP, but we must also recognize that there are some individuals who are NASP members who are not specifically trained as school psychologists or who are working in related fields. That said, our estimate is very consistent with data from a Charvat (2005) survey of state departments of education educational licensing agencies, which indicated there were nearly 38,000 certified or licensed school psychologists in the United States alone. This estimate is also in line with other recent estimates taking into account U.S. school psychologists only. For example, Fagan (2008) noted that a “reasonable figure” for school psychologists within the United States is in the 30,000–35,000 range, and Charvat (2008) estimated that there were approximately 35,400 credentialed school psychologists in the United States in 2008, with 28,500 of these individuals being practicing school psychologists.

Using APA Division 16 data is less informative in terms of estimating the number of school psychologists. On March 18, 2010, we were informed by the division’s vice president of membership that at the end of 2009 there were approximately 2,200 members of Division 16. This figure is obviously not a proxy figure in any respect for the total number of school psychologists in the United States, because it is widely understood that far fewer school psychologists join APA than NASP, and it is unknown how many individuals are members of both organizations. One reason that APA Division 16 has far fewer members than NASP is that a doctoral degree is required for full APA membership, but a large majority of practicing school psychologists do not have doctoral degrees.

Internationally, the number of school psychologists is also something of a puzzle, and it is even more difficult to ascertain than the number within the United States. Several years ago, Oakland and Cunningham (1992) conducted an international survey and estimated the number of individuals globally in the field of school psychology to be 87,000. More recently, Jimerson, Stewart, Skokut, Cardenas, and Malone (2009) estimated that there were 76,122 school psychologists in 48 countries, including 32,300 in the United States and 3,500 in Canada. After the United States, Turkey had the next largest estimated number of school psychologists (11,327), followed by Spain (3,600), and then both Canada and Japan (3,500 each). Jimerson et al. noted that estimates for school psychologists for the three countries with the largest number of children (India, China, and Indonesia) could not be obtained, and in Indonesia there was no evidence of school psychology practice. It does seem likely that the 76,122 figure somewhat underestimates the number of school psychologists internationally and that Oakland’s (2007) estimate of 100,000 may be a better reflection of the number of school psychologists worldwide.

Although we are using the term school psychologists very generally to make these worldwide comparisons, it is worth noting that the role of school psychologists outside of the United States and Canada (who are also referred to in some nations as “educational psychologists”) may differ considerably from the role of school psychologists in the United States and Canada. Particularly in the United States, the role of the school psychologist has been strongly linked to public law for education of students with disabilities. In most other nations, this is not the case. That being said, many of the basic core functions of
school psychologists in terms of consultation, intervention, and assessment are likely similar across many countries (Oakland, 2007; Oakland & Jimerson, 2008). (More information on the practice of school psychology worldwide is available at the International School Psychology Association website: www.ispaweb.org.)

With respect to gender of school psychologists, there is considerable evidence that the field has become a female-dominated profession in the past two or three decades, and the percentage of women in the field continues to increase slightly. The most recent membership survey data available from NASP (from 2004 to 2005) indicated that approximately 74% of NASP members are women, reflecting increases from the November 1999 estimate of 72% reported by Fagan and Wise (2000) and from their 1994 estimate of 67%. In commenting on the fairly recent shift in gender composition of school psychologists since about the 1970s, Reschly (2000) stated that the increased proportion of women in the field during this time period constituted “the clearest changes in school psychology during the past two decades” (p. 508).

Future trends regarding the characteristics of school psychologists are difficult to predict. Because the field does not exist in isolation, future trends will inevitably be shaped by external forces, such as economic conditions, the development of public education, new federal laws and mandates, advocacy by national and state organizations, and national and worldwide social trends. However, it appears that in the immediate future several trends are very likely. The field of school psychology should continue to grow at least modestly, and school psychologists will continue to enjoy adequate to good employment prospects in most regions, even during times of economic downturn. Public school settings will almost certainly continue to be the primary place of employment for school psychologists, although expansion into nontraditional settings will continue. The large majority of school psychology practitioners will hold master’s or specialist degrees as their highest academic degrees, although the percentage of school psychologists with doctoral degrees may increase slightly, as it has in recent years. For the foreseeable future, the large majority of school psychologists will be women, and it is likely that the percentage of women in the field may even continue to increase.

It is important to recognize that the clear evidence of professional gender imbalance is not limited to school psychology alone, but seems to be evident in most areas of specialization within graduate training programs in psychology, at the doctoral, master’s, and specialist levels. For example, a 2007 APA survey (APA, 2007a) of recent doctoral recipients in the field of psychology found that 76% of all respondents were women, which reflected an increase of 7 percentage points over 10 years and 24 percentage points in 21 years since previous surveys had been completed. Fagan (2008) asserted that “the proportion of women in school psychology may rise to as high as 80%” (p. 2070). Although Fagan stated that “effects of the increasing female representation have not been studied” (p. 2074), he did note that the increase in women in the psychology field has helped the profession maintain its ability to meet the needs of its clientele and has likely led to the increase in certain research/service areas (e.g., women’s issues, bullying).

Being There: Four Stories from the Field

Although the general professional definitions and descriptions of school psychology are extremely important and have broad impact on how the field is perceived both internally and externally, they give us only a small glimpse of what school psychologists do in their day-to-day work. Definitions cannot capture the diversity of roles that school
psychologists fill, nor can they adequately convey how each practicing school psychologist is in a unique situation and setting and has a unique perspective on the field. In addition, general definitions cannot possibly convey the wealth of experience, passion, and personal commitment that individual school psychologists bring to their work. Perhaps a better way to illustrate what school psychology looks like at the point of actual practice is to present a glimpse into the professional lives of several school psychologists. The following four composite vignettes contain elements of the professional lives of several school psychologists whom we know and have spoken to extensively about their work. Although these vignettes are composite scenarios of more than one person and do not contain identifying information, all are based on actual persons.

**Alexa: “A Tough but Rewarding Field”**

Alexa is currently in her second year working as a school psychologist in a large county school district in the southwestern United States, comprising a large urban area, its immediate suburbs, and an outlying rural region that is sparsely populated. Alexa has responsibility for three schools (two elementary schools and a middle school), and she also provides training and consultation across the district to help teachers adapt to the system’s new response-to-intervention model (RTI) for identifying and supporting students who have learning problems. Alexa arrived here after completing her doctoral program and internship from a nationally recognized training program. Prior to her doctoral studies, she received a bachelor’s degree in psychology in her home state in the Midwest, and then earned a specialist degree in school psychology at an institution in the Mountain West region. Alexa did not fall into the field happenstance or after a late discovery: She has been focused on her goal of a career in school psychology since her senior year in high school.

Alexa’s days are full. Her three schools all have pressing needs and problems. Not only are there the usual array of student concerns, but the area has been hit hard by the severe economic recession that began in 2008, and a large military base nearby means that many of the children at her schools have a parent who is deployed overseas in Iraq, Afghanistan, or elsewhere. The population in her school district has historically been transient, which creates a revolving door of incoming and outgoing students with special needs. In addition, the district has a significant and growing population of English language learners, most of whom speak Spanish at home. As a result of these factors, many of the students in her schools have notable stressors in their lives, and it manifests in a variety of academic, behavioral, and social–emotional problems. In addition, the district’s adoption of an RTI model the year she arrived has created a strong need for Alexa to consult and train with specialists and teachers. Not only is assisting with RTI implementation a part of her job description, but RTI was an integral component of her doctoral training program, and Alexa carved out a strong area of interest and specialization in RTI during her training.

Although her initial goal in accepting her current position was to work 2 to 3 years and then pursue an academic position at a research institution with a doctoral program, Alexa has been rethinking that idea. “I’m finding the district’s move to an RTI model to be very rewarding and exciting, and I like working as a practitioner more than I thought I would. I also really enjoy the relationships and friendships I have formed with my colleagues. And I’m probably making more money now than I would if I moved to a university trainer position. I’m getting a good start to paying off my student loans and I finally was able to buy a decent car!”
But Alexa’s enthusiasm for her professional role is tempered by the realities of some of its challenges. “The move to RTI happened more quickly than most of the staff expected, and I don’t think it was carefully enough planned and orchestrated in the beginning,” she says. As a result, she has encountered significant resistance to the idea from staff at two of her three schools. “In my specialist program internship, I mostly gave standardized cognitive assessments, participated in team meetings, and did some consultation with parents and teachers. I liked it, but I often questioned how it was helping kids. What I am doing now is so much more satisfying and useful than what I was doing then. But it is not easy, and the kinds of changes we need to put in place are moving slowly.”

Despite those sometimes hard realities and challenges in her professional role, Alexa is convinced she made a good choice by going into school psychology: “This is important work. When we get it right, I can see the results in the lives of our students and their families, not to mention our teachers. And what I really like about it is being able to follow through with kids over time, to see them progress when we are able to put together the right combination of programming for them. This field can be tough, but it’s so rewarding.”

Roger: “Like Putting Water on a Dying Plant”

Unlike Alexa, Roger got a later start to his career in school psychology. Currently in his late 30s, Roger is in his seventh year of a second career as a school psychologist. A native of California, he graduated with honors from a small liberal arts college in the Pacific Northwest and then went through a master’s program in business administration at a large, prestigious university in California. “I wanted to move up the corporate ladder in management and sales, and I wanted to make lots of money. At least that’s what I thought and what my family seemed to expect.” After receiving his MBA, he joined a large company and began the climb upward in the sales division. He stayed with the company 5 years, earning two promotions and a very healthy salary. But after about 3 years he began questioning his pursuit and found it increasingly a poor match for his idealism and sense of social justice. He also became interested in exploring other options. “I was becoming more and more frustrated, and although it was a good job and there was nothing wrong with that industry, I wanted to do something that I felt was making more of a difference in people’s lives day to day.” His introduction to school psychology came in the unlikeliest of places. “I would work out at a gym three or four nights a week, and got to know a group of five or six other regulars there. One of them was a school psychologist, and I found myself wanting to ask her lots of questions about her work, then I started researching the field.” He was soon convinced that this was a good direction for him, and the next year he applied for and received admission into a specialist-level master’s program in his home state. “I loved my school psychology training—It was hard, but so much different and more satisfying to me than my MBA program.”

Roger completed his internship with a school district in the San Francisco Bay area, accepted a regular position there, and has been there ever since. The district is large, mostly urban, and very diverse. About 40% of the students are Asian and about 25% are Latino; white and African American students each constitute about 10% of the district’s population. There are also many immigrants from the Middle East and quite a few students for whom English is not their first language. Roger feels that his own Asian ethnicity helps him with initial cultural acceptance issues when dealing with Asian students and families, but he does not see it as an advantage with students from other groups,
stating that after the initial work has started “what really matters is connecting with people and coming up with plans that can help students and make a noticeable difference in their education.” He is assigned to an alternative middle school/high school program for at-risk students, including many students with disabilities, and also provides services to an elementary school one day a week. Roger likes the elementary school and says “it gives me a sense of perspective,” but his clear passion is the alternative middle-secondary program: “These kids come to our school basically having failed or been thrown out or seen as the bad kid, but for most of them, they come here and it’s like a new start. We get the right things into place for them and it’s like putting water on a dying plant. I love it.” The alternative school is relatively small, and one of Roger’s assignments is to serve as the special services coordinator and assistant principal. He oversees the coordination of referrals for special education eligibility and mental health services. He also works individually with students and co-leads social and emotional learning classes with three to four teachers per week. “It’s incredible how quickly some of these kids make gains. We still have lots of challenges, but we see on a weekly basis major positive changes happening in their lives.”

In the past 4 years, Roger has sought out additional training in positive behavior support and has helped to introduce it schoolwide. “It’s cut down our office discipline referrals by 45% since we started, and now that it’s part of the routine, it really doesn’t take that much time.” His expertise in applied behavior analysis and functional assessment from graduate school provide a natural springboard for him to use in developing plans for the students who continue to act out even with positive behavior support in place, and he is integrally involved in writing behavioral goals and objectives for students who are on individualized education plans (IEPs).

Roger clearly loves his work and does not regret his decision to leave the corporate world, but he wishes there were greater resources available: “We need a full-time mental health specialist, and we could use two more teachers. And the supplies and materials and facilities are really pathetic. The corporate world wouldn’t put up with these conditions for a minute.” Despite the challenges, Roger would absolutely recommend a career in school psychology. “For someone who is not afraid to work hard and be flexible, it’s a great way to make a definitive impact for good. If you have the right training and tools, you can measure what you are doing, and sometimes it amazes me how well we are able to get things turned around.”

**Dana: “A Great Time to Be a School Psychologist”**

Dana works as a school psychologist in a large suburban school district in the midwestern United States, adjacent to one of the nation’s largest cities. She serves one middle school (1,600 students) and one large elementary school (900 students). In addition, she serves on the district’s crisis intervention response team and on a steering committee charged with guiding the district’s practices and policies for at-risk and underserved students. In her mid-40s, Dana is a veteran school psychologist with 16 years of professional experience, including 5 years with a large urban school district in another state immediately after completion of her EdS degree.

Dana has worked in the field long enough to have seen some significant changes. Her graduate training emphasized individual cognitive and academic assessment as well as individual and small-group counseling. For her first few years in the field, much of her time was devoted to conducting individual psychoeducational assessments and participating in decision-making processes to determine which students would receive special
education services because of a specific learning disability, guided by the traditional ability–achievement discrepancy model. She also carried a small caseload of students from her schools’ programs for youth with emotional disturbances who required individual counseling.

Much has changed for Dana in recent years. “As soon as the 2004 Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act was in place, we were positioned to begin moving to an RTI model for assessing students with learning problems, because some of our psychologists and our special education director had been moving in this direction. Now I give far fewer individual intelligence and achievement tests, and I spend more time helping teachers and the student support teams gather data and develop and monitor interventions. At first it was a hard transition, because I didn’t have much training in those kind of tasks, but I got up to speed fairly soon. I really find that this is a better use of my skills—we’re helping students earlier, and we spend much less time doing assessment just for the purpose of eligibility decisions.”

Another major shift for Dana has been in how she supports students who have behavioral and emotional problems. She has always had a strong interest in this area, and has specifically stayed in her current assignment for so long because both of her schools have strong programs for supporting students who are eligible for special services under the behaviorally disabled (BD) category (her state’s name for the federal “emotionally disturbed” [ED] category). Initially, most of her intervention work with BD/ED students was in individual counseling and small-group social skills training interventions. “These were good to an extent, but we were only serving a very small number of kids, out of necessity. But we moved to schoolwide positive behavior support about 10 years ago, and for the past 4 years both of my schools have been emphasizing social and emotional learning schoolwide and classwide, not just in small groups. We’re now seeing much better results and I’m helping a lot more kids as a result.” With regard to her interest in the BD/ED area, Dana states: “I’m not only involved in assessment, service eligibility, and providing services to students with BD, but I’m actively involved in helping the district focus on ethnic overrepresentation issues in the BD program. As an African American myself, I’ve been really aware and frustrated that our BD programs are identifying African American kids—particularly boys—at a rate so much higher than their presence in the school system in general. Some of these identifications are appropriate, but way too many have been questionable, and I tend to advocate very actively for not only making data-based decisions, but looking at cultural issues too. We’ve made some progress here, but have a long way to go.”

Dana admits her work can be stressful and has had 1 or 2 years that were particularly challenging (she played a key role in responding to the aftermath of a school shooting a few years ago). Overall, however, she finds her profession and career to be very satisfying and rewarding. “Now is a really great time to be a school psychologist. Even with all the economic and budget and social issues we are facing, we have some really exciting possibilities. I wish the field was at the point it is now when I went through grad school and started my first job—I could have helped so many more kids.”

**Mariana: “One of the Most Rewarding Things I Can Imagine”**

Mariana is a school psychology program faculty member at a regional state college in a small eastern U.S college town, a position she has held for 7 years. She was awarded tenure and promotion to the rank of associate professor 1 year ago. She mostly teaches graduate-level classes in her department’s certificate of advanced graduate study (specialist-level)
school psychology program, but also teaches two undergraduate courses in psychology each year, and she supervises her advisees’ graduate thesis research. Prior to the start of her career as a university educator and school psychology trainer, Mariana completed her predoctoral internship and 1 additional year of work as a school psychologist in an urban school district in the northeastern United States. Her doctoral training was at a prominent program that had a strong orientation toward behavioral theory and school psychologists as problem solvers.

Mariana enjoyed her 2 years working as a full-time practitioner but was focused on the goal of becoming a faculty member from the start: “I’ve always loved the university setting, and the opportunity to be around new ideas and innovations that come with it. At first, I thought I wanted to focus a lot on research and work as a faculty member in a PhD program, but I found that I really loved the teaching and mentoring of students, and was less enthusiastic about teaching less but being expected to publish a lot more.” Her greatest surprise in making the transition from practitioner to trainer was how much work was involved. “I knew that my mentor and the other faculty from grad school worked hard, but I really had no idea. The first 2 years I was constantly struggling just to be prepared for my classes and meetings the next day, and got almost no scholarship done. There are a lot of complex demands, and the job doesn’t have as clear a starting and stopping point every day as I had in my work as a practitioner.” After that initial transition, Mariana found her footing, improved her time management, and began to carve out an area of scholarship related to multicultural educational issues as well as mental health service delivery in schools. “These are really important areas, and there is so much to be done.” Mariana loves working in her present role, and rates her mentorship of students as the single most satisfying part of the job. “To see these students progress from knowing very little about the field to becoming highly effective and respected school psychologists is one of the most rewarding things I can imagine. My work is impacting so many students indirectly, through the work of the students I trained. I honestly have no interest in doing anything else at this point in my career.”

**Tying It Together**

The variety, personal investment, challenges, and impact reflected in the professional lives of the four composite school psychologists featured in these vignettes could easily be duplicated by conducting similar interviews with any four randomly selected school psychologists. It is also noteworthy that professional lives evolve over time. Those school psychologists profiled in this section have seen their career paths develop and change, sometimes in ways they never anticipated. The same could be said for any school psychologist who is committed to making an impact in the field. Although tied together by a collective professional identity and associations, every school psychologist has a unique story, makes unique contributions, and follows a unique path. And yet there is a commonality among them that ties them together and reflects the shared vision and unique identity that defines school psychology. We believe that this vision and identity stem from a focus on affecting the academic, behavioral, and social–emotional problems of children and youth in educational settings through the effective use of psychological principles and procedures and through the medium of “school psychology.” This vision is also clearly tied to the personal commitment and idealism of those individuals who choose to join the field of school psychology. Although school psychologists have differing backgrounds, job descriptions, expectations, and professional ambitions, as a group they share a collective desire to positively influence the lives of children, adolescents, and
their families. It is the incredible power of this collective individual idealism that fuels the impact and potential of the field.

**How Does One Become a School Psychologist?**

Having established a definition of school psychology and some of the characteristics of school psychologists, the next question that might be asked by someone exploring the field is “How does one become a school psychologist?” This question is dealt with in extensive detail in Chapter 4, which covers training and credentialing issues. To help us establish our basic introduction to school psychology, a few of the more elemental details regarding the paths that must be traveled to become a school psychologist are covered in this section.

To become a school psychologist, one must have completed a graduate-level program in school psychology and have received a credential (i.e., a certificate or license) to practice in the field. The specialist-degree level of training has become the minimum standard of preparation for entering the field. This level of training typically (but not always) requires approximately 2 years of full-time graduate study beyond the bachelor’s degree and includes a field experience component (practicum and internship). NASP has advocated for a specialist standard of preparation requiring a minimum of 60 semester credits of graduate study and including a full-time academic-year internship. Because these standards are integrated into NASP’s Nationally Certified School Psychologist credential (the NCSP, which is promoted and offered by NASP’s National School Psychology Certification Board), the 60-credit/1,200-internship-hour specialist level of training has become the *de facto* standard in the field. It is worth noting that many graduate programs do not offer a specialist degree by that name but provide an equivalent level of training through a master’s degree (MS, MA, or MEd) or certificate of advanced graduate study program.

Although the efforts of NASP to advocate for minimum training at the 60/1,200 specialist level have created a general standard, it is important to recognize that neither NASP nor any other professional organization actually credentials school psychologists for work in the field. There is no national-level licensing body that provides clearance to work as a school psychologist anywhere. Rather, credentialing of school psychologists is the responsibility of individual states and provinces. For school psychologists to work in public school settings, they must usually obtain a credential, which may be called a certificate or a license, from the educational licensing agency of the particular state or province where they intend to work. Usually, these agencies are part of the state or provincial department of education. Each state sets its own standards for entry into the field in that state, and some states have lower entry-level requirements than others. However, the NASP-advocated specialist level of training is almost always sufficient for credentialing in any state or province.

As if the differentiation between NASP professional standards and various state education department standards was not confusing enough, newcomers to the field are frequently surprised to find that there is another level of credentialing that is usually necessary to practice as a school psychologist outside of school settings. To become licensed as a psychologist to practice independently or to practice in settings such as hospitals, clinics, and community mental health agencies with the use of the title “psychologist,” one must hold a doctoral degree in psychology (school psychology, counseling psychology, or clinical psychology) and be licensed by the professional psychology licensing board.
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of a particular state or province. The doctoral level of professional psychology training, which usually requires 1 year of supervised predoctoral internship and 1 year of supervised postdoctoral residency (although, as noted in Chapters 4 and 5, several states no longer require supervised postdoctoral hours) as well as passing written and oral competency examinations that are required by many states, is what is advocated by APA and its various state affiliates. However, the APA position, as well as most state psychology licensing laws, includes provisions for the use of the title “school psychologist” (as opposed to “psychologist” or “licensed professional psychologist”) with less than the doctoral level of training and without a psychology license, providing that the work is limited to school settings and is conducted under the banner of a school psychology credential from a state department of education.

There are currently close to 250 institutions of higher education in the United States and Canada that provide graduate training in school psychology at some level, and more than 300 different training programs exist at these institutions (Miller, 2008). Although the specialist level of graduate training has become the standard and typical mode of entry into the field for most school psychologists, a substantial percentage of school psychologists have earned doctoral degrees. Recent estimates of the percentage of school psychologists who have doctoral degrees have been around 32% for all school psychologists, although the percentage is lower (24.4%) for practitioners (Curtis, Lopez, et al., 2008). For about the past 30 years, the trend has been in the direction of steady but small increases in the proportion of school psychologists with doctoral degrees.

Individuals who enroll in school psychology graduate training programs have a variety of undergraduate backgrounds, the most common of which are psychology and education. A generation ago, it was not uncommon for individuals entering the field of school psychology to have had backgrounds in education, perhaps some experience as teachers, and in many cases to be midcareer (i.e., in their 30s or 40s), but these background characteristics appear to be less common now. We are not aware of any studies or data that have tracked the age, undergraduate preparation, and background of students entering school psychology programs over the years, but it has been our experience that the trend has been toward students entering graduate school in their early to mid-20s, more often than not with an undergraduate degree in psychology and often with limited volunteer or professional experience in psychology or education. We anticipate that as education and mental health fields become increasingly professionalized and that as higher levels of educational attainment become more common, these trends in school psychology training will continue and become even more noticeable.

Differentiating School Psychology from Related Professions

In addition to understanding what school psychology is all about and how one becomes a school psychologist, prospective graduate students who are beginning to explore the possibility of a career in this field must also decide whether to pursue school psychology or some closely related field. As school psychology faculty members, we visit with prospective graduate students on an ongoing basis. Although many prospective school psychologists have a very clear idea what being a school psychologist involves and how school psychology differs from some of its sister fields, many do not. Most trainers have likely sat through meetings with prospective students who assumed that they were considering entering a school counseling training program, for example. Because there are important differences not only in the entry-level requirements but also in the typical role
and function of various fields, it is very important for prospective graduate students to get a clear picture of how school psychology is both similar to and different from its sister fields in psychology and education.

**Related Fields in Psychology**

At the doctoral level of training, there are other areas of professional psychology that overlap considerably with school psychology and that may prepare professional psychologists to work with children, adolescents, and their families. Historically, school psychology has been included with two other fields, *clinical psychology* and *counseling psychology*, as one of the three applied areas of professional psychology. Completing a doctoral program in any one of these three fields will, in part, prepare one to become a board-licensed professional psychologist and to work in a variety of clinic, private practice, community, and medical settings. Clinical and counseling psychology programs have not traditionally focused on schools and educational issues as school psychology has, and they do not typically prepare students to work primarily in school settings. However, many clinical and counseling psychology programs focus on working with children, adolescents, and their families and provide a path toward a predoctoral internship and postdoctoral residency year in a child-focused setting, providing assessment, intervention, and consultation services. Historically, there have been some important differences between clinical and counseling psychology, with the former field focusing more on abnormal behavior and psychopathology and the latter on normal developmental and adjustment issues of life. However, these distinctions have become increasingly blurred in recent years, and today it is not uncommon to find clinical psychologists working in college counseling centers and counseling psychologists working in hospitals and community mental health clinics.

Within clinical, counseling, and school psychology, some subspecialties focusing on children, youth, and their families have emerged in recent years, and these subspecialties are usually not specific to one field of psychology. For example, just as APA has a division devoted to school psychology (Division 16), it has separate divisions devoted to child, family, and youth services (Division 37), clinical child and adolescent psychology (Division 53), and pediatric psychology (Division 54). Child and adolescent neuropsychology has also emerged as a strong subspecialty within the division of neuropsychology (Division 40). These specialty areas include doctoral-level psychologists who are graduates of school, clinical, or counseling psychology programs, who have received specific specialty training, and who have developed particular expertise and interests in the respective specialty area.

With these related psychology fields and specialty areas, school psychology shares a focus on children, youth, and their families. What makes school psychology unique among these related areas within psychology is the specific focus on schools as practice settings and on educational and learning issues as primary concerns. Although some overlap exists among these areas, they all have a unique identity.

**Related Fields in Education**

Because school psychology is rooted in education as well as psychology, there are professions specific to education with which we share common concerns and professional overlap. *School counseling* is perhaps the best known of these related educational professions. This field grew out of the mental hygiene and child guidance movements of the
early 20th century, and its focus has evolved from vocational guidance and college placement to the promotion of a comprehensive model of student development, adjustment, and growth at all grade levels. The American School Counselor Association has been in existence since 1952 and currently has more than 27,000 members internationally. Many more school counselors than school psychologists are employed in schools. Within the United States, the national average ratio of school counselors to students is slightly less than 1:500 (American School Counselor Association, 2010), whereas the national average for school psychologists is estimated at about 1:1,500 (Fagan & Wise, 2007). In terms of differences in training and job focus between the two fields, school psychologists tend to receive more training in individual assessment methods and intervention techniques than do school counselors and have historically focused more on students with disabilities. School counselors are more likely to be assigned to work at a single school, whereas school psychologists are often itinerant and may have responsibility for two to four schools or may work on a districtwide basis. Much of this difference in site-based versus itinerant service models is related to the large differences in professional to student ratios, which are much smaller for school counselors.

In addition to school psychologists and school counselors, school social workers are also employed in public and private schools. This profession is part of the larger field of social work, and it began in the early 1900s in the large urban areas of the northeast United States out of a concern for underprivileged youth and their families. The first school social workers often were part of psychological clinics in the schools and had the title of “visiting teachers.” Their role was often focused on home visits and advocacy for children and their families who were living in tenements in industrial areas. Today, school social workers maintain some of the same historical emphasis on advocacy and working with at-risk students, but they tend to work on multidisciplinary teams with psychologists, counselors, teachers, and nurses and to focus on a broad array of mental health and social–behavioral adjustment issues. It is difficult to estimate the number of school social workers nationwide. It is widely understood that there are far fewer school social workers than school psychologists, although an exact professional-to-student ratio is not known.

Although school counseling and school social work are the two best known professions within education that are closely related to school psychology, there are other professional roles in schools that have much in common with our field. These other roles are not necessarily defined as separate professions but have evolved as specialty positions in education in many school systems. Special education consultants, service coordinators, behavioral specialists, or consulting teachers are often employed in larger school districts and have the responsibility of working with teachers, other educators, and parents in developing appropriate educational programs for students, especially those who are at risk for negative outcomes or who are otherwise having difficulty in school. Such consultant or coordinator positions are often filled from the ranks of experienced and talented teachers, but sometimes they are filled by individuals with school psychology backgrounds. These roles usually involve extensive indirect intervention through consultation, and they may have a problem-solving or training focus as well. In addition, some schools hire teachers or counselors to serve as educational diagnosticians or educational assessment specialists. These types of positions include an exclusive focus on individual assessment of students with learning and behavior problems, and on the surface they seem quite similar to the role of school psychologists who are in very traditional “test-and-place” assessment roles.

Although most school psychologists remain employed with that title, those who have the aptitude and interest to pursue other roles within schools often find that there are
opportunities for career shifts within school systems. Some school psychologists move into educational leadership positions, such as pupil personnel directors, special education administrators, and school principals. Typically, career moves of this type require the individual to obtain additional graduate-level education in order to receive an administrative credential. School psychologists who have particular expertise in research methods, statistics, and psychometrics sometimes move into district-level positions as directors of research services, directors of testing/assessment and analysis, and so forth.

Using This Book: A Vision for School Psychology

As stated in the preface, this book is designed to provide an introduction and orientation to the field of school psychology. We especially intend for this book to be of interest to graduate students who are beginning to prepare for careers in the field of school psychology. This book is also designed to be an exploratory resource for individuals who are considering careers in school psychology as well as those who are currently working as school psychologists and who are interested in a guide to this dynamic and exciting field.

Chapter 2 of this text provides brief overviews of the historical context of the field as well as of history and trends in American education. Chapters 3 through 6 provide a foundation for the professional practice of school psychology, focusing on cultural and linguistic diversity, training and credentialing issues, employment trends and challenges, and legal and ethical aspects of practice in this field. Chapters 7 through 12 detail our vision of best practice in school psychology and focus on the wide range of goals that we believe school psychologists should pursue, including a data-oriented problem-solving approach to practice; assessment; prevention and intervention; facilitation of systems-level change; and involvement as a consumer and producer of research and evaluation. Chapter 13 provides some concluding comments regarding moving the field of school psychology forward and mapping our own future as professionals. Together, the 13 chapters in this book provide a comprehensive and, in our view, state-of-the-art introduction to the field of school psychology.

You may have noted that we use the phrase “school psychology for the 21st century” in the title of this book. Our focus on the 21st century was a very deliberate choice. In deciding to write this book, we were not interested in simply providing an overview of the history and current status of the field, which have been well documented in other sources. Rather, we were interested in promoting a forward-thinking vision of the exciting and dynamic possibilities within the field of school psychology. We believe that the field of school psychology has much to offer and that its potential is just beginning to emerge. The possibilities of this field making a strong positive impact in schools and other settings and in the lives of children, adolescents, and their families are simply enormous. We also believe that there are still several barriers to achieving this vision, foremost of which are the low expectations of other professionals for school psychology, which have unfortunately often been perpetuated by the narrow vision of some school psychologists and school psychology trainers. We are not naive about the institutional challenges, obstacles, and barriers that many school psychologists face in using their professional skills and interests to achieve the maximum good. Rather, we believe that through a concerted effort over time school psychologists can individually and collectively advance the field at all levels and that, in doing so, school psychology will make an enormous positive impact.
Although each chapter within this book is unique, they were developed through a collective vision. Some of the “big ideas” on which this book and our vision for the field of school psychology are based include the following:

- The general fields of psychology and education, as well as the specific field of school psychology, have given us rich and sometimes challenging historical precedents for the present practice of school psychology. Although it is important to have a strong understanding of these historical elements and how they have shaped the present, we agree with the premise that the past is not necessarily the future, and we advocate that the time has come for the field of school psychology to move forward from some of the historical challenges that have limited it in realizing its full potential.

- American society has become increasingly diverse and pluralistic with respect to cultural background, race, ethnicity, and language of its citizens, and it will continue to become increasingly diverse during the 21st century. School psychologists should develop cultural competence so that they can work appropriately and effectively with individuals and groups from a variety of backgrounds (see Chapter 3).

- School psychology has been and should continue to be primarily focused in school or other educational settings. The educational setting is a main focus of our vision and of this book. However, school psychologists have much to offer outside the context of school settings, and we encourage the practice of school psychology in a variety of settings and contexts (see Chapters 4 and 5).

- Individual psychoeducational assessment of children and adolescents has been and will continue to be an important activity of school psychologists. However, individual assessment activities should do more than simply describe or diagnose problems. Rather, the most useful assessment strategies are those that are part of the problem-solving process and provide a foundation for effective interventions (see Chapter 8).

- School psychology practice should be data oriented or data driven. School psychologists should base their decisions on valid data and use effective data collection techniques to inform, monitor, and modify intervention activities (see Chapter 7).

- School psychologists should be savvy consumers of research and should have the skills to engage in research and evaluation activities within their respective settings that will help to advance practice (see Chapter 12).

- School psychologists have historically worked with a limited segment of student populations, primarily those who have or are suspected of having disabilities and those who are otherwise at high risk for negative outcomes in life. We believe that there will always be a need for school psychologists to focus some of their effort on the small percentage of students who have serious learning, behavioral, and social–emotional problems. We also recognize that longitudinal research points to the chronic nature of such problems and the critical need for early intervention/prevention if negative long-term outcomes are to be curtailed. Thus, we strongly contend that school psychologists should use their unique expertise to positively affect all students in school settings, not just those who have severe needs.

- Although assessment activities have had and will continue to have an important place among the school psychologist’s varied responsibilities, effective prevention and intervention activities should occupy a significant percentage of his or her time (see Chapters 9 and 10).
• Prevention and intervention activities can occur with individuals, within small groups, within classrooms, within entire schools, and within school district or community-based contexts. School psychologists should engage in prevention and intervention activities, including consultation, at each of these levels, so that a larger number of individuals may be positively influenced (see Chapters 9 and 10).

• School psychologists do not typically function in isolation but instead work in consultation and collaboration with others and as part of a system. School psychologists should strive to use their expertise to develop a solid understanding of the systems in which they work and to help facilitate systems-level change as needed (see Chapter 11).

• School psychology is a field with incredible potential for helping to solve the “big” problems facing education. And yet this potential is still largely unrealized. We believe that school psychologists should play an active, important, and essential role in this regard. This book is built on the foundation of a progressive, forward-thinking vision of school psychology, and we are optimistic that collectively individual school psychologists can continue to move the field forward through their efforts (see Chapter 13).

In sum, school psychology is a dynamic and exciting field that has incredible and still unrealized potential for positively affecting education, psychology, and the lives of children, adolescents, and their families. It is our hope that this book will provide a useful and engaging guide to the field of school psychology and will help to continue to move the field forward.

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES**

1. Individuals who are being introduced to the field of school psychology are often surprised to find that the definition of school psychology is not necessarily clear-cut and has, at times, been a point of controversy. Discuss the power of definitions and how they can shape the field of school psychology and how it is perceived.

2. During the past several decades, the characteristics of school psychologists have changed somewhat. Characterize some of these changes, and describe the current characteristics of those who work in the field of school psychology.

3. Interview one or more school psychologists in your area. Find out how they entered the field, what their career trajectory has been, what their responsibilities and roles are, and how they spend a typical day, week, and month in their workplace. Ask what they like most or find most rewarding about their work as school psychologists and what they find to be most frustrating or difficult.

4. One of the first decisions that new graduate students in school psychology make is whether to pursue a master's/specialist degree or a doctoral degree. How do the two levels of training differ, and what are the costs and benefits, pros and cons, to each?

5. Differentiate the training and roles of school psychologists at the doctoral level from that of the two other primary areas of professional psychology: clinical psychology and counseling psychology. Differentiate the training and roles of school psychologists at the specialist or master’s level from that in the fields of school counseling and school social work.