Toward a Framework for Translational Research in School Psychology

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ABSTRACT: This article addresses a translational research framework for school psychology. Translational research uses outcomes of basic and applied science to enhance the overall well-being of persons. This transdisciplinary framework connects disciplines and uses their resources, capacities, systems, and procedures to advance prevention, intervention, and diagnosis. In order for this advancement to occur, research outcomes must quickly reach the field-based setting and the research findings must result in efficient and effective practices that can be readily implemented by the practitioner. Translational research studies published in School Psychology Forum are intended to quickly promote the application of promising new evidence-based practices in real-world contexts such as schools, homes, and communities. In addition, primary prevention models of school psychology practice are emphasized. This emphasis will help school psychologists promote the development of all children. By promoting child development across the spectrum of psychoeducational, psychosocial, and physiological well-being, school psychologists help to perpetuate the profession and expand their opportunities to be of service to potentially all students.

This issue of School Psychology Forum (SPF) marks the beginning of the tenure of the journal’s new editorial team. SPF began publication under the editorship of Ray Christner in 2006 as an outlet for scholarship that can be applied directly to the daily practice of school psychology. Steven Shaw followed as editor-in-chief and remained in that role until I was appointed to begin serving as editor-in-chief in 2017. Each editor-in-chief advanced SPF as a school psychology journal dedicated to connecting researchers and practitioners in order to promulgate research that produces fundamental implications for the day-to-day role and function of school psychologists.

My approach to editing SPF is framed by the belief that quality research guides good practice and effective practice advances positive student outcomes. A core construct of my philosophy is the principle that practice journals should be designed utilizing research epistemologies that are specific to the particular discipline. Thus, SPF will emphasize the publication of school psychology domain-specific knowledge bases, beliefs, and structures. My central goal is to promote scholarship that clearly advances the prevention science knowledge base and practice of school psychology. This requires publication of research articles that communicate effectively and professionally, whose research design and methodology apply acceptable scientific standards, and the results of each work can be readily translated to the real-world context of practicing school psychologists (Edwards & Shaw, 2017).

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TRANSLATIONAL RESEARCH

Under my editorial tenure, SPF will remain a practice journal, but will transition to a translational research framework. Translational research uses outcomes of basic and applied science to enhance the overall well-being of persons (Edwards & Shaw, 2017). It is a transdisciplinary approach that connects disciplines and uses each of their resources, capacities, systems, and procedures to advance prevention, intervention, and diagnosis (Cohrs et al., 2014). In order for this advancement to occur, research outcomes must quickly reach the field-based setting and the research findings must result in efficient and effective practices that can be readily implemented by the practitioner. Translational research published in SPF is intended to promote the application of promising new evidence-based practices in real-world contexts such as schools, homes, and communities (Edwards & Shaw, 2017; Woolf, 2008). The translational research framework is important because it is designed to lead to “... effective translation of the new knowledge, mechanisms, and techniques generated by advances in basic science research into new approaches for prevention, diagnosis, and treatment of disease [that] is essential for improving health” (Fontanarosa & DeAngelis, 2002, p. 1798). Readers of SPF will acquire knowledge regarding novel and innovative scientific approaches that will improve and/or expand their practice.

PREVENTION: A TIER 1 FOCUS

Since its inception, school psychology has featured the scientist practitioner model as a means of fostering school success of children (Barlow, Hayes, & Nelson, 1984). Methods of using scientific research are part of the training and practice of school psychology (Puyana & Edwards, 2017; Tilly, 2008). This is because the National Association of School Psychologists includes the application of science and the scientific method as core constructs for preservice school psychology training (Tilly, 2008). Notwithstanding the prominence of science in the training and practice of school psychology, the profession has experienced multiple paradigm shifts as it has matured as a profession (Tilley, 2008). Nonetheless, many of the popular paradigms used by school psychologists emphasize problem behaviors students manifest and a posteriori treatment of these problem behaviors (cf. Edwards, 2001; Edwards & Cheeley, 2016). These paradigms often emphasize a child or developmental psychopathology framework (Kamphaus & Frick, 2005).

Historical and contemporary psychological models often depict development during childhood and youth as composed of problems and dangers that make students vulnerable to multiple adverse outcomes (Edwards & Pratt, 2016; Shillingford & Edwards, 2008). The models emphasize child psychopathology and have their roots in the medical model that focuses on a disease entity, with deficits that must be defined in order to indicate the presence of a disorder (Kamphaus & Frick, 2005). The models require students to exhibit adverse symptoms and these symptoms must be treated, reduced, or removed before students are viewed as healthy (Edwards, Mumford, & Serra-Roldan, 2007). This reactive process tends to be ineffective because it focuses on at-risk behaviors and often results in protracted interventions that necessitate students fail or show limited response to intervention to receive intensive services (Edwards et al., 2007). Thus, school psychologists who practice using these models as their foundation frequently must wait for a student’s problem behaviors to be expressed to the extent that the student causes considerable difficulties in the classroom or school or the student’s symptoms must be demonstrated to a potentially clinically significant level before the student can receive intensive intervention and treatment services (Edwards et al., 2007).

In contrast to the problem-focused models, the promising emergent psychological framework of positive youth development represents a paradigm shift in science that has an impact on many subspecialties in psychology, including the science and practice of school psychology. This framework utilizes the dual-factor model of mental health in children and youth (cf. Suldo & Shaffer, 2008). It considers both the positive and the negative indicators of well-being to comprehensively measure and treat children’s
psychosocial functioning. It essentially repudiates the overemphasis and focus on students’ deficits, disorders, and disabilities.

Currently, SPF welcomes manuscript submissions that address the dual-factor framework as aligned with positive youth development. Manuscripts may highlight positive youth development’s application to school psychology and its potential as a prevention science model that will likely serve to perpetuate and expand school psychology research and practice. School psychology journals have not systematically addressed the relevance of considering more positively oriented models for working with all students, but focus primarily on those students who are connected to the special education pipeline. As opposed to labeling students using specific diagnostic criteria to identify deficits and disorders, positive youth development highlights students’ strengths, abilities, and contextual resources to promote their psychosocial development and advance their school-related achievement and success (Edwards et al., 2007). As such, positive youth development is a Tier 1 approach to providing services as part of the multitier systems of supports model (Edwards & Benson, 2010). Although funding for school psychologists may be partly based on special education appropriations to the school district, expanding school psychology practice in Tier 1 may result in more efficient and effective school psychology services to students in the special education pipeline and to all students. Quality research is needed investigate the aforementioned proposition (Puyana & Edwards, 2017).

SPF’s new focus on primary prevention will help school psychologists work to promote the development of all children. By promoting child development across the spectrum of psychoeducational, psychosocial, and physiological well-being, school psychologists help to perpetuate the profession and expand their opportunities to be of service to potentially all students within the school context (cf. Caplan & Caplan, 2000; Edwards & Cheeley, 2016). As one of the early developers of the prevention model of mental health, Caplan noted that primary prevention must promote overall health before the onset of disorder and it must be focused on the entire population (Myers, Brent, Faherty, & Modafferi, 1993).

As part of Tier 1 services, school staff members need strategies and models that develop and enhance students’ acquisition of compensatory skills and behaviors (cf. Puyana & Edwards, 2017; Simeonsson & Pan, 2013). Quality research that produces promising new evidence-based Tier 1 strategies are at a premium and will be embraced by SPF editors. Research promoting overall development will prevent gaps from occurring between students’ current and expected levels of functioning. Of course, this type of research should not merely possess strong external validity, but internal validity is important as well. Quality classrooms, schools, homes, and communities offer multiple prevention resources, but more research is needed to determine effective evidence-based prevention science resources at the Tier 1 level. SPF will strive to help fill this research gap.

CONCLUSION

In closing, I believe this is an exciting time to be a school psychologist. I also believe SPF can be the practice leader in our discipline and I view this zeitgeist as a catalyst for increasing the preeminence of SPF in our discipline and across the fields of education and social sciences. The translational research framework employed in SPF will serve to translate and speed the implementation of promising scientific discoveries in the field-based setting that promote child and youth well-being.

REFERENCES


