Innovation and Effective Response to National Standards: Developing School Psychology Programs of Excellence

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An often-cited African saying states that “it takes a village to raise a child”. Raising our children in schools necessitates our attending not only to the content of their books and projects, but to the processes of the development of their minds and their hearts, and to the interconnectedness of those elements. This complex responsibility takes not only the actions of a village, but thinking as a village, an interconnected whole, whose areas of expertise, thought, and intervention blend and complement one another to contribute to the community of children.

In addition, it calls on educator community members to be cognizant of the development of their own minds and hearts, so that they may model as well as facilitate the development of our youth. Part of the beauty of a village is its diversity — diversity of thought, talent, and style. The diversity of our communities along with their willingness to act as one on behalf of our youth is central to the development of school psychology programs of excellence. Furthermore, our diversity augments rather than detracts from meeting our national standards in a manner that becomes both innovative and responsive to the needs of our children, yet builds on our unique perspectives and talents.

To illustrate the integration of the uniqueness and strengths of individual villages or programs with adherence to national standards of training, I draw from two levels of experience. First, being an academic learning community member in school psychology at San Diego State University (SDSU) provides first-hand experience. Our program faculty bring a diversity of experience, ways of thinking, and areas of expertise. This, in combination with our development of common visions and missions, has been central in developing a program with outstanding out-

comes and national recognition. Second, I draw ideas and experiences from a decade of involvement with the National Association of School Psychologists' (NASP) reviews of school psychology programs.

Four major constructs central to the development of strong programs are illustrated and discussed in the present article : (a) context, philosophy, and mission ; (b) the integration of that context, philosophy, and mission with national standards, (c) developing meaningful delivery systems, and (d) self evaluation for program improvement.

Context, Philosophy, and Mission

First, programs must be cognizant of their own contexts, and from those contexts, develop a philosophy and mission. Without this, programs lack depth and grounding, essential for their students' development of an integrated professional identity. Also, without this grounding, programs can falter and appear disjointed or superficial. Contexts include not only geographic and professional contexts, but also the beliefs and values of the learning community. Core beliefs and values are grounded by the faculty community, but should be informed by the beliefs and values of the students and other key stakeholders (schools, parents, and community partners). To design programs of excellence, program faculty members must begin by examining what they believe that thinking and learning really mean. Do they mean simply to engage students' minds? Faculty and other stakeholders should ask one another, for instance, “What do you believe about how children learn, and about what we as educators and school psychologists truly have to do with it?” Listening carefully with respect to one another's core beliefs leads to finding commonalities as well as complementarities of faculty or partner

differences. This then builds and becomes one of the contexts from which the philosophy of the programs will emerge.

Several beliefs about learning are core for the faculty at SDSU, and serve as examples from which unique beliefs emerging from community contexts can be woven into the mission, standards, and delivery systems of our program, as well as into the delivery of national standards. None of these beliefs or values is found explicitly in our national standards, yet we consider them central to our philosophy and context. They make our program unique. First, we are complex beings, influenced deeply by our upbringing, our surroundings, and our experiences. Our home language, experience, and culture form the root of our learning to learn. Second, our learning emerges not from our brains alone, but from our heart, spirit, and body as well as our mind. Nor does learning emerge in isolation, but rather it emerges in relation to the ecosystems with which we engage. Third, the engaged and active learner, rather than the passive recipient of someone else's ideas, will become the active creator of new knowledge that eventually supports all of us. Fourth, learning emerges from engagement with the people and experiences in our lives that have helped to co-author the stories we tell quietly about ourselves as learners and thinkers (Winslade & Monk, 1999). Our families, communities, cultures, and those with whom we have adventured in life share meaning and perspective, and that becomes in part our own storied reality. Our students as learners bring stories about who they are to their schooling. Those, similarly, are not constructed solely by the learner. Have they heard that they are smart and capable, inept, or not gracious or careful? The internalizing of those stories in part shapes the experience of schooling.

Beyond philosophy, the context must reflect the needs of our communities, including the youth and children. Thus, in developing a vision and mission, it is critical to raise the context of national, state, or local need, so that, as a community, a shared set of beliefs and values is developed. For instance, SDSU is situated in a part of the country rich in cultures and languages. We have worked hard to assure the diversity of our graduate student body, so that we have a

variety of experiences, cultures, languages, and ideas to draw on. As a group, we are committed to systems change. These systemic and ecological factors, as they intersect with highly diverse constituents, become important strengths of the program.

Here we see the emergence of the program's mission — what it will commit to do, given its beliefs and articulated needs. At this intersection, we, as program faculty members, bring our colleagues' strengths to the task, but also foster a culture of willingness to develop new strengths in light of those needs — to learn in new areas. Our programs should build on the expertise that the faculty brings to the program, but draw also on the wisdom of our students and communities to help us know better how to serve them effectively.

Here is an example of a program vision from SDSU :

SDSU school psychologists integrate educational, psychological, social and cultural foundations to create and engender a vision of educational equity in the public schools. We design, organize and deliver services to meet the needs of the diverse children, youth, families, and communities served by these schools. We are accessible to members of the school system and community at all levels. Our professional effectiveness is enhanced by strong personal, interpersonal, and leadership qualities. We are committed to our own life-long learning and to influencing the professions which serve children, especially culturally and linguistically diverse children, in the schools.

Integration of Mission with National Standards

To illustrate the integration of a program mission and vision with national standards, four of the eleven domains of practice will be discussed below, with examples of how programs can infuse unique perspectives, while meeting or exceeding national standards requirements.

Data-based decision-making. The NASP standard on data-based decision-making and accountability says that it must permeate all professional practice in the program. That is, data are used to identify strengths of students, to understand problems, to measure progress, and to evaluate the outcomes of

services. SDSU students use data in all those ways. To be consistent with its mission and vision, however, we also assure that data inform interventions, not just diagnoses ; that cultural hypotheses are raised and lead to relevant data collection ; and that cultural and cross-cultural hypothesis generation informs the interpretation of data.

An example in practice is the program's incorporation of the Response to Intervention (RtI) model, folding in ecosystemic perspectives (cf. Cook-Morales, Robinson-Zañartu, & Duren Green, 2006). We begin by collecting school-wide or classroom-wide data, in order to determine any needs obvious to the whole school or any classroom-wide (system level) interventions that should be instituted. Our ecosystems orientation helps students learn how to gather local data on a whole school or whole classrooms, disaggregate the data by culture or other appropriate groups, and seek patterns to inform intervention decisions (Tier 1). If the student response to that intervention is insufficient, Tier 2 is initiated, in which the data (for instance, that pupil's curriculum-based achievement data or dynamic assessment-based data on effective interventions) inform a more intense small group or individualized level of intervention for that child, still within the regular classroom (Tier 2). Following that intervention, we collect data to test whether the intervention was effective. If the child's response to that level of classroom intervention was ineffective, we may either modify the intervention or choose to provide more intense interventions or more individualized ones (Tier 3).

Consultation and Collaboration. NASP standards require not only skill in collaboration with one's colleagues, but skill in specific models of consultation. For instance, behavioral consultation involves working with the child, family, and/or school staff to promote a child's ability to function successfully and adaptively at home, in the community, and/or at school. Collaborative consultation might be used to support a teacher's adaptation of curriculum to meet specific student needs. Under supervision, students study the models and practice consultation skills in schools with actual teachers. Consistent with SDSU's mission, students also learn and practice cross cultural models and processes of consultation in

schools, implementing them first in practice, and then in internship.

Effective Instruction and Development of Cognitive and Academic Skills. This NASP standard requires students to gain knowledge of human learning processes, of techniques for assessment, and of direct and indirect services, in order to develop cognitive and academic skills. They must acquire the skill needed so that they can develop appropriate cognitive and academic goals for students with different abilities, disabilities, strengths, and needs ; implement interventions to achieve those goals ; and evaluate the effectiveness of interventions. Consistent with the program's mission, SDSU students go beyond conventional learning theory to study cross cultural and multicultural issues critical to learning, the dynamic assessment of thinking and learning skills, and mediated instruction/intervention in critical thinking skills infused in standards and classroom content. They work on culturally diverse school sites with a mentor teacher and bilingual students, creating an authentic learning environment, and developing lessons that will be used with the children.

Student Diversity in Development and Learning. This standards requires that students learn about individual differences, abilities, and disabilities, and about the influence of biological, social, cultural, ethnic, experiential, socioeconomic, gender-related, and linguistic factors in development and learning, and that they demonstrate skills needed to work with individuals of diverse characteristics. In addition to learning from research and immersions, SDSU's richly diverse student cohorts learn about barriers and resilience across cultures from each other's life experiences and from the diverse settings in which they practice. They learn to bring diversity of skill, experience, and culture to the forefront of hypothesis formation when we examine learning situations.

Developing Meaningful Delivery Systems

Choosing how to deliver the content of the curriculum speaks to how well the program enacts the students' beliefs about adults' learning. Using readings, lectures, discussions, seminars, and case based work is the norm within university classrooms. More recently, Web-based learning, from use of Blackboard

through Webinars and WebQuests, guides students to access and use resources more broadly. Collaborative project work helps students learn and apply the collaboration skills that they will need as practitioners.

NASP standards require some practicum prior to internship: "Closely supervised practica experiences that include the development and evaluation of specific skills are distinct from and precede culminating internship experiences that require the integration and application of the full range of school psychology competencies and domains" (National Association of School Psychologists, 2000). That is, graduate students must have some exposure to work in schools prior to serving in their internship year. Typically, this is done as project-based assignments in schools. However, often graduate student interns enter school systems as novices. This inexperience takes away from their credibility and flexibility within the system. SDSU's program bridges that issue, as well as the question about whether their learning was going to work in schools (vs. "ivory tower" thinking), by engaging the students with school systems in every year of their program.

Site-based experience prior to internship. Rich meaning-centered contexts for learning foster enhanced investment in the process (Brown, D'Emidio-Caston, & Benard, 2001). Thus, practicum experiences prior to an internship go beyond simply learning to administer tests or collect data sets on a school site. Rather, they place the whole graduate course on school sites, so that all learning happens in the context of enhancing the schools and school children's experiences. For instance, training in advanced assessment for intervention has students and their supervisors working with real cases. Consultation is not a simulation, but rather a live school-based experience. Learning is implemented alongside a regular mentor teacher in the school. Although classrooms and Web-based learning have an important place in graduate education in school psychology, infusing a strong dose of supervised "hands-on" work with youth creates an authentic learning situation. Authentic learning grounds students in the reality of their learning, and familiarizes them with the complex contexts in which they will practice (from the politics of schools to

actual work with children and parents). From this experience, graduates are prepared to enter the profession and begin practice with confidence, entering school systems ready to be full team members.

Program Evaluation and Program Improvement

All programs preparing students for professional practice are works in progress at some level. New information and new techniques become available regularly. Because the issue of youth not succeeding academically or in interpersonal areas connected with achievement continues to be problematic, we need to revise and refine our knowledge and delivery systems constantly, in order to enhance our effectiveness. This necessitates having in place ongoing measures of our effectiveness. In a report to and subsequently published by the National Research Council, Bransford, Brown, & Cocking (2000) posit that ongoing self evaluation of our work is one of the cornerstones of effective teaching.

NASP standards now require program-based assessment and accountability at a minimum of five levels: (a) Two measures of content knowledge (one measured by the national exam, and a second measured by course-embedded assignments or grades), (b) an assessment of students' practice experience that includes their ability to plan necessary professional responsibilities; (c) a performance assessment by the field supervisor, rating student competence in all domains of practice during internship; (d) a performance assessment by faculty of assignments during internship, demonstrating the integration of the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary for effective practice; and (e) a measure of effects of the students' practice on their learning environments or learning.

The move to performance assessments necessitates that students of school psychology not only pass tests on content knowledge and skill, but that they also demonstrate that they can apply that knowledge in effective ways to appropriate situations in schools. Further, they must demonstrate the professionalism and dispositions to work effectively in school environments.

Measuring this requires that programs develop clear performance expectations. Some mistakenly list skill areas and rate them as below, average, or

above average. More effective measures, however, work with behaviorally defined rubrics, elaborating on what each of those categories (below, average, superior) look like.

Beyond this, programs may introduce and include additional assessments. One of the areas several programs consider is the students' reflection and self-assessment of knowledge, skills, and practice. Including self-assessment prepares students for effective practice in which they will not only reflect, but also act on the need to enhance certain skills and knowledge through continuing professional education.

The most challenging of these areas to virtually all programs has been the final area, measuring the effects of practice on student learning environments or student learning. However, it totally aligns with data-based decision making. In using the RtI model, evidence of effectiveness is a prerequisite for decision making at the next level. At an individual level, this is often done in conjunction with the mandate to measure the effectiveness of intervention work, whether academic, behavioral, or affective. Having baseline data, both qualitative and quantitative, from which to measure the difference our work has made,

not only serves to provide accountability for our service, but also enables us to share the impact of our service with the school community.

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