

# ***The Unspoken Paradox of School Psychology***

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In our introductory graduate course that gives an overview of school psychology as a whole, we learned about the paradox of school psychology—“to serve children effectively school psychologists must, first and foremost, concentrate their attention and professional expertise on adults” (Gutkin and Conoley, 1990, p. 212). While the context was framed to mean that school psychologists spend a large portion of their role in consultation with other school staff instead of direct service with students, I also interpret this as the urgent need to focus and reevaluate the current school psychology graduate program system and climate. If you are involved in school psychology graduate education and do not believe there are problems, **you** are part of the problem.

“The more competence an individual has, the more deviance will be tolerated in him by others” (Gold, 1980). During my practicum supervision, I had once shared with my supervisor that I found the disparity between mental health “professionals” and their warped sense of self (and not in the dark and twisty, Grey’s Anatomy kind of way) was intriguing. They asked if I was familiar with the Competence-Deviance Hypothesis, which essentially postulates how the competence of an individual can determine the degree of tolerance by others. When I first heard this, it both resonated and validated the experiences and feelings I had. I was left wondering about two things: (1) how competency is determined (or is it really *perceived* competence), and (2) the parallels to school psychology.

There are some of the most brilliant minds in the world of school psychology, broadly, and in my graduate program, specifically. You would be wrong to assume this would naturally translate into a high-quality graduate experience—one that focuses not only excellence in training and preparedness but also the compassion for graduate student mental health, program climate, systemic/institutional barriers, and active support in diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). In school psychology, there is an emphasis on integrity and fidelity of interventions. But where is that within school psychology programs, with revolving adjuncts, reused/outdated course content, and faculty negligent in non-research activities?

While I was never jaded from the beginning that I would revolutionize the field or school system(s), I did not expect to be burnt out before I even began. I did not expect that some of the “leaders in their field” of school mental health would be willfully ignorant, at best, or apathetic of the problems rampant in their own graduate program. If you administered a survey on program climate, how do you think students would rate things? To reiterate, if you think it is actually at an acceptable level, please stop here and reread the last sentence of my first paragraph. Ultimately, my feelings could eloquently and succinctly be summed up in the wise words of Grande (2019)—thank you, next.

Before analyzing the nature of the problems, it's helpful to understand the topography of the students we serve and the field itself. Racial and ethnic minorities made up 42 percent of students in U.S. public schools (KewelRamani et al., 2007). Over 4.7 million students in the United States are emergent multilingual learners\* (EMLLs) (Lopez, 2014). EMLLs speak over 150 languages in public schools in the United States (Batalova & McHugh, 2010). Of those, the top five languages are Spanish (73.1%), Chinese (3.8%), Vietnamese (2.7%), French/Haitian Creole (2.1%), and Hindi (1.8%). From 1993-2000, Oregon, Georgia, Colorado, Nevada, Nebraska, and Indiana experienced a 200% growth in EMLLs entering their school systems (Capps et al., 2005).

In comparison, three-fourths of National Association of School Psychologists (NASP)-affiliated school psychologists are female and 93% self-identified as Caucasian (Lewis, Truscott, & Volker, 2008). A demographical survey of NASP school psychologists (N= 1272) revealed few (i.e., of a third who answered the item, of that 47.6%) who reported fluency in a language other than English (Curtis et al, 2012). Limitations of the study included how proficiency level was not defined, so bilingual competency is vague. Likewise, another survey revealed nearly 70% of the respondents described their training with respect to cross-cultural issues involving bilingual assessment as less than adequate (Ochoa, Rivera, & Ford, 1997). Looking at the most recent 2020 NASP Membership Survey, it indicated that there are still more than 80% of school psychologists who identify as female, White, able-bodied, and monolingual (Goforth et al., 2021). School psychology too, as a field, is not devoid of racial discrimination and prejudice, ranging from culturally-biased assessments to color-blind practitioners.

However, that is not to discount the conversations and initiatives, ever-present but seemingly amplified within the current societal contexts, to address these concerns. At the annual NASP (virtual) convention, there were numerous professional development opportunities and a large focus on racial inequity and social justice. In addition, there has been an initiative that the NASP African American subcommittee created, the NASP Exposure Project, to introduce school psychology as a career to high school and undergraduate students, with one of the goals to increase the diversity within the field. Sabnis & Proctor (2021) outlined a fundamental and much needed paradigm shift among school psychologists—critical school psychology.

While I find those moments allow me to keep faith and gain renewed hope for the field, there is this sense of accompanying existential guilt. The (virtual) audience was engaged and largely enthusiastic, not taking into account some of the inappropriate and ignorant comments. But where were they, myself included, all these years? With the increase of Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) hate and discrimination, the community is rising together and raising their voices. Why am I only speaking up now? Because it affects those with a similar cultural/ethnic background to my own? Despite continued racial discrimination across other backgrounds? I hope these discussions are not ephemeral and lead to actualized concrete change. I digress and perhaps I'll continue these thoughts in a separate piece on the intersectionality of my identities and feelings.

\*The term EMLL refers to the assets students have in terms of their linguistic repertoire, versus the deficit-based terms "English Language Learners" or "Long-Term English Learner" (New York State Education Department, 2017).

I had a meeting with my advisor who had asked me how I was doing. Before I elaborate on our discussion, I want to emphasize in that one sentence, there are two things of note: (1) I still met frequently with my advisor, despite them being on sabbatical or “off contract”, showing their true compassion for their advisees (and even others’ advisees), and (2) how they legitimately care for their advisees’ and general graduate student well-being. It essentially was a therapy/vent session and me fumbling over my thoughts and feelings (much like this current writing piece). I first explained my feelings on the NASP Exposure Project, which some students in my program are assisting with, as sort of a Catch-22. While I think it’s invaluable and necessary (for both the field and graduate programs), I would not personally advocate and encourage marginalized and minoritized populations to join the field. How can the field change and diversify without increased representation? At the same time, how could I authentically explain why I love school psychology and my graduate program (especially when neither have progressed to a state that is welcoming and inclusive to marginalized and minoritized populations, specifically, and graduate students as *actual* human beings, generally)? Perhaps, graduate students are just meant to suck up their snowflake feelings and furiously, silently spin as a cog in the system that has worked just fine for everyone else who has gone through it.

What no one talks about are the cogs that spin until they burn up and disintegrate into the ether, from over work or improper maintenance. To put that into concrete, real-world factors I am referring to, include but are not limited to: self-care (Google: “Mental Health & Graduate School”) and financial, housing, and food insecurity. School psychology is a critical shortage area in the United States with unsustainable caseload ratios. There is also an oversaturation and competitiveness in urban/major cities, in particular the Northeast. With the plentiful selection of graduate interns from a variety of schools/programs, school districts can offer internships to guide and nurture future school psychologists—unpaid of course. This parasitic relationship forces graduate students, who need to complete a full-time (i.e., five day a week, regular school hours) internship to graduate, to accept unpaid internships with school districts who are fully aware of this. Part-time jobs may minimally supplement living expenses with long hours and careful money management, except if you consider cities like NYC or Boston.

While graduate assistantships (e.g., research assistant, teaching assistant) fully cover tuition, offer an actually decent stipend (thanks to the efforts of the graduate union), and comparable health/dental plans, students are not eligible to hold these positions when they are in their internship year. Students *are* eligible to hold these positions prior, when we are taking a five-course load semester (note that the university’s policy holds that a typical 3 credit course requires 9-12 hours of study/work per week, multiplied by five courses a semester, thus ranging from an expected 45-60 hours a week). The graduate assistantship can be either a 10-hour or 20-hour position. With additional part-time work, research, and/or familial responsibilities, the weekly hour totals can be exceedingly high. However, somehow the transition to a full-time internship (i.e., 1500 hours) makes us ineligible from concurrently holding both positions? Consulting with others in the field,

the general consensus was that policies vary by program, department, university, state, etc. or that this hasn't been an issue previously. Faculty have noted that to meet the demands of a full-time internship at 1500 hours, while holding a graduate assistantship, is not something that they will formally endorse. While they make an understandable point about potentially having a student in crisis, which may necessitate an unplanned safety meeting that extends past the typical school day, it does not account for having graduate assistantship hours beyond possible school hours. Just because you have had past experiences with students who experienced challenges in meeting the expectations of the internship given competing work demands, does not dismiss the validity of our concerns to *live* during our internship year. Just because you list this standpoint in the program handbook does not make it justifiable or helpful to assist in our "planning purposes". If merely listing policies or rules made a perspective appropriate, we would just write about inclusion and equity and will them into existence.

I do not pretend to be oblivious to the NASP/APA demanding accreditation requirements (and on a tangential aside, the imbalance in perceptions of school/counseling to clinical psych within APA for that matter or financial gatekeeping of various licensures, at least from my perspective) and the legitimate concern about overlapping internship and work hours. However, thanking us for engaging in this "discussion" implies an actual ongoing conversation and being amenable to potential solutions or ideas. Current graduate assistantship forms could be adapted/modified to include language that explicitly state hour/schedule expectations, for example, in the [Supplemental Description of Duties Form](#). Or, the [Dual Employment Request Form](#) can be adapted to replicate its intended purpose—to *indicate the multiple work schedule will not conflict with other assignments*. Convenient that the state of Connecticut would create this form, almost like they predicted this very scenario. Current graduate assistant supervisors have suggested their support in being flexible to the scheduling requirements of our internship. True, this would add an additional form for faculty to review and sign. But, I would hope having tuition covered, a stipend to afford living expenses, health/dental insurance, and relieving the stress/anxiety of your graduate students would warrant this minor inconvenience.

Graduate students not only provide the foundation of many institutions but also hold the potentiality towards transformation and evolution of these same institutions. Through the combined efforts of my peers and I, we have started to fracture an antiquated system. Most recently and notably are attempts to facilitate DEI efforts within and beyond our program. For example, a university program provided tuition remission and subsidized healthcare for interns in specific programs. The stipulation was that the internship had to be a paid internship. As previously mentioned, school psychology internships are vastly unpaid and while included in the list of specific eligible programs, would not often qualify because of this. In other words, unpaid internships would not receive tuition remission and subsidized healthcare, but paid internships would. After many discussions across various stakeholders, the university graduate school amended their policy to provide the same benefits to school psychology interns. Stipends among Connecticut internship sites are supposedly

being “looked into” but seems highly unlikely unless all school psychology programs within the state band together to demand stipends for all interns. While the GA policy has not been lifted and no stipend is provided, this was definitely a win and a large leap forward. Also notable is the expediency of the graduate school administration to actually listen to graduate students, enact change, and apply it for the upcoming semester. To actualize this within a short time frame is a monumental bureaucratic feat, especially given the contexts of state budgets and COVID-19. However, I do not need to be told to be thankful for things that are broken and seemingly only mended due to student advocacy. Ultimately, I am thankful for the collective effort, the individuals who actually listened or acknowledged our concerns, and the knowledge that (graduate student) advocacy can lead to actual change.

To my past self, choose a different course of study and career. It is not worth enduring the microaggressions (unfortunately widespread across any field but at least you would be less shocked about it coming from mental health professionals), solitude, and uncertainty. You deserve more, you deserve better. It is unsurprising that one anonymous faculty member stated in the [BIPOC Graduate Student Support: Information & Assessment Summary](#) (2021), “I don’t trust UConn to make real change or support a student in this situation in a meaningful way that has long term and systemic implications” (p. 16). How can the university and program support their graduate students when they are failing to support their BIPOC faculty? Graduate students are not oblivious to the systemic and institutional barriers within their own program and institution.

To my future self, I hope you have managed to find a niche that makes you happy— whether in school psychology, in a completely unrelated field, or somewhere in between. Continue to be thankful and explicitly thank your family, close friends, cohort, and advisor for their constant support, you would not have made it that far without them. Try to temper your schadenfreude when the graduate students who carry the program/research graduate and move far, far away and on to great success of their own. You survived the long haul, Dr. Li. While this may not have been the hill you wanted to die on, it does not mean you did not put up a good fight, with the help of others, to try and improve what you could along the way. While you unequivocally felt “thank you, next”, I do hope those still in graduate school say “thank you to the undervalued collective, from the next generation”.