

IT'S
ALWAYS
ABOUT THE
children

charles a. barrett

IT'S ALWAYS ABOUT THE CHILDREN

Charles A. Barrett

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It's Always About the Children

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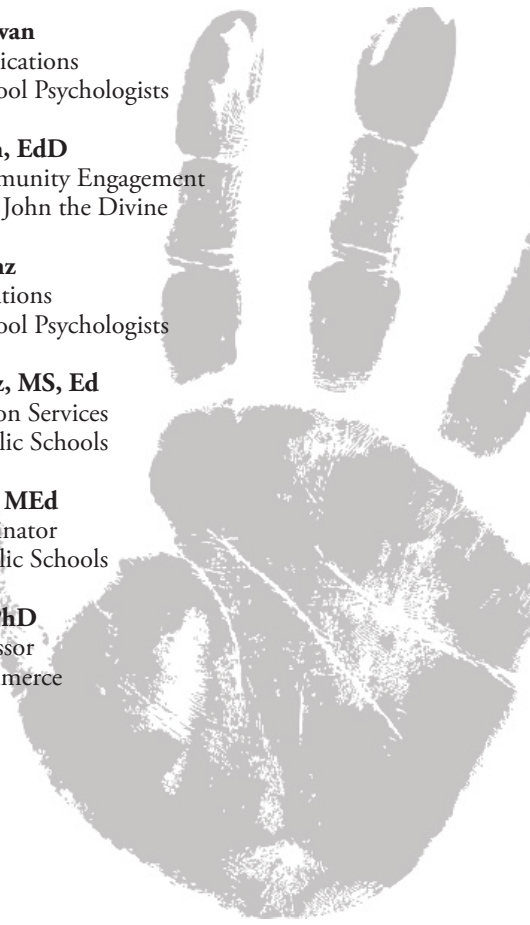
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DEDICATION

Rev. Bruce Ferguson (d. 2004)

To an extraordinary champion and advocate for young people whose humility and life impacted me in immeasurable ways. Your consistent support, encouragement, and numerous opportunities to use my gifts have been instrumental in my development and will always be cherished.

To the amazing children, families, schools, and communities that I've had the pleasure of serving as a practicum student, intern, and school psychologist. You have taught me so much about courage, commitment, and resilience in the face of seemingly insurmountable obstacles. I have been enriched as a person and am a better psychologist because of you.

Allentown School District

Louis E. Deiruff High School
Ritter Elementary School

Baltimore City Public Schools

Grove Park Elementary School

Loudoun County Public Schools

Forest Grove Elementary School
Guilford Elementary School
Park View High School
Sterling Elementary School
Sterling Middle School
Sully Elementary School

The School District of Philadelphia

James Rhoads Elementary School

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ABOUT THIS BOOK

As I reflect on 10 years as a school psychologist, it is never quite comfortable for me to say that this is my job. Although it is the best career in the world, both by my standards and according to *US News & World Report*¹, school psychology is more than a profession. For me, and many of you reading this book, school psychology is a calling. And if you're not a school psychologist, because you serve children as a teacher, administrator, school social worker, school counselor, speech pathologist, or educational diagnostician, your vocation is a calling as well. Like a perfect union—a marriage between compatible individuals—school psychology found me, and I found school psychology. We were made for each other and I was destined to become a school psychologist. As much as I enjoy teaching undergraduate and graduate students and presenting to a variety of audiences at state and national conferences, the core of my professional identity is that of a school psychologist. I am a practitioner who serves real children and real families attending real schools in real communities. It is the joy and honor of being intimately involved in the lives of young people that informs all of my professional endeavors, including writing this book.

In early 2018, it occurred to me that a hashtag I started using—*#itsalwaysaboutthechildren*—was more popular than I realized. After a few friends and colleagues mentioned it, coupled with numerous professional

experiences of my own, I was compelled to write about my passion for serving children. Although this book includes some technical information about the clinical aspects of school psychology and education in general, its focus is not what we do as educators. As one of the greatest benefits of effective instruction is teaching students how to think rather than what to think, this book is a window into my philosophical orientation to the fields of school psychology and public education. Amidst what feels like the inevitability of increasing demands that compete for our time and attention with each passing year, anecdotes are shared to highlight how fulfilling it is for me to serve children of all ages. I am confident that each chapter will inspire, remind, and rejuvenate us about our most important responsibility: children.

Although this book is most relevant to practitioners, faculty, and graduate students in school psychology, it is also fitting for teachers, school counselors, school social workers, educational diagnosticians, and speech pathologists. Building and central office administrators (e.g., principals, special education and pupil services directors) as well as graduate faculty in related disciplines may also find the content useful for their staff and students. To facilitate dialogue about the ideas presented, questions for reflection and small group discussion are included at the end of each chapter. Additionally, *References and Resources for Professional Learning* allow interested readers to further explore the concepts mentioned throughout the book.

From one colleague to another, whether you are entering the field of education, have been serving for a few years, or nearing the end of your career, thank you for your commitment to children. Thank you for the countless ways that you ensure their academic, social, emotional, and behavioral well-being.

And most of all, thank you for making eternal deposits into the lives of young people who will shape our future and make us proud by the great things that they are destined to accomplish.

Because it's always about the children,

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of the letters 'CARB' in a stylized, cursive-like font. The 'C' is a simple loop, the 'A' has a horizontal crossbar, the 'R' has a vertical stem and a curved top, and the 'B' has a vertical stem and a rounded bottom.

Please think of the children first. If you ever have anything to do with their entertainment, their food, their toys, their custody, their childcare, their health care, their education—listen to the children, learn about them, learn from them.

Think of the children first².

—Fred Rogers

CHAPTER 1

THIS IS MY STORY: PURPOSE, PASSION, HOPE, AND WHOLENESS

And while we don't always know exactly where our purpose comes from, it is often clarified through our experiences. What we have encountered and overcome allows us to help others be better.

Everyone has a story. You have a story and I have a story as well. In serving children, we should never underestimate the significance of our stories. What may not be learned through the most eloquent lessons or masterfully implemented group or individual counseling sessions, children grasp through the human connection that is forged in sharing lived experiences. Some may refer to this as building rapport; but it is simply the power of relationship that leads to the most effective instruction and positive outcomes.

While teaching one evening, I shared with my community college students that it took me longer than I anticipated to complete my PhD. A simple moment of transparency led to their faces lighting up with surprise, interest, but most of all, hope. As many of my students are English Learners (ELs) who

are also juggling the responsibilities of working full-time and raising children, they are managing more than I ever had to contend with in undergraduate or graduate school. From this short exchange, I learned a profound lesson: students genuinely want to know who their teachers are as people. In the words of James Comer, noted child psychiatrist and advocate for education reform, “No significant learning occurs without a significant relationship³.” Regardless of our roles as educators, our first responsibility is to establish relationships with our students. A little transparency does not change the fact that we are the professionals. It simply builds a bridge to our students because they see us as humans. With that in mind, this is my story.

GROWING UP

My earliest recollection of wanting to work with children was in high school. Especially for a person whose friends were almost always adults, this was somewhat surprising to me. While I don't know where this interest came from, it was quite evident by my junior year. Having always enjoyed English and writing, after flirting briefly with a career in print journalism—I specifically remember thinking that I wanted to become the editor of the *New York Times*—I decided to become a high school English teacher.

As a youngster, and to some degree today, I stuttered. Between first and sixth grades, I participated in school-based speech therapy. Throughout elementary school, my speech teacher was Ms. Valerie Schwinger. She was patient, kind, and taught me a lot—some of which I continue to use today. If my aspirations of becoming an English teacher did not work as planned, I

would become a speech pathologist to help children like me. Although I was very comfortable with my decision, an opportunity presented itself that I could not ignore.

A few months before graduating high school, I heard about the Initiative for Minority Student Development (IMSD) program at St. John's University. Federally funded by the National Institutes of Health (NIH), it sought to prepare undergraduates for research careers in the biomedical sciences; increase the number of underrepresented minority undergraduates who chose to major in biomedically-related sciences; and raise the awareness among underrepresented minorities majoring in the sciences to consider biomedical research as a desirable career. Knowing that I was not particularly excited about a career in biomedical research, I was not interested in the program. However, as my father and I were meeting with the program coordinator and Timothy Carter, the faculty member who was responsible for the grant, they mentioned that psychology and sociology were also acceptable majors for participation in the program. Despite planning to study English and speech pathology, because IMSD provided full tuition, a stipend, and up to six credits of summer classes each year, I ultimately changed speech pathology to psychology in order to take advantage of this opportunity.

THE COLLEGE YEARS

Having indicated my interest in psychology, Dr. Carter gave me a catalogue that contained the research of the St. John's faculty. After looking through it, I identified a few professors who were studying topics that I was at least open

to learning more about. Dr. Carter called one of them, who was the chair of the psychology department. Although he was not accepting students to work with him, he told us about Raymond DiGiuseppe whose research on anger and aggression in adolescents was intriguing to me. My father and I met with Dr. DiGiuseppe and he agreed to work with me.

Following my first year in college, I was a camp counselor in the Catskill Mountains. Although my tuition was covered, and I was receiving a stipend, like most college students, I needed to make a little extra money over the summer. After spending seven weeks with intelligent, creative, and energetic boys, if there was any lingering doubt in my mind, I absolutely knew that I had to work with children.

Near the end of my undergraduate career, I did not know what I wanted to do. After all, three years is not a lot of time to figure out the rest of your life! While I knew that I wanted to work with children, I was still unsure of how I would use my degrees in English and psychology. Did I still want to become an English teacher? Did I eventually want to become a principal or even a superintendent? What about a child psychologist? I spoke to Dr. DiGiuseppe about my uncertainty and everything changed in one brief conversation. He asked me if I had ever considered school psychology. I had not. In fact, I had never heard of school psychology. He said that it was a relatively new field, but he thought that I would like it based on my interests in children, psychology, and education. After Dr. DiGiuseppe told me that he was a clinical child and school psychologist, I was convinced that school psychology was for me! Not knowing where to apply to graduate school, he told me about Lehigh University. And because I trusted him, I set my sights on Lehigh.

GRADUATE SCHOOL

To say that my first semester in graduate school was a huge learning curve would be an understatement. Having never taken any education courses, and only being somewhat familiar with school psychology, many of the terms and concepts were foreign to me. What was an IEP? What was an FBA? What was IDEA? In addition to finding myself in a puzzling world of alphabet soup, my biggest question was *is this what I really want to study?* Perhaps it was because I was only 20 years old and had very little life or professional experiences that I began to doubt whether I made the right decision to pursue school psychology. And despite my many questions, I had very few answers.

For those of you who have earned, or are pursuing a doctoral degree, especially a PhD, a significant amount of time in graduate school is dedicated to research. Because of this, having at least a general idea of your research interests sooner than later is very helpful. Serendipitously, my senior thesis as an undergraduate was on Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Specifically, I reviewed a paper by Reid, DuPaul, Power, Anastopoulos, Rogers-Adkinson, Noll, and Riccio⁴ about the cultural factors that are involved in assessing children and adolescents for this condition. Not knowing a lot about ADHD, and much less about school psychology, I remember asking George DuPaul at my interview for the school psychology program at Lehigh if he was the same DuPaul whose work I had been reading. He was. What began as intellectual curiosity about why Black males seemed to be diagnosed with

ADHD and placed in special education more than other groups became central to my development as a psychologist.

PURPOSE, PASSION, HOPE, AND WHOLENESS

In life, and specifically as an undergraduate, graduate student, and professional, none of our experiences are ever wasted. Everything happens for a reason. Through childhood events, family situations with parents and siblings, volunteer and professional opportunities, overcoming learning challenges and other disabling conditions, or marriage and raising children, our lives evolve and afford us greater clarity about what we should be doing. My passion for serving children grew out of having a speech impediment and working with Black boys at a summer camp. But while passion is necessary for personal and professional fulfillment, it is not sufficient. Passion must be informed by purpose.

My purpose in life is not to be a school psychologist. Although this sounds antithetical to who I am, what I enjoy doing, and the book that you are reading, purpose is greater than position. Purpose is the reason for our existence, which cannot be contained by what we are currently doing. In other words, school psychology, teaching, and counseling are simply ways that we fulfill our purpose; but in and of themselves they are not why we exist. My purpose is to communicate and facilitate hope and wholeness. Whether through writing, teaching, or serving children, families, schools, and communities as a school psychologist, I am driven by helping people have hope of better days ahead and becoming whole despite experiencing brokenness. And while we don't always know exactly where our purpose comes from, it is often clarified through our

experiences. What we have encountered and overcome allows us to help others be better.

As a child who stuttered, I have learned that my speech impediment was not a speed bump—something to slow me down—but a stepping stone. It made me more sensitive to others, not only those with speech impediments, but people who are different for various reasons. In my undergraduate and graduate courses, I require my students to speak in every class session. But because I stutter, I intentionally and quickly create a supportive environment that is conducive for students to feel comfortable sharing their ideas, asking questions, and responding to their peers and me. Because I stutter and know what it feels like to prefer listening rather than contributing verbally, I am sensitive to my EL students who may be self-conscious about their English proficiency. I am sensitive to shy students whose anxiety makes it difficult to present to their peers. Stuttering has made me more patient because I wanted others to be patient with me. It has made me a better listener because I needed others to listen to me more intently when I was a youngster. It has made me a better psychologist—one who is slow to form impressions because all students deserve this from the adults in their lives. Having met with parents and students who stutter, I understand that they are quiet, not because they do not know the answer or do not want to contribute, but because they may be nervous.

Even decisions that I felt were made for pragmatic reasons were ultimately purposeful and led me to where I am today. Changing my major from speech pathology to psychology was more than benefiting from an opportunity that would fund my undergraduate education. Participating in the IMSD program

was the catalyst that introduced me to Raymond DiGiuseppe—a man who mentored me into the field of school psychology and is why I am a school psychologist today. Working at a summer camp, seemingly to make a little extra money, was a pivotal experience that crystallized my desire to serve children. In fact, it was the first time that I realized children always give us more than what we think we are giving them. While I thought that I was simply going to make a few hundred dollars over the summer, my life was forever changed and my purpose and passion for children was confirmed. Studying ADHD in Black males throughout graduate school provided an invaluable foundation for my current scholarship and professional passion: a deep interest in the assessment practices that are used to identify culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students with a variety of disabilities.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

More than an autobiographical retelling of life experiences, this chapter highlights the interconnectedness of where we have been and where we are today. Because seeing is believing, when young people see what we have accomplished, they believe that they can do these things as well. Regardless of our respective roles as educators, our stories expose children to the possibilities of what they can achieve and become.

As we think about our lives and decisions to work with children, consider these two questions: what led me to a career in education? Further, why do I want to serve children? As educators, why is almost always greater than what. More than what we do, the underlying purpose for our actions is of

utmost importance. Especially when balancing the inevitable challenges that are associated with working in public education, understanding why we are teachers, administrators, school counselors, school social workers, educational diagnosticians, speech pathologists, and school psychologists helps us to remain focused and true to our commitment: excellent service to children, families, schools, and communities.

REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. Watch the following video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1ytFB-8TrkTo>⁵. How is this concept applicable to education, and more specifically, your respective discipline?
2. Based on the video above, think about why you are a teacher, administrator, school psychologist, school social worker, school counselor, educational diagnostician, or speech pathologist. Record your thoughts in the space provided below. If you are comfortable, share these with your classmates or colleagues.

3. For graduate educators: Consider having your students write and present about why they chose their respective discipline (e.g., school psychology, school counseling, social work, teaching, administration), their emerging beliefs about the field, the populations they are interested in serving, and their professional goals. Additionally, have them write about their philosophical orientation to serving students, families, schools, and communities as a professional. Having assigned these activities to graduate students in school and developmental psychology, they are helpful exercises that challenge trainees to think about why they chose the field, how their past experiences shape their beliefs about the field, and how they approach serving students, families, schools, and communities.

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CHAPTER 2

SERVING FAMILIES AND SCHOOLS: THE OVERLOOKED CLINICAL SKILLS

People don't care how much you know until they know
how much you care¹.

In serving students, families, schools, and communities, we are susceptible to thinking that we have all of the answers to the myriad issues facing children. Perhaps it is because we are passionate about what we do and invest ourselves in our work. And while we are often well-intentioned and have spent significant time and resources developing our skills to be more than competent educators, if we are not careful, our skills go unnoticed and ultimately the children whom we seek to help suffer.

Some of the information that will be presented in this chapter is covered, at least to some degree, in school psychology consultation courses. However, for my colleagues in related disciplines, you may not have been exposed to methods of collaborating with families, teachers, and other professionals to support the academic, social, emotional, and behavioral needs of children. For a review of evidenced-based behavioral consultation models², interested readers are encouraged to consider the *References and Resources for Professional Learn-*

ing at the end of this chapter. Following a brief explanation of the nature of schools, information will be presented in three sections: customer service, effective collaborative behaviors, and benefits for everyone.

THE NATURE OF SCHOOLS

Schools are some of the most politically-charged environments. In this context, political is not meant to be associated with partisan politics or political affiliation (e.g., Democrat, Republican, Independent), but institutions that are significantly influenced by power dynamics, structures, and hierarchies. While other industries' politics are often influenced by money, the nature of politics in schools is not necessarily economics, but the emotional investment that is inevitability associated with children. For school psychologists, effectively working with families, teachers, and administrators involves managing relationships with multiple individuals, some of whom may have competing interests. Especially for those of us who enjoy a great deal of flexibility and autonomy while serving several schools, we must intentionally cultivate and maintain relationships in order to position ourselves to share our knowledge and expertise in support of children.

CUSTOMER SERVICE

Every industry has a client. For educators, who is the client? Who is the beneficiary of our services? Consistent with the consultation literature, while the consultee is situationally dependent, the child is always the client. In other words, school psychologists collaborate with families in some instances, but also work closely with teachers and administrators in other circumstances.

Nevertheless, in all cases, as consultants working to develop the skill sets of our consultees, positive outcomes for children is the ultimate goal.

EFFECTIVE COLLABORATIVE BEHAVIORS

SPEND TIME DEVELOPING AN UNDERSTANDING OF THE SCHOOL CULTURE

The manner in which we begin our consultative relationships with consultees is critically important. Before offering intervention ideas to families, teachers, and staff, school psychologists should spend time thinking and learning about the following:

1. What do the students, families, teachers, and administrators in my school value? Are there differences in what these respective groups view as important?
2. What is my school's philosophical approach to instruction, discipline, and partnering with families? Are punitive approaches (i.e., suspension and expulsion) preferred rather than restorative practices?
3. How do teachers and administrators view effective instruction, differentiation, and intervention in reading, writing, and math?
4. How does my school support students who are not meeting grade level expectations?
5. How are data used to inform subsequent decisions about instruction and social, emotional, or behavioral support?
6. What are teachers' and administrators' understanding of Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) and Response to Intervention (RtI)?

7. How are students with disabilities supported and provided access to the general education curriculum? To what extent are inclusion models preferred over exclusionary practices?

While not an exhaustive list, these questions show that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to serving students, families, schools, and communities. School psychologists who are cognizant of this reality position themselves to understand the unique perspectives of their diverse constituent groups and utilize their training to support the identified needs. Especially for early career and very experienced psychologists, one of the most detrimental missteps is superimposing our recent training in best practices, or what has worked in previous settings, on our current placement. Thoughtfully developing an understanding of the culture is time well spent.

LISTENING IS GREATER THAN SPEAKING

In the words of my grandmother, *we have two ears and one mouth. Therefore, we should listen twice as much as we speak.* Although a lighthearted comment, its truth resonates with me, especially as a school psychologist. Relatedly, perhaps you have seen a picture on the Internet of two individuals looking at the same image. From one person's perspective the picture is clearly the number 6. But to the other person, it is equally clear that it is the number 9. For obvious reasons, not only are both individuals correct, but this example underscores that different is not necessarily synonymous with wrong.

When collaborating with families and teachers, effective school psychological practice involves first listening to and validating their concerns. Sensi-

tive school psychologists recognize that more than answers to their questions, clinical interpretations for their children's or students' presenting challenges, intervention suggestions to remediate a variety of skill and performance deficits, implications for next steps, or feeling that they are correct, individuals want to be heard and know that their concerns are reasonable. While seemingly unnecessary, validating families' and teachers' perspectives makes it exponentially easier to not only disagree with them, but to also offer ideas that they are more likely to consider. When school psychologists prematurely make suggestions before acknowledging and validating a family's or teacher's concerns, despite having a reasonable interpretation for the youngster's difficulties, it ultimately does not matter. Defensiveness and resistance take the place of openness to new ideas. A simple statement such as, "Sir, ma'am, I understand what you're saying. And what you're saying makes sense to me. However, another reason for the difficulty that [insert the child's or student's name] is experiencing at home or school is..." goes a long way.

Even after observing students, school psychologists and others who do not regularly spend time with children in their classrooms or at home should be mindful of dismissing families' and teachers' concerns because they did not personally witness the target behaviors. Remembering the principles of observer effects and demand characteristics, which assert that our presence in students' natural environments renders them no longer natural, are helpful to frame comments in ways that are both respectful and helpful to those with whom we seek to collaborate.

A LESSON FROM KENNY ROGERS

Some of the most popular lyrics from Kenny Rogers' *The Gambler*³ are also fitting for school psychologists. *You've got to know when to hold 'em, know when to fold 'em. Know when to walk away...* At times we have very strong professional feelings about decisions that are being contemplated by multi-disciplinary teams. For example, if you have not already, you will likely work with a family or teacher who is advocating for a special education evaluation despite the available data suggesting otherwise. In these situations, we should ask ourselves the following questions:

1. Could my analysis of the data or situation be incomplete, or perhaps wrong?
2. And because I could be wrong, is it worth being inflexible, especially when the other team members are equally passionate about their position? Note: This is even more relevant if additional data could be collected that would be helpful to the discussion and subsequent decision. For example, it is almost always advisable to refer a student for an evaluation and allow the additional data to inform the most appropriate next steps.

Having been in these situations over the years, evaluating the student can lead to one of two possibilities. First, our impressions could be confirmed and the student does not have an educational disability. If this happens, we have not won. Instead, we are better positioned to help teachers understand the factors involved in determining special education eligibility and how they can effectively meet the needs of their students. Remember: most teachers do

not have the specialized training and experience in identifying disabilities and would greatly appreciate learning more about the process. Further, the nature of people is that they sincerely want to understand how and why decisions are made. Rather than assuming that teachers are being difficult and disregarding what we are saying, school psychologists should listen to their concerns for their students, patiently explain our perspective, and move forward in the best interest of the child.

On the other hand, it is possible that our preliminary analysis was incorrect and the student does have an educational disability. Regardless of our knowledge and experience contributing to these decisions, we ultimately do not know whether students are eligible to receive special education services until we have completed a comprehensive evaluation. For this reason, remaining somewhat tentative about our impressions not only shows humility and grace, but it communicates that we value families and teachers for their intimate understanding of their children and students. On one occasion, I was evaluating a student for whom anxiety seemed to be the primary referral concern. However, after reviewing his file, I spoke with his mother and she shared valuable information that challenged my thinking and prompted additional assessments. After evaluating a few more cognitive abilities, the mother's impressions were correct. The child actually had a Specific Learning Disability (SLD) and his anxiety was secondary to his underlying academic difficulty.

Although time-consuming, in order to develop the most accurate understanding of students' difficulties, it is important to speak to parents about their concerns for their children. Despite having our own ideas about what is contributing to students' difficulties, we must remain open to other perspectives,

knowing that nothing will ever take the place of listening to families. While we do not have to know all of the answers, we must accept that parents at times know more than we do.

THE IMPORTANCE OF ASSUMPTIONS

While completing my graduate training, one of my practicum placements was in a diverse suburban school system. Working with a very experienced school psychologist, I learned one of the most valuable lessons of my budding career. My supervisor told me that he assumed all parents want the best for their children. This sentiment continues to resonate with me and influences how I practice today. Believing that parents—although they may not attend every parent-teacher conference, school event, or meeting—are unequivocally invested in their children's success, helps us to guard against our preconceived notions based on their observable behavior. When serving families who are forced to contend with the burden of limited financial resources, sensitive school psychologists frame their absence from school happenings as having nothing to do with their lack of interest in their children's education, but rather a function of the competing demand to provide food, clothing, and shelter. This rationale is also applicable to how school psychologists partner with teachers and administrators. Assuming that our colleagues are dedicated individuals who also have a vested interest in young people's success, the manner in which we interpret their behavior becomes quite different. Could it be that seemingly aggressive teachers—who want children evaluated due to the suspicion of an educational disability—may not be trying to circumvent the need for intervention and differentiated instruction, but genuinely believe that they are acting in the best interest of their students?

School psychologists have been trained to consider multiple sources of data to formulate the most accurate conclusions. Such consideration involves an awareness of our own, albeit subtle, assumptions that ultimately impact how we interact with consultees. Instead of criticizing and discounting families and teachers for behaviors or perspectives that may not be completely aligned with what we have come to acknowledge as best practices, we should help them to more effectively meet the needs of their children and students. As several individuals discussing a child are often communicating the same message, effective school psychologists identify common ground between all stakeholders while keeping what is best for the child priority.

THE NATURE OF THE FIELD IS SERVICE

School psychologists have the honor of being involved in work that can change the course of history. Moreover, the opportunity to collaborate with adults who will be instrumental in shaping students' social, emotional, behavioral, and academic development is humbling. The children whom we serve today will be faced with the challenges of civic leadership within our communities, the fiscal responsibility of our local and national economies, the weight of fostering a climate of respectful and inclusive politics, and the social well-being of our global society. For these and many other reasons, the work of school psychologists transcends a job. The untold benefit of our contribution for generations to come speaks to school psychologists as more than scientists and practitioners. Although profoundly understated, school psychologists are best understood as servants.

In serving students, families, schools, and communities, there are not many phrases that are more appropriate than “People don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care¹.” Whether good or bad, after we have been hired, our colleagues assume that we possess the requisite competencies and credentials to adequately fulfill our job responsibilities. However, we will never be able to use our skills in child and adolescent development; social, emotional, and behavioral functioning; academic and cognitive assessment; and preventative mechanisms for a host of difficulties if we do not know how to work with people. For this reason, it is imperative that school psychologists become a part of their school communities.

While serving an elementary school, volunteering for morning and afternoon bus duty remains one of the most valuable and beneficial experiences of my career. A new psychologist, I did not know what to do on the first day of school. Working with an assistant principal who was also new to his position, we learned many aspects of our jobs together. Standing outside as buses arrived allowed me to learn a lot about the students, their families, and the community. It afforded me informal face time as I got to know parents on their terms. Rather than families coming inside to meet me, I went outside to meet them. Bus duty also showed them who I was as a person, which was more important than my position as the school psychologist. Serving a school with a significant Latino population, I quickly learned that the term psychologist was culturally loaded. Whereas White families were generally not intimidated by my title, some Latino families were uncomfortable as they associated my child is crazy with the term psychologist. Over time, I realized that allowing all families to see me as the man who shook their hands and greeted their children before and after school was tremendously helpful in diffusing their anxieties and making

them more comfortable discussing their children's difficulties with me. In fact, over the course of 10 years, there are parents with whom I still keep in touch that I met while on bus duty. For staff, this showed them that I was a team player—a person who did not see himself as above certain duties but was willing to work with them on a rather mundane and non-preferred task. Because I was seen as involved in the school community, invested in its students and families, and supportive of teachers and staff, all of which were unrelated to the technical skills necessary for being a school psychologist, they were more open to implementing interventions. Rather than being told to do something by someone who did not know who they were, how much they cared about their students, and how hard they were working to ensure their success, I believe that teachers saw me as a colleague who could be helpful.

As stated earlier, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to serving schools. Because each building is different and has its own culture, we must be careful to figure out how we can become involved in the school and community without getting in the way. Although I was serving four schools at the time, my regular bus duty activities were only at one school. Not only was it impractical to be in four places at once, but my other schools did not necessarily have a need for me in this capacity. However, at another elementary school, my involvement and investment were shown through participating in its *Early Bird Reading* program. As students arrived before school to read, I met them in the cafeteria and placed a charm on their backpacks. This was helpful as I learned the names of students, some of whom were discussed in various meetings due to academic, social, emotional, or behavioral challenges. Rather than simply being a name to me, I knew them. These types of activities also inform our clinical practice. By getting to know teachers in both instructional and extra-curricular settings,

we understand them as individuals and their approaches to students and instruction. We learn about intervention programs that are available at schools, which assists us in making more appropriate recommendations.

Being mindful of how we are perceived as school psychologists, managing these perceptions, and intentionally becoming enmeshed in the school culture is helpful for everyone. Like teachers, families will also ask for our input: *[insert your name] what do you think about this situation with [insert child's name] at home? What can I do to help them to be more successful?* Parents and teachers are more interested in our ideas when they see that we genuinely care about their children and students.

EVERYONE BENEFITS

You are likely familiar with Oprah Winfrey, the billionaire media mogul, talk show host, actress, producer, philanthropist, and her iconic September 2004 *Oprah Winfrey Show* episode in which she gave her entire 276-member audience brand new cars⁴. However, her exuberant and repeated exclamations of, “You get a car!” overshadowed the significance of this moment in television history. More than receiving new cars, the audience members’ excitement was because a need was met in their lives. In other words, each individual was creatively and intentionally selected by the show’s producers based on needing a car. Tears of joy and shouts of happiness had less to do with receiving something new, than it was about filling a void.

And so it is with serving students, families, schools, and communities: we must meet their needs. Defensibly the most famous triangle in psychology, Abraham Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs⁵ shows that when individuals’ basic

needs are not met, it is more difficult for them to experience the other necessary needs. If children are hungry and tired, or don't feel safe in their homes and neighborhoods, how can we expect them to be available for reading, writing, and math instruction? As noted teacher and education activist Nicholas Ferroni has said, "Students who are loved at home come to school to learn; and students who aren't come to school to be loved⁶." Meeting children where they are—whether through establishing a trusting relationship or working with community resources to ensure that they have food to eat and a safe place to sleep—and helping them to meaningfully participate in their education is the joy of the profession. Regardless of our position, as we identify areas of need and work to address them, we will be more effective in our service to students, families, schools, and communities.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

Through spending time in schools, I have learned that some educators—principals, teachers, school psychologists—have not been taught how to work with people. While some industries place practice before people, the nature of education is relationships and people are always the priority.

This chapter did not provide any technical competencies for being an effective school psychologist, teacher, administrator, school social worker, or school counselor. If you are a graduate student, you are in the process of developing these skills. As a professional, you will continue to grow with experience and mentoring. Instead, this chapter explored professional behaviors and a way of doing things that allows us to work more effectively with families and schools. Perhaps some would refer to these as soft skills. Nevertheless, they are important. Developing an understanding of our school cultures, listening

more than we speak, taking the time to understand and validate the perspectives of others, and knowing when to offer ideas that respectfully challenge families' and teachers' ways of thinking while helping them to support their children and students are invaluable characteristics of professionals who are committed to the well-being and success of young people.

REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. At the end of Chapter 1, you considered your decision to become a teacher, administrator, school psychologist, school social worker, speech pathologist, or school counselor. Now, think about how you want others to view you in this role. How do you want to be perceived by parents, teachers, administrators, non-licensed staff, and students? Record your thoughts in the space provided below. If you are comfortable, share them with your classmates or colleagues.
2. How do the perceptions of students, families, and colleagues affect the degree to which we can effectively utilize our skills to fulfill our job responsibilities?

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