

School Culture

If you have run into a "brick wall" of resistance when you tried to obtain changes in your child's educational program, **you need to understand how schools really work**. You need to learn about "school culture" and the beliefs held by many educators, school psychologists, administrators, and guidance counselors.

Dr. Galen Alessi, Professor of Psychology at Western Michigan University, conducted a fascinating study on school psychologists. Dr. Alessi's study illustrates why so many parents have problems dealing with schools. Dr. Alessi's article is "Diagnosis Diagnosed: A Systemic Reaction" published in Professional School Psychology, 3(2), 145-151.

The primary role of the school psychologist is to evaluate children to determine the reasons for learning and behavior problems. According to Dr. Alessi, when a child has trouble learning or behaving in school, the source of the child's problem can usually be traced to **one or more of five causes**.

First, the child may be misplaced in the **curriculum**, or the curriculum may include faulty teaching routines.

Second, the **teacher** may not be implementing effective teaching and/or behavioral management practices.

Third, the **principal and/or other school administrators** may not be implementing effective school management practices.

Fourth, the **parents** may not be providing the home-based support necessary for effective learning.

Fifth, the **child** may have physical and/or psychological problems that contribute to learning problems.

School psychologists from different areas of the country were interviewed and asked to complete an informal survey. The school psychologists were asked if they agreed that the five factors listed above play a "primary role in a given school learning or behavior problem." (Page 148) The school psychologists agreed that these factors, alone or together, played a significant role in children's learning problems.

The school psychologists were surveyed about the number of children they evaluated during the past year for learning problems. The average number was about 120 cases (or kids). These numbers were rounded to 100 cases for each of the 50 psychologists for a total of 5,000 cases.

Alessi asked these psychologists how many reports they wrote in which they concluded that the child's learning problem was mainly due to **curriculum factors**. "The answer was usually none. All cases out of the 5,000 examined confirmed that their schools somehow had been fortunate enough to have adopted only the most effective basal curricula." (Page 148)

Next, he asked how many reports concluded that the referring problem was due primarily to **inappropriate teaching practices**. "The answer also was none. All cases out of the 5,000

examined proved that their districts had been fortunate enough to have hired only the most skilled, dedicated, and best prepared teachers in the land." (Page 149)

Then, he asked the psychologists how many of their reports found that the problem was due mainly to **faulty school administrative factors**. "The answer again was none. All cases out of 5,000 examined demonstrated that their districts had hired and retained only the nation's very best and brightest school administrators." (Page 149)

When asked how many reports concluded that **parent and home factors** were primarily responsible, the answer ranged from 500 to 1,000 (10% to 20%). These positive findings indicated that we were finally getting close to the source of educational problems in schools. Some children just don't have parents who are smart, competent, or properly motivated to help their children do well in school.

Finally, I asked how many reports concluded that **child factors** were primarily responsible for the referred problem. The answer was 100%. These 5,000 positive findings uncovered **the true weak link in the educational process** in these districts: **the children themselves**.

If only these districts had better functioning children with a few more supportive parents, there would be no educational difficulties. (Page 149)

Dr. Alessi noted that in IEP disputes, "family factors are invoked most often when the parent does not attend the meeting, or if the parent is involved in a way deemed 'inappropriate' by the school staff. Otherwise, child factors alone seem to carry the explanatory burden for school learning and behavior problems." (Page 149)

Based on the results of these 5,000 reports prepared by school psychologists, "the results indicate clearly **no need to improve curricula, teaching practices, nor school administrative practices and management**. The only needs somehow involve improving the stock of children enrolled in the system, and some of their parents." (Page 149)

Alessi expressed serious concerns about his findings. If school psychologists define children's learning problems as existing solely within the child, "it is equally unclear how school psychologists can help resolve this kind of problem. School psychologists seem to define school problems in ways that cannot be resolved."

When Dr. Alessi shared these findings with the school psychologists, many protested that "all five factors are indeed responsible for school problems in the cases they studied, but that **informal school policy (or 'school culture') dictates that conclusions be limited to child and family factors**."

Many feel that they could lose their jobs were they to invoke school-related factors. Certainly, they claim, their professional lives would be made very uncomfortable . . . **The fact remains that no school psychologist in the group had determined that any existing problems were due to school-related factors.**" (Page 149)

The "Child-as-the-Problem"

Dr. Alessi discussed several additional reasons for the prevailing "child-as-the-problem" perspective of school psychologists. Graduate school programs focus on child problems and

ignore or exclude school-related factors. Workshops and papers presented at school psychology conferences share the "child-as-the-problem" focus. Most school psychology journals focus exclusively on child factors.

School psychology textbooks have a clear "child-as-the-problem" bias. After examining several "mainstream" school psychology texts, Alessi found that when assessing children's reading problems, school factors were mentioned as a factor between 7% and 0% (zero) of the time. "Child factors" were held responsible for reading problems between 90% to 100% of the time.

Citing a classic book on reading disability, Alessi noted that it included no chapters about the connection between reading problems and school factors. The entire book focused on "child factors." (Page 150)

The "child-as-the-problem" bias also pervades school psychology research and practice. Alessi referenced one work that presented an extensive review of the research on learning disabilities. "Of the approximately 1,000 studies reviewed, not one examined the relation between school factors and learning disabilities." (Page 150)

In conclusion, Alessi observed that "Parents trust school psychologists not to adopt assessment practices that are inherently biased in ways that could hinder, rather than help, their children." (Page 148)

"Ethical Burdens" on Psychologists

Dr. Alessi discussed the "**ethical burdens**" on school psychologists:

As this body of research grows, school psychologists will increasingly face the burden of deciding whether they work for the schools or for the children, in cases where the interests clash. (Page 150) 'We end with a discussion of the ethical burdens on school psychologists to be forthright and honest when reporting their findings.'

He posed some questions: (Page 150)

Are we really helping children by concluding that children alone are responsible for their educational problems?

Are we helping the school system at the expense of the children?

How do we balance the rights of those who pay for our services against those who receive our services, when interests clash?

Is the role of the school psychologist to label children to help schools avoid improving faulty educational practices, or to help schools improve faulty educational practices to avoid labeling children?

Implications

As the parents of a child with special educational needs, what does this study tell you?

If you believe the staff at your child's school are not willing to look at what they need to do differently to help your child learn, you may be right.

If you believe that you and/or your child are being blamed for your child's learning problems, you may be right.

And if you believe that school factors (i.e., an inappropriate curriculum, faulty teaching, ineffective school administration and management practices) are contributing to your child's problems, you may be right.