



## Scientific research in school psychology: Leading researchers weigh in on its past, present, and future <sup>☆</sup>

Kent McIntosh <sup>a,\*</sup>, Rebecca S. Martinez <sup>b</sup>, Sophie V. Ty <sup>c</sup>, Maryellen B. McClain <sup>b</sup>



<sup>a</sup> University of Oregon, USA

<sup>b</sup> Indiana University, USA

<sup>c</sup> University of British Columbia, Canada

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### ABSTRACT

A survey of established researchers in school psychology was conducted to reflect on the state of the science of school psychology research. A total of 54 members of the Society for the Study of School Psychology shared their perceptions of (a) the most significant findings of the past 25 years that have influenced research and practice in school psychology, (b) current, exciting research topics, and (c) topics that are likely to guide the future of research in school psychology. Qualitative analyses revealed 6 major categories and 17 minor categories within the major categories. Four major categories were present across each of the three time periods: (a) Data-Informed Practices and their Implementation, (b) Theory Development, (c) Changing Role and Function, and (d) Biological Bases of Behavior. Additional major categories included Advances in Research Methodology and Psychometrics (found across past and present time periods) and There is Not One Single Most Important Idea (found during only the past time period). Quotations are provided to illustrate these categories and share the respondents' ideas in their own words.

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### 1. Introduction

At pivotal intervals in any scientific field's evolution, it may be worthwhile to pause for critical examination of its research base and directions. In the field of astronomy and astrophysics, for example, a panel of distinguished scholars convenes every decade to survey the state of the field and recommend research priorities for the next 10 years (*Committee for a Decadal Survey of Astronomy and Astrophysics, & National Research Council, 2010*). Similarly, in school psychology, scholars have convened twice (in 2002 and 2012) through the *MultiSite Conference on the Future of School Psychology* (*D'Amato, Sheridan, Phelps, & Lopez, 2003*), assembling the top scholars in the field to discuss the state of the field and recommend future priorities for research and practice. In addition, a number of school psychology journal special issues have been devoted to reporting comments about directions for the field from a small group of luminaries (e.g., *Fagan & Sheridan, 2000; Pfeiffer & Dean, 1988*). For example, *Sheridan and Gutkin (2000)* evaluated school psychology in terms of "where it has been, where it is, and where it needs to go" (p. 485) and proposed a paradigm shift in school psychology practice rooted squarely in the ecological framework.

Bringing a small group of scholars together to present their views is useful, but it may also be advantageous to hold a conversation with a larger group regarding the state of research and directions for the field. Such a comprehensive and reflective

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\* Corresponding author at: University of Oregon, 1235 University of Oregon, Eugene, OR 97403, USA. Tel.: +1 541 346 2340; fax: +1 541 346 5517.

E-mail address: [kentm@uoregon.edu](mailto:kentm@uoregon.edu) (K. McIntosh).

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scholarly activity may reveal the extent of agreement in perspectives about what constitutes that field's seminal works and ideas of the past and present. As opposed to the more common practice of developing concept papers and commentaries to appear in school psychology journals, rigorous research is needed to examine the degree of consensus (or diversity) regarding the areas of research and specific studies that have shaped research programs in school psychology yesterday and today. Such research could provide interesting findings regarding how perspectives on important research of the past have shaped current trends. More importantly, perhaps, it may also engender exciting discourse and enthusiasm for what problems should be addressed in the future.

Reflective research may be most useful in fields that draw upon research from many disciplines, such as school psychology. School psychology's multidisciplinary nature is defined by its broad-based training and specialization, which are informed by the concepts, theories, and practices from various disciplines, including educational, developmental, cognitive, social, biological, and clinical psychology (D'Amato, Zafirris, McConnell, & Dean, 2011; Gutkin & Reynolds, 2009; La Greca & Hughes, 1999). Cross sectional reviews of current research in multidisciplinary fields offer limited insight into that field's scientific evolution, however. Scientific research in school psychology does not always follow a linear path; rather, it prompts and is prompted by the educational and psychological contexts of the day (e.g., Fagan & Wise, 2007; Merrell, Ervin, & Gimpel Peacock, 2012). Further, much of the published literature examining trends in school psychology has emphasized practice-based issues in the field. Our focus in this paper is on the *science* of school psychology—its research and theory—as opposed to a focus solely on practice.

For the current study, we drew inspiration from the Edge Foundation (<http://www.edge.org/>), an informal, collective think tank of contributors whose mission is “to arrive at the edge of the world's knowledge, seek out the most complex and sophisticated minds, put them in a room together, and have them ask each other the questions they are asking themselves.” Since 1996, the Edge Foundation has polled extraordinary thinkers from diverse disciplines (e.g., scientists, philosophers, artists, entrepreneurs) to reflect on one question each year. Responses are posted on the foundation's website and published in an annual book (e.g., Brockman, 2013). The questions for the last three years were: (a) what is your favorite deep, elegant, or beautiful explanation? (2012), (b) what scientific concept would improve everybody's cognitive toolkit? (2011), and (c) how is the Internet changing the way you think? (2010).

It is with the Edge Foundation enterprise in mind that the current Editor of the Journal of School Psychology commissioned a study to invite a group of the most influential and respected researchers in the field of school psychology to share their perspectives regarding the most important ideas or research findings to the science of school psychology. These scholars were asked to share a single most important idea or research finding for three points in time: the past 25 years, the present day, and the next 25 years. The primary purpose of the study was to provide an opportunity for reflection regarding what previous research has been most influential to school psychology, what pressing research is currently shaping the field, and what are the most likely research directions for the future. A secondary goal was an attempt to capture the present moment in the history of school psychology, based on the opinions of some of the most recognized scholars in the field, in an effort to share the state of research to inform and inspire an array of audiences in school psychology, including graduate students, early career scholars, and mid to late career scholars.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Respondents

The study's respondents were 54 members of the Society for the Study of School Psychology (SSSP; <http://www.ssspresearch.org>), an independent organization of scholars committed to furthering the scientific base of the profession of school psychology and psychological practice in the schools. According to the SSSP Membership Recruitment Procedures, criteria for membership include members' potential to contribute to the field by demonstrating: (a) substantial involvement in the field of school psychology and ongoing commitment to making significant scientific contributions, and (b) a commitment to service to the Society and its ongoing objectives. As such, this study's target population is an intact group of scholars in the field of school psychology; however, this study's sample certainly does not represent the entire population of recognized scholars in the field.

The pool of potential respondents included the 107 active SSSP members (as of November 2011) with email contact information available from the SSSP, their most recent university affiliation, or the American Psychological Association (APA) Registry at the time of the study. This pool included 95% of the total all-time membership of 113.<sup>1</sup> The participation rate of potential respondents in this pool was 50%, a much higher rate than is common in email surveys (Kaplowitz, Hadlock, & Levine, 2004), possibly due to the specificity of the targeted population or potential appeal of the study. A list of respondents and their affiliations is provided in Table 1.

### 2.2. Measure

The survey was a 3-item questionnaire that respondents were invited to complete electronically. The three items elicited respondents' reflections about seminal research informing school psychology for three time periods: the past 25 years, the present day, and the next 25 years:

Question 1. What has been the single most important idea or research finding—in psychology, education, or related fields—to the science of school psychology over the past 25 years, and why has it been so important?

<sup>1</sup> Randy G. Floyd, Editor of the *Journal of School Psychology*, was excluded from the pool because he commissioned the manuscript and served as action editor.

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