

NJPA Introductory Article

As an idealistic young teacher, I sought to connect to my students; to provide a listening ear and be a committed advocate. However, I often felt that I was limited in my role and with my training. Seeing the need for mental health within the schools, I sought to fill this void by going back to school to train as a psychologist. Now, as a third-year student at the Graduate School of Applied and Professional Psychology at Rutgers, I am “living the dream”, as I pursue my education in a field that seeks to serve those who are in need.

I entered the field of school psychology with a strong desire to help every child and an understanding of the distinct challenges of the school setting. My varied experience, in a range of grades and educational settings, has furnished me with awareness of the diversity of the current student population and sensitivity to the individual needs of each child. As a teacher of adolescents in mainstream high school classes and elementary school children in a special education setting, I confronted the challenge of trying to educate children who had turbulent social, emotional, or family situations. With any student, I discovered, learning cannot take place in a vacuum. If social, emotional, and psychological needs are not met, learning usually takes backstage to the larger issues. As an educator, I channeled my creativity and knowledge to advance the overall welfare of each child, as well as to stimulate learning and motivation. I learned to harness my position to advocate for students, partnering with principals and other faculty to foster the collaboration necessary to help each child succeed. As an intuitive listener and a practical problem solver, I succeeded with difficult students and managed challenging classrooms where others could not. Through these undertakings, I gained a deep appreciation for the need to consistently view the child as a whole person, considering social, emotional, and psychological needs in conjunction with academic functioning. As a school psychologist, I hope to draw on my experience and use the insight I have gained on a greater scale. As I have done for the students in my classroom, I can advocate to address the totality of every student and foster a collaborative school environment, in which teachers, parents, and administrators are partnered in attaining common goals.

My experience as an educator has been largely positive and productive. However, I have come to acknowledge the limitations of my role, as well as shortcomings within the system at large. It is this realization that fuels my desire to become a school psychologist. Despite my success in the classroom and in reaching challenging students, my influence as a teacher was limited. My position within the school system was that of a teacher, not a mental health provider, and I was therefore not equipped to address students’ psychological needs. Working in an organization with complex relationship and power dynamics, I had to pragmatically maintain my boundaries, and could not always act upon my concerns or intuitions. In addition, oftentimes I felt that my ability to help specific children was hindered by a system where problems either went undetected or were not always identified correctly. Even when teachers and administrators sensed that something was amiss, defects in the assessment process caused mislabeled and mistreated problems. As an educator, I am aware of the influence that the school experience wields and its potential to impact a child both positively and negatively. Armed with my

NJPA Introductory Article

observations and the awareness I've acquired, I chose to enter the field of school psychology in order to gain the skills I need to maximize my ability to effect change within the school system.

For the past year and a half, I have had the opportunity to partner with the Child Study Team at Ramtown and Greenville schools in Howell Township. There, I was once again in a school setting, but in a very different capacity. I was now responsible for the assessment and classification of students, as well as for their psychological welfare. I learned a wealth of new skills, including testing, counseling, teacher consultation, and case management. My supervisor, a GSAPP alumnus, was a true role model in juggling the needs of every student along with the many technical requirements of her role. The warm and professional atmosphere of the school was a fertile ground for promoting positive change within the diverse range of students they served.

This year, I have chosen to channel my experiences working with children into a clinical context, as an extern at the Tourette Syndrome Program at Rutgers University. This clinic provides psychological treatment to children and adults with Tourette syndrome and comorbid conditions, such as ADHD, OCD, and anxiety, and is one of very few clinics serving this unique population. There are several goals I hope to attain as an extern this year. Through conducting diagnostic interviews, my goal is to become more adept at honing in on specific presenting problems, and at clarifying what symptoms are most distressing to clients. I also hope to improve my therapeutic skills through collaborating with clients and their families to create treatment goals and outcomes that both parents and children can agree upon and take pride in. Furthermore, I hope to use my knowledge of the school system to join forces with the schools that my clients attend. Through partnering with case managers, teachers, and other school personnel, I can raise awareness of Tourette syndrome and of the challenges that children with Tourette's face in school. Moreover, through my familiarity with the intricacies and procedures of the school system, I can ensure that there is support and consistency with treatment in the child's school environment as well. I also anticipate opportunities to refine my public speaking skills by presenting to school personnel on the topic of Tourette syndrome in schools. Finally, my overarching goal is to always link research to practice, through combining evidence based practices with expert therapeutic skills, to deliver comprehensive care to the clients I serve.