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## ***Personal Research Agenda***

As a first year tenure track assistant professor, there is an obvious need to develop a research agenda that will yield at least two or three publications per year over the next five years. While I would like to become an expert in an area that has not been adequately explored, it is perhaps equally important to be able to work on a variety of projects simultaneously. I have never been short of research ideas, but I am considerably more polished as a clinician than a researcher at this point in my career. Consequently, I am drawn to applied research and the unique challenges associated with enacting real change and evaluating the outcomes of actual interventions. Potential areas/types of research of interest include:

- Advancing the field of school psychology
- School-based mental health
- Consultation/behavior management
- Prevention and early intervention programs
- Students referred for special education but do not qualify
- Slow learners
- Development and evaluation of educational programs (e.g., after-school tutoring)
- Individual and family psychotherapy
- Treatment efficacy research
- Evaluation of Remedial and After-School Tutoring Programs

At this time I am developing a specialist level school psychology program at the University of Missouri-St. Louis. Our eventual goal is to become a NASP-approved program (Missouri has just one existing school psychology training program at the University of Missouri-Columbia, and it is not NASP-approved). During the 2001-02 school year, there were just 103 certified school psychologists working in districts across the state (83 of whom work in the St. Louis area). The vast majority of individuals providing school psychology services are actually school counselors who are dually certified as psychological examiners and do the testing for their districts. As a result, few

practitioners are trained school psychologists or do anything more than testing.

Although school psychological services in Missouri lag far behind most other states across the country, this situation provides a golden opportunity to advance the field of school psychology through demonstration projects. I developed and implemented a school-based mental program for a rural district in Southeast Arkansas that provides comprehensive school psychological services as part of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Center (21<sup>st</sup> CCLC) grant. The 21<sup>st</sup> CCLC has a School-Based Mental Health program and an After-School program. Both programs provide prevention and early intervention services for at-risk students. The After-School program is a combined remedial/recreational program, whereas the Mental Health program provides comprehensive school psychological services for all students in the district (especially those with behavior problems). The program utilizes a pre-referral process to identify and implement an appropriate combination of indirect and direct services on a case by case basis.

My plan over the next three to five years is to continue working with the school-based mental health program, carry out ongoing program evaluation, and obtain grant funding to implement similar programs here in Missouri. This model naturally lends itself to applied research in the areas of interest to me.

A second line of research currently underway is a longitudinal study of students referred for special education who did not qualify. I have identified a population of 1,600 such students from the Special School District of St. Louis County from the 2001-02 school year. I have several studies in mind for this data including general characteristics of non-qualifiers, interventions provided subsequent to ineligibility, and examination of

educational and psychosocial outcomes. I am especially interested in identifying and working with slow learners from this population in the hopes of generating much needed research in this area. Ultimately, I want to develop and evaluate remedial and after school programs for at-risk students.

### ***Collaborative Multi-Site Research***

As the only school psychologist at my university, my vision of a collaborative multi-site research project begins with a sense of adequate professional support. I currently lack the necessary financial resources, personnel, and collegial support at my institution to carry out any large scale school psychology projects. I have a clear picture of what I want to accomplish and close working relationships with interested local school districts. However, I lack formal research experience and need a mentor with expertise in school psychology research.

My ideal collaborative project would be to establish several sites across the country where comprehensive school psychological services could be implemented. Appropriate sites would be schools in any districts where school psychological services are limited exclusively to psychoeducational assessment and can have a 1,000-1,500:1 student to school psychologist ratio. I would like to obtain consumer satisfaction data via surveys completed by students, parents, teachers, administrators, and other school services personnel to obtain a baseline measure prior to implementing an expanded role. It would also be necessary to gather district level information regarding retention rates, discipline referrals, suspension/expulsion, state assessment data, typical number of special education referrals, and eligibility rates.

The school psychologists participating in this study would all be Certified School Psychologists who have completed at least a master's degree in school psychology (separate analyses could be run with level of degree as the independent variable). Each school would need to have or initiate a pre-referral process involving a Child Study Team or CARE Team. The school psychologist would provide a brief presentation detailing the procedures for all staff prior to the start of the school year. A critical component of this process is for the school psychologist to become viewed and assume the role as the primary person responsible for ensuring that all cases are taken care of in a timely manner.

During the Child Study Team meetings, intervention decisions are made ranging from any or all of the following: monitor (no action required at this time), academic consultation or modifications, behavior consultation, development of a formal behavior management program, parent meeting, individual, group, or family counseling, screening of academic skills, curriculum-based assessment, and/or referral for comprehensive special education evaluation.

Specific issues/questions to be addressed include:

1. What effect does this pre-referral process have upon eventual referrals, eligibility rates, retention, suspensions/expulsions, and state assessment scores?
2. How do consumer attitudes change as the school psychologist assumes an expanded role?
3. Is this a cost-effective model of delivering school psychological services?
4. Are administrators willing to allocate more funding for comprehensive school psychological services than they are currently spending for testing?

5. Will this expanded role help us break from our historical reliance upon special education funding?
6. Are there any differences in satisfaction/success as a function of setting (urban vs. rural)?
7. What are the individual characteristics of school psychologists in successful (and unsuccessful) sites?

Funding for this project would depend entirely upon the number of districts interested in participating and the willingness of the corresponding administrators to expand the role of their current school psychologist. I have a couple districts here where this would not cost anything more to do, but it conceivably could run as high as \$10-30,000 per site. In addition, at least one part-time research assistant (10 hours per week for 30 weeks at \$10 per hour = \$3,000) would be needed at each site for data collection, database management, and entry of information. The project will need to run for at least two years (three is preferred) to have sufficient time to assimilate into the schools and become a valued member of the educational community.

The main advantage of this project as a collaborative multi-site program is that of power. Several different locations are needed to control for potential subject variables, as any one site may succeed or fail as a function of individual characteristics of the school psychologist rather than the model itself. The more sites that produce successful outcomes, the more likely we are to obtain additional funding for the program and gain momentum for an expanded role for school psychologists across the country.

Finally, in addition to carrying out the research described above, my location in a large urban area in the Midwest allows me to contribute as a secondary party to other

large scale research projects. No matter what population of students a fellow researcher intends to study - from urban to suburban to rural - I should be able to arrange it. I offer professional skills and am interested in a variety of applied projects. Most importantly, I am committed to the field of school psychology and eager to develop my skills as a researcher and scholar. I appreciate the opportunity to apply for this program and thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Donald A. Gouwens, Psy. D.

***Project I: Slow Learners***

The proposed project has multiple goals, but the primary purpose is to initiate a longitudinal study of educational and psychosocial outcomes for students who are considered to be slow learners (70-85 IQ). During the 2001-02 school year, more than 1,600 students were evaluated and diagnosed “non-disabled” (i.e., did not qualify for special education) by the Special School District of St. Louis County. Slow learners are especially unlikely to qualify for special education because they do not meet the administrative requirements of average intelligence needed for a learning disability and do not score low enough to qualify for mental retardation. While we have considerable information regarding special education outcomes, limited information exists regarding students who do not qualify for special education. Hence, this project is designed to use

the Special School District database (and hopefully others from collaborative sites) of students who were referred but did not qualify for special education to obtain outcome data for these students and identify a subgroup of slow learners for a longitudinal study.

Once the subgroup of slow learners is identified, additional data will be collected for all (or depending on sample size and available resources a random sample) of these students via parent, teacher, and student interviews, reviews of school records, behavior rating scales, and individual assessment using norm-referenced and curriculum-based measures. Annual follow-up evaluations will be carried out with these subjects in the spring of each year. The long-term goals of this project are to identify the characteristics of slow learners associated with successful outcomes, create efficient screening methods, and develop effective intervention programs.

A final aspect of this project involves eligibility criteria and rates. Missouri state regulations mandate the use of grade norms when evaluating ability-achievement discrepancies, and in October 2001 the eligibility criteria for learning disabilities were changed from a regression formula to a straight 22-point discrepancy. Both decisions apparently were intended to decrease the number of students who qualify for special education services. Thus, in addition to research on slow learners in particular, additional goals of this project are to describe the characteristics of students found ineligible for special education during 2002-02, provide follow-up data on these students, and investigate the extent to which changes in learning disability eligibility criteria affected eligibility rates.

#### *Slow Learners Summary*

- I. 1,600 surveys are sent to parents to assess educational and psychosocial

- outcomes for all students who were declared non-disabled in 2001-02
- II. Existing assessment data and parent survey results are entered into database
  - III. Descriptive analyses of non-disabled characteristics and one-year outcome data
  - IV. Recalculation of eligibility rates using regression formula and age norms
  - V. Identify target sample of slow learners
  - VI. Collect additional data on slow learners via interviews, rating scales, and testing
  - VII. Annual follow-up with slow learners
  - VIII. Develop and evaluate remedial/intervention programs for slow learners

### ***Project II: School Psychological Services***

A second project is planned involving the transition to an expanded role for school psychologists. Missouri has a significant shortage of qualified school psychologists to the extent that school psychological services across the state are almost exclusively limited to a test and place model of service delivery. The Special School District of St. Louis County is the sole provider of special education evaluations and services for all schools in the county and employs 147 school psychology personnel (less than 50% are certified School Psychologists). These factors often lead to intense (albeit valid) criticism of the services provided by Special School District and strained relationships with the local school districts they serve. Thus, in addition to shortages of qualified staff, it is unknown how receptive local schools will be to a different model of service delivery. Data are also needed regarding the extent to which individual school psychologists want to provide an expanded role, as many seem content with the test and place model.

The Special School District recognizes the limitations of a test and place model and is committed to implementing a problem-solving model over the next two years. Hence, this study is designed to facilitate this process through the systematic development, implementation, and evaluation of a problem-solving model of school psychological services in St. Louis County (and any other collaborative sites). Baseline data regarding efficacy and satisfaction with current practices will be collected between now and the start of school next fall when project implementation is scheduled to begin. This will include surveys of parent, teacher, administrator, and school psychologist attitudes toward existing services as well as collection of data regarding the number of special education referrals, eligibility rates, utilization of time/accountability, state assessment results, and discipline reports. This information will enable evaluation of future effects associated with the change in service delivery models.

The development phase of the project includes identifying volunteers, obtaining support for the problem-solving roles from partner schools, and training school psychology staff. Survey results and a series of preliminary meetings will be used to identify interested school psychologists and partner schools. The Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education has contracted with Dr. Dan Reschly to provide a “trainer of trainers” training in June 2003. Between the University of Missouri-St. Louis and Special School District, at least three representatives from St. Louis area should participate in the problem-solving training. These individuals will then serve as trainers and provide ongoing supervision during program implementation.

From an administrative standpoint, the actual implementation of the problem-solving model initially will require a substantial reduction in assessment caseload,

inclusion of regular education consultation in job description (productivity typically is based upon number of referrals processed in a test and place model), involvement and acceptance in CARE Team meetings (pre-referral), and ongoing supervision and support. Special emphasis will be placed upon increased visibility within the school and the development of collegial relationships with principals, teachers, student support staff, and parents.

Evaluation will include formative and summative components via surveys, performance evaluation, accountability data, and educational outcomes of referred students. An important goal of this study is to produce cost-effectiveness data regarding the problem-solving model; this information is considered essential to gaining administrative support for the expanded role among local districts and across the state.