

Obstacles to the Development of School Psychology and School Counselling in Germany and Perspectives for the Future

Norbert Grewe^{1,*}, Lutz Thomas¹

¹Professor, Institute of Psychology, University of Hildesheim, Hildesheim, Germany

*Correspondence should be addressed to Norbert Grewe, grewe@uni-hildesheim.de

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Abstract

This commentary refers to the article: 'The future of psychology in schools – a review and outlook: with particular reference to the role of school psychology'. For a better understanding, some additional information has also been included. Basic problems in the German education system, as they have become apparent (among other things) in international studies, must be urgently addressed. Meanwhile, educational and psychological research has produced numerous results that suggest better solutions in many areas. So far, however, it has not been possible to deploy research and school psychological resources in such a systematic way that they can effectively support a reform of the education system. A review of the history of school psychology reveals misguided developments and perspectives for the future.

Keywords: School psychology, Case management, Counselling teams, Educational and Psychological research

Introduction

In 2023, the German Association of Psychologists (BDP) invited to the congress '100 years of school psychology' and announced the motto 'More psychology in schools'. But what was there to celebrate other than the long-standing existence of the profession? What has school psychology achieved throughout this time to address the increasing problems in schools? Is school psychological counselling today so well established that it meets the expectations of teachers, School leaders and school inspectors as well as parents and children for professional school counselling? Do the universities provide practically relevant research results and qualified training concepts to meet these expectations.

Considering the low development of school psychology in Germany, it can be assumed that educational policy had doubts about the efficiency of school psychological work in various phases. The supply ratio of one school psychologist per five thousand pupils, as planned by the Conference of Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs and the Federal-State Commission in 1973, is today [1] only achieved in 7 federal states of the 16 federal states, none of which is below 1:3,000.

The current international standard would correspond to a ratio of 1:1,000. Superficially, the obstacles to expanding the number of positions arose from budget cuts and restructuring in the education system. For example, for a long time, Lower Saxony was one of the 'worst performers' in expanding school psychology, and in the context of a school administration reform at the beginning of the 2000s, it even planned to reduce the number of positions from just under 90 to initially 50, then 40. Such drastic cuts were only reversed after the Erfurt and Winnenden school shootings in 2002 respectively 2009, which made the urgent need for crisis intervention clear and highlighted the need for new positions for emergency response teams that could be deployed quickly.

How could such drastic cuts and reductions be justified? Would not more support and counselling services have been more appropriate in view of ongoing social trends: falling birth rates, increasing divorce and single-parent rates, and the influx of refugees and migrants? Did not the growing importance of education and upbringing require a reorientation of counselling to meet both the strong demand for higher-level qualifications and the need to ensure that social and emotional skills were not neglected?

Undesirable Developments in the Establishment of School Psychology in Germany

The article “The future of psychology in schools” attempts to investigate the question of which obstacles and undesirable developments were responsible for the limited acceptance of school psychology work during the expansion phase:

1) At the beginning of the 1970s, educational–psychological research at the universities had little to offer for a counselling practice in a school context. There was no special degree program in ‘school psychology’: significantly to this day, there are only two institutes at German universities that offer this degree program. The degree program covering educational–psychological research was considered within the general diploma program, and for the practice of school psychology, primarily covered skills in the area of test diagnostics and report writing, as well as procedures for conducting and evaluating scientific studies. Theories and diagnostic instruments for promoting learning development, for evaluating and developing teaching methods, and for preventing and intervening in cases of abnormalities and disorders were not developed until the 1990s. Newer approaches, such as supervision and teacher coaching, analysis of learning prerequisites and learning strategy training, social learning and improvement of the classroom climate, were not yet part of the training of teachers and school psychologists.

2) While psychology training at universities until the 1980s mainly qualified students for school career counselling, the tasks assigned by the education authorities for school psychology work included not only school career counselling but also individual case counselling and system counselling, for which they were not trained.

3) In addition, the educational administration imposed a framework of distribution and responsibility that required all schools to have access to psychological counselling. To ensure that all schools had access to psychological counselling, the schools were allocated to the available school psychology posts purely on a mathematical basis. It therefore did not matter how many schools a school psychologist was responsible for; the important thing was that all schools were ‘covered’. The quantitative challenge was compounded by the qualitative challenge of being able to deal with every school problem that arose at the allocated schools—at times a school psychology post was responsible for 10,000–20,000 pupils.

4) Involvement in school activities was only rudimentary. Most school psychologists worked in isolation in administrative offices, and the few who were initially assigned to a single comprehensive school were withdrawn from the schools in the 1990s due to staff shortages.

- Services that excluded teaching and focused on changing individual students were readily accepted.

- Diagnostic screenings and social group training to prevent problems were difficult to integrate into school activities.
- Participation in state-wide reform projects, such as school development consultancy, was only sporadic and short-term.
- School practitioners lacked knowledge about the competences and possible fields of work of school psychologists.
- This often resulted in a discrepancy between unrealistically high expectations of individual case assistance (‘curing or ‘getting rid of’ problem–children) and the possibilities of school psychology. In 1978, Selvini–Plazzoli summed up this situation with the symbol of a ‘disillusioned magician’ who had not yet found his place in school.

5) Cooperation between universities and school psychology was hardly developed. Psychological institutes occasionally conducted research projects in schools, but were not very interested in involving school psychologists. With a few exceptions in the present day, notably the University School in Cologne, the educational authorities did not take any initiatives to promote more intensive exchanges.

Conclusion

The rapid expansion of counselling services through education policy at the turn of the 1970s was marked by expectations that the knowledge of educational psychology and the skills of school psychologists at that time were severely limited. The broad range of tasks outlined in the school psychology decrees also proved to be too much for many of the young school psychologists. Many teachers in addition, held the opinion that school psychology could change problematic pupil behavior in isolation, without involving teaching or social relationships in the classroom.

Perspectives and Impulses for a School Psychology of the Future

Meanwhile, the situation has changed. The research in educational psychology has made enormous progress and the personnel in school psychology are much better trained and have gained experience in important areas of practice. Nevertheless, there are still some factors that hinder the efficient use of school psychology, especially as expectations of school practice are still primarily focused on individual case support. In Wagner’s survey (2018), secondary school pupils cited learning and performance difficulties (approx. 70%) and social problems (approx. 20%) as their biggest problems [2]. In particular, over 90% of the young people surveyed would like additional help with learning and performance problems [2]. However, the support offered by school psychology in this area

appears to be limited. In the study 'Deutsches Schulbarometer 2025', 71% of teachers stated that their schools did not provide sufficient support for pupils with psychosocial problems through school psychology [3].

In the light of the specific support needs of schools, future school psychology should therefore be guided by the following principles:

1. The focus of school psychology should not be solely the responsibility for certain schools and all the counselling issues that arise, but by expertise in specific topics. Only specialization and continuous further training in accordance with scientific standards can ensure in a few areas that school issues are dealt with in accordance with the 'state of the art'.
2. Collaboration in multi-professional teams with special education teachers, school social workers, and external counselling centers, as well as advising teachers on the implementation of measures in the classroom, should be standard practice in school psychology work.

Further Perspectives and Trends for the Future of Counselling

The following section discusses further perspectives and trends for the future of counselling in schools:

From individual counselling to case management

Unlike external counselling services, school counselling is part of a special responsibility structure. The educational mandate obliges the school to provide the right stimuli and opportunities for the cognitive, social and emotional development of each child. When problems such as bullying, absenteeism, school anxiety etc. arise, the school is obliged to intervene in order to avert disadvantages or damage to the further development of the children and young people. This requires a combination of counselling and educational measures that are based on existing scientific standards and are designed for the long term. School counselling can rarely be limited to individual counselling sessions with good guidance and advice on further care. From the outset, it should be planned as a longer-term process, i.e. as "case management". Teachers, parents, and external experts should be involved cooperatively in the analysis, planning, and evaluation of the change measures. A responsible person should be in charge and ensure a continuous and systematic approach.

Working in counselling teams

The wide range of counselling issues and advances in related sciences and counselling methods require multi-professional cooperation. Teachers, guidance counsellors,

special education teachers, school social workers, and school psychologists contribute a variety of skills and different perspectives, strategies, and methods for intervention and problem solving. Regular team meetings and supervision, for example, following the Finnish 'student welfare teams' model [4], are important for effective collaboration.

Training and further training and supervision

Although deficits in the training of teachers and counsellors are often identified, it is evident that a university degree cannot impart the skills needed for an entire professional life and for the wide range of different situations and tasks that may arise. Similar to other professional groups, advances and developments in science and evaluated practice require all persons working in schools to participate regularly in continuing education. For certain special tasks, such as bullying or crisis and emergency intervention, experts must be qualified through certified training courses. In order to further develop personal qualifications, it is also necessary to regularly reflect on one's own actions in a supervisory context [5].

Accompanying research

The concept of individualized learning requires not only new forms of cooperation between teachers and advisors, but also the establishment of systematic evaluation methods. Learning progress in individual cases must be regularly reviewed, and educational and advisory measures must be constantly adapted to meet individual learning requirements.

In addition, universities could provide considerable support for the development of effective support measures through research projects with a practical focus. The 'University School Cologne' is a 'flagship project' in which teachers, school psychologists and scientists from the fields of education and psychology are working together to develop teaching concepts for inclusive schools [6]. Huber (2012) [5] shows how German school psychology could be involved in the transition to an inclusive school system.

Development departments in educational administration

At conferences, at the awarding of the German School Prize and in publications, promising projects and school experiments are often presented. However, many of these are regionally and temporally limited and do not receive national attention. Reform ideas from individual schools are taken up rather randomly, and projects from other states are rarely adopted. There is an urgent need for a permanent infrastructure for innovation in school development that reviews evaluated and proven projects on a supraregional basis and makes them available in a database. Furthermore, experts should

be available across the federal states to support schools and educational administration in implementing proven projects from other countries. Similar to industry, development departments in the ministries of education could be the center and driving force of efficiency-oriented school development, responsible for ensuring that advances in science and practice are systematically and continuously incorporated into everyday school life.

The implementation of the proposed further perspectives and trends for the future of counselling would certainly involve a number of difficulties with the federal structure of the education system being significant. However, above all there is the lack of knowledge and understanding of decision-makers concerning the advanced possibilities of school psychology for the further development of the school system. This lack of understanding is hindering the expansion of personnel.

Joint long-term cooperation between universities and school psychology could help to convince people of this in pilot projects. The qualification of school psychologists for a specific field of application and the scientific evaluation of the effects in school practice would gradually highlight the need for further expansion of school psychology. Examples of such pilot projects are those at University School Cologne, previously mentioned, and the class climate project of the University of Hildesheim in collaboration with Lower Saxony School Psychology [7].

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