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Changing Conceptualizations of the EP’s Role in Singapore

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Abstract

Psychology is a young discipline in Singapore. Hence, perceptions of the roles and responsibilities of an Educational Psychologist (EP) are still constantly being negotiated and redefined. This qualitative study examined how role negotiations and redefinitions could be actively facilitated through an experiential and intensive two-day Basic Counseling Skills training course. This course was attended by eight trainee EPs enrolled in the only Masters Level Educational Psychology training program in Singapore. A grounded analysis of their pre-and-post training qualitative questionnaires and focus group discussion revealed the group’s evolving conceptualizations about their roles as EPs from mere test-administrator to a recognition of the need for a more systemic approach in providing intervention. The EPs also recognized their lack of capacity to respond to emotionally-distressed parents with compassion and sensitivity, and acknowledged the value of basic counseling skills training. Implications for training and future research are discussed.

Keywords: educational psychology, school psychology, change in role conceptualization of EP, self-awareness of EP, training of educational psychologists; change agents.
The role that an educational psychologist (EP) plays, particularly in an ever-changing school environment, had been continually evolving. By and large, the term educational psychology was synonymous with school psychology in Singapore and many commonwealth countries such as the United Kingdom and Australia (Educational and Developmental Psychology, 2016; 2016; Educational Psychologist, 2016; Protected Titles, 2016; School Psychology; 2016; Who are School Psychologists, 2015). This was elucidated in the official guideline created by the International School Psychology Association: “the term also refers to and is meant to include educational psychologists and others who display qualities this document associates with school psychology” (Cunningham & Oakland, 1998, p. 19).

Over the past 30 years, education systems had been moving towards inclusive education (Engelbrecht, 2004). UNESCO (1994) described an inclusive school as one that recognized and responded to the diverse needs of their learners, regardless of any difficulties or differences they might have. A range of educational support services may be offered by the state to support the development and growing needs of inclusive schools. In addition to the move towards inclusive education, psychologists in the field of positive psychology had increasingly advocated the need for schools to take a holistic approach to promoting student well-being through student advocacy and teacher support. It was argued that educational psychologists had the unique skills sets to be change agents in accomplishing these tasks at the school level, as they were supposed to be skilled listeners who could validate negative feelings, and reframe situations while engaging in solution and strengths focused conversations with relevant stakeholders (Roffey, 2015)
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This changing educational landscape required EPs to reconsider their roles to respond more adequately to the needs of their clients (Engelbrecht, 2004). The EPs’ perceptions of their role were significant; as Love (2009) noted “the behavior of educational psychologists was ‘shaped’ by expectations of their role” (p. 5). Moreover, the mutual understanding that both teachers and educational psychologists had of their respective roles was demonstrated empirically to have a major impact on the success of their work (Farrell, Jimerson, Kalambouka, & Beniot, 2005).

For a long time, EPs had been expected to be nothing more than ‘specialist’ psychometricians until a widening role signified the greater importance of ‘assessment’ as opposed to ‘testing,’ requiring EPs to provide greater specificity in terms of intended intervention that the child required (Love, 2009). Studies over the decades had documented the contrast and struggle between the profession’s actual (e.g. test/place) and desired (e.g. consult/counsel) roles, between the populations they set out to help (e.g. students with special needs) and those (e.g. all students) they hoped to help, and their functions (Olsen Murray, 2001). Due to compulsory legislative demands and a society increasingly in need of help, EPs had been facing increasing mandates, and an imposed set of definitional roles and role restrictions.

Mismatch between School Expectations and the EP’s Perceived Role

Studies of faculty and administrators’ perceptions of the role and function of EPs demonstrated that teachers often confused EPs with social workers and guidance counselors. While teachers and school administrators occasionally consulted EPs, their interactions were mostly limited to testing for special needs education, even while teachers claimed that they
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would welcome help with classroom strategies and student interventions (Davies, Howes & Farrell, 2008).

Engelbrecht’s (2004) study demonstrated a move from the traditional child-deficit, medical approach among educational psychologists in South Africa to a more ecological and multilevel systems approach which was more aligned with that of an inclusive educational framework. While school programs in other countries had advocated for a systemic consultative model (SCM) for EPs, in reality most seem locked into the traditional test/place role (Olsen Murray, 2001). As Lovejoy (1985, p. 111) noted: “The overall picture is a gloomy one. Head teachers and teachers, in many cases, have expectations of the educational psychologist’s role which are different from those that the psychologist has of the role.”

The ambiguity of the role of the EP might, therefore, have persisted because school personnel were unaware of duties, obligations, training, and skills of the EP (Love, 2009, Magi & Kikas, 2009). The different groups (e.g. faculty, administrators, families and practitioners themselves) might also have put different emphases, sometimes conflicting, on what they expected the EP to do. EPs were expected to take on a much broader role including curriculum development, and providing support to both teachers and parents (Love, 2009). Engelbrecht (2004) described the new roles to be that of an organizational facilitator and collaborator in school reform and change, as well as consultants in inter-sectoral collaboration.

It would, then, be worthwhile noting whether educational psychologists themselves perceived this ambiguity and evolution in their roles and responsibilities, whether they believed that they had the capacity to fulfill said roles, and how they believed it impacted their selected modes of intervention.
Singapore School Personnel’s Perceptions of the Role of Educational Psychologists vis-à-vis Counseling Psychologists and School Counselors in Singapore

Oakland and Hatzichristou (2014) stated that the “nature, quality, and scope of a country’s school psychology services are also impacted by language use, geography, and national needs and priorities, as well as the development and status of psychology as a discipline and a profession” (p. 223). As such, it becomes significant to explore how educational psychology training had been impacted by the needs of Singapore in the last 50 years (1965 to 2015).

As a nation without any natural resources, Singapore had always placed a strong emphasis on academic achievement. The need to take on the challenges in nurturing and educating the future of the nation propelled the development of school counseling in the 1980s (Tan, 2002). This impetus to address the socioemotional and educational needs of school children gave rise to the 1997 introduction of educational psychology and counseling psychology in Singapore, which was led by the National Institute of Education. As of 2012, both disciplines were still in the emergent stage of development, and there was a paucity of adequately trained counselors and psychologists in the country (Yeo, Tan & Neihart, 2012). Estimates of the ratio of counselors to students and educational psychologists to students were 1:2,000 and 1:20,000 respectively (Yeo, Tan & Neihart, 2012). This grim lack of trained professionals was compounded by inadequacies in clinical supervision, with newly trained and hired staff usually diving into broad clinical practice with limited supervision.
As with many other countries, the bulk of the EP’s work in Singapore was assessment-related and directed at evaluation of clients’ issues. Their role was separate and distinct from that of the school counselors which comprised support and enhancement of clients’ coping, self-management, self-efficacy and self-regulation (Yeo, Tan & Neihart, 2012). However, school personnel usually placed EPs in the same category as pastoral, counseling, or clinical psychologists (Yeo et al., 2012). This finding supported those of an earlier survey of 315 Singaporean student teachers, which revealed that they had a limited conception of the role of psychologists in the welfare and well-being of the people (Tan & Lim, 2002).

The school personnel’s confusion over the roles of the EPs as compared to that of CPs and counselors, could have arisen largely because school counselors and psychologists worked closely together within the school context, and graduated from parallel programs run by the nation’s only teacher training institute, the National Institute of Education (NIE). NIE produced both Educational Psychologists (EPs) and Counseling Psychologists (CPs) through its dual-track Masters of Arts in Applied Psychology program (National Institute of Education, n.d.). It also produced school counselors through its Diploma in School Counseling program, and counselors through its Masters of Arts in Counseling and Guidance program (National Institute of Education, n.d.). Graduates of these three programs often ended up working together within the school context. Furthermore, many CPs were also able to do some psychological testing, though not to the same extent that their EP counterparts were able to do, thus furthering the confusion experienced by school personnel.

It is hoped that this exploratory study would serve to explore in greater depth the conceptualizations of EPs on what their roles and responsibilities were in the school context. It
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therefore focused on investigating how educational psychologists-in-training (hereby referred to as participants) perceived (a) their own roles and responsibilities, (b) skills and competencies, and (c) their personal challenges, which arose from the gap between their current skills, their future roles and responsibilities prior to training, and how these perceptions changed after training. This research was part of a larger study that was meant to raise an evidence-based awareness in counseling training by doing an evaluation of a current program in Singapore that documented Trainee EPs’ experiences, struggles, dilemmas, and changing conceptualization of the role an educational psychologist played during their training sessions. Another paper by Kit, Garces-Bacsal, and Burgetova (2015) examined in detail the efficacy of the practices that took place in the prepracticum counseling training of the only provider of educational psychology training in Singapore, and might be referred to as a reference point to understanding the process through which the changes in conceptualization of educational psychologists-in-training occurred.

Method

The university’s internal review board (IRB) approved the ethics of this study, which was funded by a university research grant. The researchers used Corbin & Strauss’s (2015) Grounded Theory method as it provided an explicit set of techniques and guidelines for data gathering and analysis. This data analysis process gave rise to a theory that resembled reality, which provided insight into the phenomena, and served as a meaningful guide to implementation (Corbin & Strauss, 2015).

Participants. The participants were enrolled in the educational psychology track of the Masters of Arts in Applied Psychology program at the National institute of Education. Convenience
sampling was utilized for this study, and all students in the class were recruited as potential participants. Participants were informed that the purpose of the research was to document their learning experiences for this course module to inform effective teaching practices of group counseling skills in the future. As such, their performance in the course would not be graded. Participants were also aware that none of the researchers would serve as instructors for their remaining course work in the program. Participants provided their written consent to participate in this study, as required by the IRB. In order to protect their identities, pseudonyms were used to identify them in this paper.

The mean age of the participants was 28.24 years old, ranging from 25.76 to 32.33 years old. The ethnic mix consisted of one Singaporean Indian and seven Singaporean Chinese participants. All of the participants had bachelor’s degrees in psychology and were able to speak and write in the English language fluently. They also had less than five years of relevant work experience in either psychological testing or classroom teaching prior to entering the master's program.

**Composition of research team and trainers.** The research team includes three doctoral-level researchers with extensive experience in counseling and psychoeducational testing in schools and clinical settings. The first author is a Singaporean of Chinese descent with 9 years of counseling and psychoeducational testing experience in school, university and clinical settings in Singapore, and 7 years of experience as a counsellor or school psychology-educator in the university. The second author is of Filipino descent with 15 years of counseling experience in community and school settings in the Philippines and Singapore, and 6 years of experience as a counsellor-educator in the university. The third author is of European descent with five years of
counseling experience in community settings in the United States and Singapore, as well as 1 year of experience as a counsellor-educator in the university. The first and third authors cotaught the course module and facilitated the administration of pre- and posttraining qualitative questionnaires, while the second author conducted the focus group discussion at the end of the course.

**Procedures**

**Participant selection.** All EP and CP students in the dual-tracked Masters of Arts in Applied Psychology program were required to take four core modules of Theories and Techniques of Counseling, Psychological Assessment, Research Methods in Applied Psychology, and Statistics in Applied Psychology, and three other electives from a selection of nine electives. In addition, Trainee EPs were required to take one prescribed elective in Psychological Testing, and CP students had to take a prescribed elective of Advanced Counseling Skills, before they were allowed to embark on two consecutive practica of 400 hr, and a dissertation (National Institute of Education, 2013).

The core module of Theories and Techniques of Counseling was conducted during the Trainee EPs’ first semester. For this study, trainee EPs who did not have any counseling experience or who encountered difficulties during the triadic role-plays conducted during this core module, were selected for an additional prepracticum counseling training program held at the end of the first semester, just before they commenced on a compulsory 30-hr counseling practicum in the second semester. The result was that the entire cohort of nine trainee educational psychology students were selected for the training program. However, only eight
students attended the training, as the ninth student was on medical leave during the training period.

**Course structure.** The course was conducted in the group room of the school’s counseling centre. This room had two built-in video cameras installed in the ceilings, thus providing researchers with a 360-degree view of the room. Once the students’ consent to proceed with the research was obtained, the video recorder was turned on during the course and Focus Group Discussion. All recordings were transcribed to allow researchers to study students’ verbalization of thoughts, opinions and reflections during the class discussions and the focus group discussions (FGD).

During the course, students participated in three role-play sessions and one case conceptualization discussion after the first role-play session. The first author acted as a distraught mother during the role-play sessions, and the trainee EPs were tasked with convincing her to give consent for her son’s psychoeducational assessment in the first two role-play sessions, and with delivering to her the bad news of her son’s intellectual disability in the third role-play session. See Appendix A for details of course content.

Pre- and post role-play debriefs were facilitated by the first author on the first day, and by the first and third authors on the second day. These took place at the beginning of each segment, and at the end of each role-play session. At the end of the two day program, an hour-long Focus Group Discussion was conducted solely by the second author, who later validated the transcript for accuracy. See Appendix B for the FGD questions.

The research team also created and modified two open-ended qualitative questionnaires after several discussions. In addition to the video recordings, students were asked to complete a
short questionnaire listing down their prior work experiences, learning needs and expectations of the course, after they had given their consent for the research to proceed (Pretraining Questionnaire), and before the first didactic teaching segment of the course. At the end of each of the four segments of the course, students were asked to write down their key learning points in the Posttraining Questionnaire. Both questionnaires may be found in Appendix C. More details of the training program may be found in the paper by Kit, Garces-Bacsal & Burgetova (2015).

Data sources. The data corpus for this study included: (1) Pretraining questionnaire, (2) Posttraining Questionnaire; and (3) Transcript of video and audio recorded Focus Group Discussion.

Data analysis. Approximately 12 hr of data were generated from the study. The authors used NVIVO 10, a software used to help analyze qualitative research. Each research team member independently analysed all data sources. Each transcript or questionnaire was openly coded for key words or phrases that represented the most elemental unit of meaning such as a thought, feeling, or action (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). In the second analytical stage, responses that fell across specific categories and themes across the three data sources were grouped (Patton, 2002).

The research team (authors) decided to adopt an element of Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR) so as to enhance the reliability and validity of the data analysis process (Hill, Thomson, & Williams, 1997). This was done by continually reviewing each other’s findings for similarities and differences in a rigorous peer debriefing process consisting of several intensive research meetings, until an agreement grounded in an iterative analysis of the data was achieved. To establish trustworthiness of the results obtained from the research, the participants’
Pretraining

**Role of the Educational Psychologist.** This subcategory focused on participants’ pretraining perceptions of the role of the educational psychologist. These were encapsulated in the two themes of (a) Assessment and (b) Placement.

**Assessment.** All of the eight participants perceived their primary task to be the psychological assessment of the child. However, they were also clear in mentioning that their role as test administrator was not merely to identify learning needs, but also to take note of
behavioural issues and emotional difficulties that the client had, to help develop an appropriate intervention plan. Bailyne (Pre-Q) summarized succinctly that the EP had “to assess the child, youth or adult for learning, behavioural and emotional difficulties, and provide needed support, so that they can learn or work better.” In addition, Octavia (Pre-Q) made mention of the importance of addressing the socioemotional aspect of the child’s development to ensure holistic growth. Mabel (Pre-Q) elaborated further, “The educational psychologist must be able to screen for the appropriate disorders, and do some level of counseling and support for students facing difficulties even if they do not have a developmental or learning disorder.”

**Placement.** Four out of the eight participants articulated that aside from conducting psychological assessments, one of the major roles of the EP was to help place children with the relevant intervention services provided by public agencies. They could do this by merely directing the parent or the child to the relevant public agency that would best serve the client’s needs. Gabriela (FDG) noted that this was how the role had been modeled for her:

So when I sit in and observe the session that the EP has with the parents, it’s very mechanical. It’s just really … I’m drawing out the child, preparing the child, so you can refer the child within the school for support…Yes, I did come in thinking that’s how an EP’s life will be like.

Another respondent, Becky, mentioned during the FGD that she chose the route of an EP because she had the preconceived notion that all she needed to do was the administrative task of doing assessment and directing the parent or the child to the relevant public agency where they could seek intervention.
Participants’ Self-Efficacy in performing the role of the Educational Psychologist. This subcategory explored participants’ sense of self-efficacy in performing the assessment and placement role of the EP, which includes the subthemes (a) Existing Skills and Competencies, and (b) Current Challenges.

**Perceived skills and competencies.** Five of the eight participants shared that their experience in the field constituted mostly of informing the parents that their children needed to be assessed. They mentioned how their previous work and training influenced the way they responded to their clients as EPs. In the pretraining qualitative questionnaire (Pre-Q), one of the participants, Camelia, noted that her previous job as a school teacher made her more sensitive to the difficulties that the children and their families usually faced. Another respondent, Bailyne (Pre-Q), shared how her passion with working with children was a strong motivating force for her, and she had some work experience in conducting intake interviews, behavioural observations, and case conceptualizations. Faith (Pre-Q) shared that her work as an associate psychologist provided her with some experience working in the mainstream school setting as she understood the profile of mainstream students, and was aware of the constraints that parents, students, and teachers usually faced.

The participants also displayed confidence in their psychological assessment skills, and ability to provide short-term and long-term recommendations for interventions to both parents and teachers. They were also able to connect the children to the relevant agencies that could provide such interventions. Octavia (Pre-Q) explained, “I am familiar with some assessment tools (e.g. WSL, WORLD, PhAB).”
Generally, responses to the qualitative questionnaire and the focus group discussion revealed that the EPs thought they had adequate skills when it came to administering intelligence and achievement tests, as well as conducting case conferences with parents and teachers to communicate test results and the learning needs of the child. The participants perceived these as straightforward tasks. They also regarded their work as advocacy in terms of convincing parents to seek help for their children. Hence, the EPs thought of themselves more as experts who advised parents on relevant educational information and gateways to relevant agencies from which parents could obtain the intervention that their children required.

**Current challenges.** This theme demonstrated all eight participants’ perceived challenges as an EP with the disparity between what they perceived to be their capacity and current skill set. They also shared what they believed they were expected to do in terms of responding to the emotions of both parents and teachers, particularly those who were, in Lana’s (Pre-Q) words, “unreasonable, defensive, and lacked understanding about their children and how they could be contributing to the host of issues surrounding their child.” Mabel (Pre-Q) explained that a negative consequence of delivering bad news was that, “Some parents react with anger or denial, and take their anger out at the messenger or bearer of the news, which is the EP.” Like her classmates, Becky (FGD) explained that prior to the training, she lacked confidence in dealing with parents’ emotions effectively, as emotions were “a very iffy thing” and “I was not sure whether I could handle parents’ difficult emotions.” Camelia (FGD) shared that before the training, she did not usually feel that she had the capacity to deal with negative emotions, and
hence, she would rather not touch on such emotions entirely:

I think a lot of anxiety comes from the feeling that I’m not good enough. I could shortchange the client. So then I was a bit apprehensive, you know. So if I don’t feel adequate, I won’t even go down that road. (Camelia, FGD)

Mabel (FGD) explained that she used to cope with this challenge by requesting that her school principal convey the bad news to parents on her behalf, “It’s very helpful because they (the parents) cannot run away from it (from the School Principal) when it goes like this.”

Posttraining

**Increased Scope of the Educational Psychologist’s Role.** This subcategory explored participants’ growing recognition during the course that the Educational Psychologists’ role went beyond assessment and placement. The larger role of the Educational Psychologists was described in the following themes: (a) Taking Responsibility to Initiate Change, (b) Consultation with a Systemic Approach.

**Taking responsibility to initiate change.** As the course module progressed, there was an increasing realization among all the EPs that their task went beyond just a mechanical facilitative role that would merely link their client with relevant organizations. They realized that they could be more effective if they overcome their challenge of dealing with emotional clients. Lana (Post-Q) acknowledged, “I have a role to play to help parents to reframe their perception of the difficulties they face and to help them understand better by offering alternatives to them.”
Camelia reflected (FGD):

It’s very easy for me to make statements like “the parent is not cooperating, the school is not supporting me.” And so these two days kind of made me realize that it’s very easy to make those statements and …in this and throughout the whole role play, I realize how much I can do as an EP, the scope of change I can impact.

**Consultation with a systemic approach.** One of the realizations that all of the participants had after the course module was the EP’s role in providing consultation to not just the direct client (the child), but to the parents and the teachers as well. Adopting a systemic approach could result in greater change, compared to just telling the client what to do. Camelia shared how the course module highlighted the significance of parents, teachers, and EPs working through self-imposed barriers and engaging all stakeholders to work in a more synergistic fashion (POST-Q). As Faith articulated:

I also realize it’s not just about getting to the child alone. You have to improve the educational outcome, but you have to work through the people around the child. So you may have to work very closely with the secondary client even though the primary client is the child. So you can’t escape from that, working through the system to support the child. (Faith, FGD)
Gabriela (FGD) noted the importance of attending to the needs of the parents:

Being an EP is not just about carrying out assessments and delivering results and finding/devising an intervention plan. It is important to attend to the parent - feelings and thoughts - as well. As the saying goes, a happy parent has a happy child.

Recognition of the Need to Build Competencies. With the recognition that the role of the Educational Psychologist was larger than they had originally thought, the participants realized that they needed to build competencies that would allow them to be better educational psychologists. This subcategory explored participants’ new understandings in the two themes of (a) Desired attributes and qualities of an Educational Psychologist, and (b) Relevance of Basic Counseling Skills Training.

**Desired attributes and qualities of an Educational Psychologist.** Six participants mentioned several important attributes and qualities that EPs needed to possess. These included empathy, compassion, sensitivity, and good communication skills. Lana mentioned that an EP should be compassionate and empathetic but at the same time mindful of the session’s goals and objectives. Lana (Post-Q) noted:

It struck me how important it is to be in tune with client’s feelings and to always validate and acknowledge what the client is going through. Hearing bad news can be very emotionally stressful and anxiety-provoking, and the use of our hearts rather than minds can be more vital at this point.

Faith (FGD) mentioned the importance of having effective communication skills that would
allow the EP to convey the relevant information while being sensitive to the parents’ educational level and capacity to understand educational jargon and terminologies. She signified the importance of being perceptive and exercising one’s intuition:

…because sometimes parents may not tell you things directly in a very straightforward way, but we have to be able to perceive these and pick it up, as well as to sense what are they really trying to tell you or what are they really feeling inside.

Becky (POST-Q) realized that:

Clients may not always be ready for what we intend to do, and we need to address and explore other issues first before we can attend to our primary purpose.

This kind of sensitivity and being with the client in-the-moment are also attributes and qualities that the EPs noted to be particularly significant.

*Relevance of basic counseling skills training.* Five of the eight participants noted that they had neither prior counseling experience nor training background to help them respond to their clients’ emotional needs and outbursts, similar to the hands-on scenario that they were exposed to in class during the first day. However, all the participants shared that during the role-play, they struggled with not knowing how to manage their “client’s” parent’s emotional response to the child’s diagnosis and learning needs. Most were at a loss when they had to break through the parent’s articulated sense of helplessness, self-pity, denial and resistance to any kind of intervention for the child. Hence, they found the two-day basic counseling skills training program to be useful as they had the opportunity to learn how to use basic counseling skills
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which they now perceived to be desirable attributes and qualities of an Educational Psychologist. Octavia (Post-Q) explained, “This course has been really helpful in equipping me with practical counseling skills to work with parents and teachers, in truly engaging them and addressing some barriers.” Becky (Post-Q) noted that she had learnt to frame psychological test results to the parents in a more positive way so that they would not go down a spiral of helplessness and despair:

   In order to work through mother’s resistance, we may have to get her to look at her issues in a more positive light and to re-direct her. This is so that she does not spiral into self-blame and self-pity. These are barriers to getting her to seek help.

Discussion

Boyle and Lauchlan (2009) claimed that EPs seemed to have “an almost perennial obsession with reflecting on their role” (p. 71) and that the debate concerning the EP’s role and functions is one that has been ongoing for some time now. Since psychology is a relatively young discipline in Singapore with the Singapore Psychological Society established only in 1979 (Tan & Lim, 2002), it is not surprising that existential queries about role, responsibilities, and functions would ensue as EPs establish their identities in schools and reflect on how they can best serve the students and families under their care.

In this study, participants still perceived their role as primarily that of test administrator and placement officer at the beginning of the course. They perceived their task as consisting mostly of advising both parents and teachers of services that the clients required based on their
test results, and the relevant agencies that could best facilitate these forms of intervention. It was interesting to note that this “expert” stance was in line with the extant literature on the influence of Asian cultural practices in medicine and mental health. It was found that Asian patients / clients usually adopted a passive approach towards health care, in deference to the expertise of their clinicians (Dutt & Kit, 2014, Ibrahim et al., 1997; Ramisetty-Mikler, 1993, Shea & Yeh, 2008). Asian clinicians, like the Singaporean Asian participants in this study, therefore responded with a deficit-focused approach to health issues, and accepted the responsibility of being active experts in identifying problems and generating solutions for their patients / clients (Lee & Armstrong, 1995; Wasan et al., 2009; Yeh, Hunter, Madan-Bahel, Chiang, & Arora, 2004).

It was also interesting to note that although participants knew they were attending a basic counseling skills course, they only truly recognized the relevance of basic counseling skills training at the end of the course. The nature of the course provided a first-hand experience on how important it was to enlist their clients’ cooperation by responding to emotional distress with compassion and sensitivity. This finding indicates that practicing Singapore-based educational psychologists in the field might still hold the traditional view that the EP’s role consists mainly of testing and placement, rather than tending to socioemotional issues that might be hampering the academic progress or successful implementation of intervention plans (Engelbrecht, 2004; Love, 2009; Olsen Murray, 2001). This finding was also corroborated in a recent research published by Singapore psychologists (Chong, Lee, Tan, Wong, Yeo, 2013) whereby it was shown that the practice of school psychology had been essential in identifying and assessing students for appropriate placement and intervention, and providing consultation to schools and
This study also found that although the majority of participants opined that they were competent in the traditional skills of testing and placing clients, particularly children, they also thought that they lacked capacity in several key areas, such as conveying test results with sensitivity and clarity to parents, and responding with empathy to parental distress. Most of the participants expressed anxiety, discomfort, and reluctance in dealing with emotional parents. This was congruent with what was found in Western literature whereby EPs were said to be “losing sight of psychology” (Thomson, 1996, p. 102) as EPs’ conception of their work remains largely administrative in nature, in addition to their ‘gate-keeping’ role for students to obtain resources (Boyle & Lauchlan, 2009). This conception has very clear implications when it comes to the future of the profession. Boyle & Lauchlan (2009, p. 79) pointed out that if EPs continued perceiving their role as ‘form-fillers,’ then “education authorities may realize that administration staff, and/or other professional groups, could carry out a lot of the duties of the EP.”

By the end of the course, participants realized that they could make a bigger impact on their clients’ lives if they attended to their clients’ concerns and needs using a systemic approach, rather than by just adopting the expert stance of telling their clients what they needed to do. This attitudinal change in the participants was achieved with the use of the experiential learning method of role-plays, which provided them with the opportunity to face their fears of working with difficult clients, and to try out basic counseling skills which they had only learnt in theory prior to this course (Kit, Garces-Bacsal, & Burgetova, 2015). As such, the role-play not only served to change participants’ perceptions of the subject matter (Kit, Wong, D’Rozario, & Teo, 2014), it also empowered them to make changes to their practice (Kit et al., 2015). Another
possible reason why the participants found the systemic approach to be significant to their learning might lie in its close parallel with the Asian culture. Singapore is primarily an Asian country, where the three Asian ethnic groups of Chinese, Malay, Indian and those of multi-ethnic decent, such as the Eurasians (Department of Statistics Singapore, 2015) have culturally collectivistic orientations (Khanna, McDowell, Perumbilly, & Titus, 2009; Markus, Mullally, & Kitayama, 1997). This collectivist orientation is evident in how most Asians rarely behave or make personal decisions without taking into account how it impacts their families and communities (Markus & Kitayama, 1998; Yeh & Hwang, 2000). Since the systemic approach takes into account the social context within which the client’s problems were situated, and how all individuals within the system are affected when changes occur, it is likely that the systemic approach resonated with the Asian participants, as they were able to understand the need to focus on the concerns of the mother with regard to her family’s adverse reaction to her son’s condition, and help her focus on what was best for the child in conjunction with the family (Wasan et al., 2009).

Participants also realized the futility of complaining about the lack of organizational support or passing on the responsibility of persuading clients to accept interventions to those in authority (e.g. the School Principal). Instead, they now understood that they could be agents of change for both their individual clients, parents and teachers. The course, thus, achieved the objective of widening participants’ understanding of the role of the EP, as recommended by the literature (Synder, 2012; Yeo, Tan & Neihart, 2012; Yuen, 2008), and promoting their awareness of their unique position within the school system, in enhancing student well-being (Roffey, 2015).
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Most of the recent literature on the changing roles of EPs had to do with their studied awareness of what their roles and functions were as perceived from within an inclusive framework of education, something which was not mentioned by any of the participants as they reflected on what their function was in schools. It was interesting to note that while teacher-trainees were actively taught the philosophical tenets and pedagogies of inclusive education in Singapore (Lim, Thaver, & Slee, 2008), this did not seem to be a salient issue with the Trainee EPs. Not one of the eight participants mentioned the changing landscape of the Singapore educational system as more students with disabilities were enrolled in mainstream schools, significantly adding to the roles and responsibilities of the EP. One possible explanation for participants not mentioning the challenges of inclusive education, is that they only had less than five years of work experience within the Singapore educational system prior to entering the Masters program. During this time, they might only have experienced the inclusive classroom or worked only with clients requiring assessment and placement in special education schools or community services. Hence, the inclusive educational landscape they had been exposed to was the norm, rather than one undergoing an evolution.

Implications for Training

It is recommended that the EPs’ interventions in schools (e.g. the use of cognitive-behavioral therapy - see Yeo & Choi, 2011) need to be implemented across the child’s varied environments to ensure its effectiveness. Hence, a culturally relevant approach, such as the systemic approach in this instance, becomes imperative as EPs work alongside with and engage relevant stakeholders in a manner that is more empowering. An effective intervention is one which goes beyond just lecturing parents and teachers about what they need to do to address the
CHANGING ROLE OF EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGISTS IN SINGAPORE

child’s learning needs. Rather, it involves using more sensitive, nuanced, and compassionate communication skills to help stakeholders understand the importance of collaboration. The specific basic counseling skills that Trainee EPs need to learn include attending behaviours, questioning, paraphrasing, summarizing, interpreting, confronting, communicating feelings & immediacy, self-disclosing, interpreting, working with difficult clients and delivering bad news. The adoption of a systemic approach needs to begin in the EP classroom, where a systemic case conceptualization and experiential training in basic counseling skills, are used to help Trainee EPs to understand the importance of these skills in their practice.

There needs to be a synergy between existing educational frameworks (i.e. inclusive education) practiced in Singapore schools with how EPs are taught in graduate degree programs. This would assist in making them more sensitive to the increasing needs of both parents and teachers in an evolving educational landscape that is still marked primarily by its academic competitiveness (Tan, 2002). Such training should not be limited to EPs-in-training, but also to full-fledged EPs currently practicing in the field, as the latter often take on the role of practicum supervisors for the trainees.

Roffey (2015) argued that Educational Psychologists were in an unique position of being able to instigate change in the larger educational system, because of their unique skills sets. However, in order to make system-wide changes, EPs need to move beyond working with individual clients, families and teacher on remediating learning deficits, to supporting school leaders and teachers in their efforts to promote student well-being via building resilience using strengths-based approaches (Roffey, 2015). Graduate level EP programs, therefore, need to
include systems-wide well-being interventions, as part of their curriculum, so that EPs will enter the profession with a broadened perception of their role.

**Changing Conceptualizations in the Future**

Following the completion of this study, the university decided to implement the two day basic counseling skills course as an integral part of the graduate program for all Trainee EPs who did not have prior counseling training or experience. Hence, EP program applicants are now informed of this compulsory pre-practicum course in writing when offered a place in the Masters program. All Trainee EPs, regardless of prior counseling experience, are also required to participate in a compulsory 40-hour counseling practicum in their second semester, and before embarking on their 400-hour educational psychology (psycho-educational assessment and placement) practicum in their third semester.

Although their clients’ quantitative feedback (60-item basic counseling skills questionnaire) and personal reflections, have not been included in this paper, preliminary evidence suggests that the Trainee EPs performed well in using the basic counseling skills that they had learnt. Both Counseling Psychology and Educational Psychology supervisors also provided anecdotal feedback indicating that Trainee EPs exhibited higher levels of empathy and compassion when working with distressed clients, compared to their predecessors.

**Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research**

This research was limited by the research design and small sample size. This study’s research design utilized self-reports within an ungraded course. As such, there was always the risk that participants might have given socially desirable answers which ascribed more positive outcomes to the course than warranted, so as to please instructors whom they could have thought
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would teach them in the future. Future research in this area could utilize third party researchers to conduct individual in-depth semi-structured interviews with participants before and after training, in addition to the qualitative questionnaires and focus group discussions.

The smaller sample size was inevitable because this was the cohort size each year for the whole country. In order to obtain a larger sample size, data would have to be collected over a few years. However, such data could be flawed by differences in cohort populations, changes to the graduate program for the training of EPs, and changing perceptions resulting from a changing Singapore education landscape each year. Hence, future research needs to take into account these limitations, or choose to overcome it by taking a longitudinal approach that maps the changing perceptions of EPs over a few years.

The current study demonstrates how EPs’ conceptualizations of their role changed as a result of a course which utilized the experiential andragogy of role-play within the Singapore context. It would be helpful to collate and analyse their clients’ feedback to understand how impactful the training really is in changing conceptualizations when trainee EPs are faced with the challenges of practice. A multi-country comparison of EPs’ perceptions of their roles via-a-vis the evolving educational landscapes of their countries would be useful in providing culturally / contextually relevant information on how tertiary institutions deal with the changes in their preparation of EPs for the field, and how to best meet these challenges. Such a study could use mixed methodologies, so as to provide breadth and insight into this issue.

It must also be noted that this study was not designed to examine participants’ cultural beliefs and orientations. The impact of culture on study outcomes were merely deductions based on participants’ reflections and the extant literature on the impact of Asian culture on mental
healthcare practices. Further research on culture and mental health care, particularly, the tendency for Asian clinicians to take a deficit-focused approach towards clients and adoption of the expert stance, would therefore be valuable additions to the existing knowledge base.

References


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### Appendix A
Lesson Plan

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Day and Time</th>
<th>Session Type</th>
<th>Content</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Day 1 Morning      | Role-Play Session 1:                 | ● 9.00am to 9.30am  
- Completion of pretraining  
  questionnaire  
- Pretraining Discussion |
|                    | Conducting an intake interview with   | ● 9.30am to 10.15am  
Didactic Teaching:  
  - Intake Interviewing  
  - Attending Behaviour,  
  - Questioning  
  - Paraphrasing and summarizing |
|                    | an increasingly distressed mother and | ● 10.15am to 11.45am  
  asking her for permission to conduct a psycho-educational assessment on her child. |
|                    | asking her for permission to conduct a | ● 11.45am to 12.15pm  
  psycho-educational assessment on her child. |
|                    | Psycho-educational assessment on her  | ● 12.15pm to 12.30pm  
  child.                                                                                  |
|                    | child.                                | Completion of Posttraining Questionnaire for Session 1.                  |
| Day 1 Afternoon    | Case-Conceptualization Discussion    | ● 1.30pm to 3.00pm  
Case Conceptualization Discussion of mum’s issues vs child’s issues using Systemic Approach |
|                    |                                       | ● 3.00pm to 3.45pm  
Debrief for Session 2                                                                      |
|                    |                                       | ● 3.45pm to 4pm  
Completion of Posttraining Questionnaire                                                  |
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Day 2 Morning 9am to 12pm</th>
<th>Role-Play Session 2: Convincing a very distressed mother that a psycho-educational assessment would be in her child’s best interest.</th>
<th>for Session 2</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9.00am to 9.45am</td>
<td>Didactic Teaching:</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Interpreting</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Confronting</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Communicating feelings &amp; Immediacy</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Self-Disclosing</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Interpreting</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.45am to 11.15am</td>
<td>Turn-Taking Role-play session 2: Working with Mum on her feelings and concerns with the goal of helping mum to accept the need for her child to receive help.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>11.15am to 11.45am</td>
<td>Debrief for Session 3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.45am to 12.00pm</td>
<td>Completion of Posttraining Questionnaire for Session 3</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Day 2 Afternoon 1pm to 5pm</th>
<th>Role-Play Session 3: Delivering very bad news of psycho-educational assessment results to mother.</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1pm to 1.45pm</td>
<td>Didactic teaching of information giving, delivering bad news, enlisting Cooperation Skills, Delivering Bad News.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.45pm to 3.15pm</td>
<td>Turn-Taking Roleplay:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Post-Psycho-education Assessment results delivery of results to mum.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Helping mum come to terms with the results, deal with her</td>
<td></td>
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</table>
feelings and work on interventions.

- 3.15pm to 3.45pm  
  Debrief for Session 4
- 3.45pm to 4.00pm  
  Completion of Posttraining Questionnaire for Session 4
- 4.00pm to 5.00pm  
  Focus Group Discussion

### Appendix B: Focus Group Discussion Guide

1. When you first entered the program, what did you think an Educational Psychologist's job entailed?

2. How has your idea of the role of an Educational Psychologist changed in the course of your training?

3. What do you think are the qualities and attributes an Educational Psychologist should have?

4. In what way do you embody these qualities and attributes?

5. What was it like for you as an "Educational Psychologist" in the role-play?
Appendix C:

Pretraining Qualitative Questionnaire

1. What do you think the role of an educational psychologist is?
2. What are the skills and competencies that you bring into this course?
3. What do you think are the greatest challenges that you will encounter in your work as an educational psychologist?
4. What skills do you expect to learn in this course?

Posttraining qualitative questionnaire

1. What was this course like for you? How has the course clarified your role as an educational psychologist?
2. How did your prior skills/competencies as an educational psychologist help you in this course?
3. How has this course helped you to overcome the challenges that you are likely to encounter in your work as an educational psychologist?
4. What are some of the skills that you learned from the course? What are your key takeaways from this course?

** Participants’ answers to these questions were explored in greater detail in another paper on the efficacy of role-plays and instructor feedback by Kit et al. (2015).