

Roles and Assessment Practices in Contemporary School Psychology: A Critical Review

Yash B. Naik

Teaching Assistant, Department of Psychology, The M.S. University of Baroda, Vadodara (Gujarat), INDIA.

Abstract—School psychology has evolved significantly over the last two decades, influenced by changing educational demands, mental health crises, and global disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic. This critical review synthesizes evidence from twelve empirical studies spanning professional roles, assessment practices, student well-being, teacher stress, and school safety systems. Findings indicate persistent inconsistencies in training, uneven access to psychological services across countries, and substantial variability in the implementation of evidence-based practices. Although the reviewed literature advances understanding of school psychological services, the dominance of survey-based designs and cross-sectional designs limits causal interpretation. Structural inequalities, underdeveloped policies, and gaps in multidisciplinary collaboration remain core challenges.

Index Terms—School Psychology, Survey-based designs, Cross-sectional designs and Evidence-based practices

I. INTRODUCTION

School psychology is a dynamic field characterized by continuous adaptation to emerging educational, developmental, and socio-cultural needs. Globally, school psychologists are expected to engage in assessment, consultation, intervention, prevention, and systems-level improvements. However, the degree to which these roles are clearly defined and effectively implemented varies widely (Matteucci et al., 2025; Jimerson et al., 2006).

The present review critically synthesizes research on psychologists' roles, assessment practices, school mental health, teacher well-being, student outcomes, and school safety systems. By examining methodological strengths and limitations across studies, this review highlights broader gaps in

evidence and structural barriers affecting school psychology internationally.

II. METHODOLOGICAL OVERVIEW OF THE INCLUDED STUDIES

The methodologies employed across the reviewed studies demonstrate substantial variability, though most rely heavily on quantitative, cross-sectional survey designs. Research conducted by Jimerson et al. (2006), Aiello et al. (2017), Genç and Arslan (2021), and Yıldırım and Tanrıverdi (2021) used self-report questionnaires to evaluate school psychologists' roles, students' well-being, and school functioning. These designs allow for broad data collection across large samples and enable efficient descriptive analysis. However, their reliance on self-report introduces several limitations, including potential response biases, social desirability influences, and participants' subjective interpretation of survey items. Furthermore, because cross-sectional designs capture only a single point in time, they limit researchers' ability to establish causality or explore developmental changes across contexts or populations.

More rigorous methodological approaches were used less frequently but provide stronger inferential value. McIntosh et al. (2021) utilized a randomized controlled trial (RCT) to assess the impact of equity-focused PBIS interventions, offering one of the most robust designs in the reviewed literature. The use of randomization and controlled comparisons enhances internal validity and allows clearer attribution of observed improvements in disciplinary equity to the intervention. Similarly, Rabiner et al. (2016) employed a longitudinal design, enabling assessment of long-term relationships between early academic skills, attention difficulties, and later educational

attainment. Such designs offer critical insights into developmental pathways, though they require substantial time, resources, and participant retention. Mixed-methods studies, particularly those conducted by Matteucci et al. (2025) and Bohnenkamp et al. (2023), contributed additional depth to the literature. These studies combined quantitative data with qualitative interviews to capture contextual nuances related to role expectations, collaboration, and systemic functioning within schools. Mixed-method approaches enhance ecological validity by allowing researchers to explore complexities that quantitative measures may overlook. However, limitations included smaller qualitative samples, short evaluation periods, and instances where qualitative analysis lacked depth or formal rigor. Collectively, the methodological landscape across the reviewed studies highlights a need for more diverse, robust designs that include longitudinal tracking, experimental manipulation, and richer qualitative inquiry.

III. FINDINGS ANALYSIS

Across the reviewed studies, several consistent findings emerged regarding school psychologists' roles, assessment practices, mental health outcomes, and schoolwide functioning. A prominent theme is the discrepancy between school psychologists' desired professional roles and the responsibilities they most frequently perform. Many practitioners report a strong preference for prevention, consultation, and counseling, yet their workloads remain dominated by psychoeducational assessments. This misalignment reflects systemic issues such as limited staffing, unclear role definitions, and institutional pressures that prioritize standardized assessments. Studies such as those by Matteucci et al. (2025) and Jimerson et al. (2006) highlight how inconsistent policies and organizational structures contribute to this persistent imbalance.

Findings also point to significant variability in the implementation of evidence-based assessment practices. Aiello et al. (2017) found that ASD assessments, although supported by validated tools, were inconsistently administered due to barriers such as inadequate training, limited access to standardized instruments, and time constraints. Parkin et al. (2020) demonstrated theoretical support for writing assessment frameworks but noted that reliance on

archival data may limit external validity. These results suggest that while evidence-based tools exist, logistical and structural barriers impede their systematic use across school settings.

Mental health findings demonstrate widespread stress, anxiety, and emotional strain among students in both general contexts and pandemic-related conditions. Schwartz et al. (2021) reported elevated psychological distress during the return to in-person schooling, underscoring the importance of mental health monitoring and early intervention. Complementary findings by Genç and Arslan (2021) and Yıldırım and Tanrıverdi (2021) revealed that psychological strengths such as optimism, resilience, and social support contribute significantly to students' well-being. Together, these findings highlight the necessity of school-based mental health systems that promote resilience and provide targeted support for at-risk students.

Teacher well-being also emerged as a critical area of concern. Herman et al. (2021) found that teacher stress and coping were strongly influenced by organizational factors, including supportive leadership, equitable discipline practices, and perceived autonomy. These results emphasize the importance of improving school climate and leadership practices to support educator wellness and minimize burnout.

Finally, findings related to school climate and discipline illustrate the potential of systemic interventions to promote equity and safety. Cornell et al. (2018) and McIntosh et al. (2021) demonstrated that structured frameworks such as threat assessment and equity-focused PBIS can reduce exclusionary discipline and racial disparities when implemented with fidelity. These interventions show promise but require sustained administrative commitment, ongoing training, and systematic monitoring to ensure long-term success. Overall, the findings underscore the need for clearer role definitions, improved access to evidence-based assessment tools, strengthened mental health supports, and consistent implementation of equity-centered schoolwide frameworks.

IV. CRITICAL THEMATIC SYNTHESIS

4.1 Roles and Functions of School Psychologists

International research reveals significant variation in how school psychologists' roles are conceptualized and enacted. In Italy, for example, the profession lacks

uniform regulation, leading to fragmented services and inconsistent expectations (Matteucci et al., 2025). Globally, practitioners commonly report spending disproportionate time on assessments while desiring expanded roles in prevention, consultation, and counseling (Jimerson et al., 2006). These discrepancies reflect enduring gaps in policy, training, and organizational structures that limit psychologists' capacity to perform comprehensive services.

4.2 Evidence-Based Assessment Practices

Evidence indicates uneven implementation of evidence-based assessment (EBA) in schools. Aiello et al. (2017) reported significant variability in ASD assessment practices, shaped largely by access to tools, training quality, and time constraints. Parkin et al. (2020) demonstrated strong theoretical grounding for writing assessment but noted limitations in generalizability due to reliance on archival data. Collectively, these findings show that although validated tools exist, practical constraints hinder consistent, high-quality assessment practices.

4.3 Student Mental Health and Well-being

Studies conducted during and after the COVID-19 pandemic highlight major concerns regarding student mental health. Schwartz et al. (2021) found elevated stress, anxiety, and academic uncertainty, while Genç & Arslan (2021) and Yıldırım & Tanrıverdi (2021) identified optimism, hope, and resilience as key protective factors. Despite the valuable insights, most studies used cross-sectional designs and lacked longitudinal follow-up, limiting understanding of long-term effects on students.

4.4 Teacher Stress and Organizational Predictors

Teacher well-being emerged as another critical domain. Herman et al. (2021) demonstrated that leadership quality, fair school discipline practices, and teacher self-efficacy strongly predicted stress and coping outcomes. However, findings were context-specific to U.S. schools and focused on early-pandemic experiences, underscoring the need for broader and more sustained research.

4.5 School Climate, Safety, and Discipline Equity

Studies on PBIS and threat assessment underscore the potential of structured frameworks to improve school climate and reduce disciplinary disparities. Cornell et

al. (2018) found that threat assessment reduced suspensions and racial disparities, while McIntosh et al. (2021) provided RCT evidence that equity-focused PBIS significantly reduced racial discipline gaps. Nevertheless, concerns about implementation fidelity and data inconsistencies highlight the need for more systematic monitoring.

4.6 Multidisciplinary Collaboration

Collaboration is central to school mental health systems. Bohnenkamp et al. (2023) showed that structured communication tools, role clarification, and protocolized agendas enhanced team coordination. However, variability in team structures and the short duration of evaluation limit generalizability. More robust evidence is needed to understand the long-term impact of collaborative models.

V. INTEGRATIVE CRITIQUE OF THE LITERATURE

Strengths Across Studies

1. Strong representation of contemporary school psychological issues.
2. Inclusion of international contexts (Australia, Italy, Russia, Turkey, Canada).
3. Integration of mental health, assessment, safety, and teacher well-being evidence.
4. Use of large and diverse samples in some studies.

Weaknesses Across Studies

1. Methodological narrowness: Overreliance on surveys and cross-sectional designs.
2. Generalizability concerns: Many studies from single cultural settings.
3. Lack of observational or performance-based assessment studies.
4. Variable implementation fidelity in intervention-based studies.
5. Minimal use of qualitative inquiry to contextualize psychological practices.

VI. IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGY

6.1 Policy Implications

- Countries need clear national standards defining school psychologists' roles.
- Policies must support equitable access to mental health services.

6.2 Practice Implications

- Greater emphasis on preventive and systems-level practices.
- Expand training in evidence-based assessment, especially for ASD and writing.
- Promote equity-focused discipline frameworks.

6.3 Research Implications

- Increase longitudinal, experimental, and mixed-methods designs.
- Conduct international comparative research using standardized tools.
- Include student and family perspectives to balance psychologist-focused data.

VII. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the synthesis of existing research, several important recommendations emerge for strengthening school psychology practice, policy, and research. First, there is a pressing need for countries to establish clear national standards that define the scope, competencies, and responsibilities of school psychologists. Studies from Italy and other international contexts highlight the consequences of unclear role definitions, which often result in inconsistent services and limited alignment between training and practice. Standardized role expectations would support greater role clarity, reduce variability in service delivery, and ensure that psychologists can engage effectively in prevention, consultation, counseling, and systems-level intervention—roles that many practitioners desire but are often unable to perform due to structural constraints.

In addition to role clarification, educational systems should mandate and support the implementation of evidence-based assessment practices. Research indicates notable gaps in the consistent use of validated assessment tools, particularly in autism assessment and writing evaluation. Improving access to standardized tools, paired with stronger training and supervision, would enhance the accuracy, reliability, and cultural responsiveness of psychoeducational evaluations. Furthermore, given the robust evidence supporting equity-focused discipline frameworks, such as PBIS and threat assessment models, schools should prioritize the adoption of systems designed to reduce racial disparities and promote fair, data-driven decision-making. This emphasis on equity-driven

approaches is critical for building safer, more inclusive school environments.

Another significant recommendation pertains to the need for improved mental health systems within schools. Students worldwide experienced heightened stress, anxiety, and uncertainty during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the reviewed studies underscore the importance of regular mental health screening, early identification of concerns, and the integration of resilience-building and social-emotional interventions. Likewise, teacher well-being requires greater attention, as organizational factors such as leadership quality, fairness in discipline, and instructional support strongly influence stress levels and overall wellness. Schools should implement structured professional development, wellness initiatives, and leadership training that bolster teacher resilience and improve school climate.

Strengthening multidisciplinary collaboration is also essential for effective school mental health and assessment systems. Evidence from team-based studies shows that structured communication tools, role clarification, and consistent procedures significantly enhance collaboration and coordination. Implementing these practices across schools can improve the quality and efficiency of support services. At the same time, training programs must equip school psychologists with advanced skills in evidence-based assessment, cross-cultural competence, and collaborative practice. Emphasizing supervision quality and culturally responsive training will help bridge current gaps in practitioner readiness and enhance the overall quality of services delivered in diverse school contexts.

Finally, future research in school psychology must adopt more rigorous and diverse methodologies. The predominance of cross-sectional survey studies limits causal inference and restricts understanding of long-term outcomes. More randomized controlled trials, longitudinal designs, and mixed-methods studies are needed to explore the impact of school psychological services over time and across contexts. Researchers should also prioritize multi-informant approaches that incorporate the perspectives of students, parents, and teachers, as well as cross-cultural research that examines how assessment, mental health, and school climate vary in different educational systems. Additionally, studies should consistently measure implementation fidelity to better understand the

factors that influence the success of schoolwide interventions such as PBIS and threat assessment.

VIII. CONCLUSION

The reviewed evidence portrays a field striving toward comprehensive, equitable, and evidence-based practices but constrained by methodological, structural, and policy limitations. While psychologists aspire to perform broader preventive and consultative roles, real-world practice often remains dominated by assessment. Emerging research on equity-focused discipline, collaboration, and mental health offers promising directions. Long-term, systemic, and culturally sensitive research is required to build a more coherent and effective global school psychology framework.

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