

AN EXPLORATORY REVIEW OF SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGIST'S PERCEPTIONS OF
THEIR ROLE AS A LEADER.

A thesis presented to the faculty of the Graduate School of
Western Carolina University in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Specialist in School Psychology.

By

Jessica Marie Arocho

Director: Dr. Lori Unruh
Associate Professor College of Education and Allied Profession
Psychology Department

Committee Members: Dr. Candace Boan-Lenzo, School Psychology
Dr. Nathan Roth, Psychology

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ABSTRACT

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Jessica Arocho, S.S.P

Western Carolina University (April 2024)

Director: Dr. Lori Unruh

School psychologists are often called on to be leaders in academic settings. They are leaders in academic interventions, multitiered systems of support (MTSS), behavioral and mental health interventions, consultation, crisis intervention and prevention, ethical practices, and advocacy, just to name a few (Kilanowski & Augustyniak, 2021). School psychologists are leaders at the individual level as well as at the school systems level. “Leadership is an essential competency for school psychologists. Whether formally (i.e., by virtue of appointment or title) or informally, school psychologists serve as leaders in school communities by advocating for the needs of students and their families” (Malone et.al., 2016, p.1). Despite leadership being a major pillar in school psychology standards, especially within the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP), research on leadership specific to the field of school psychology is very limited.

Leadership is a complex topic that is defined in different ways by different groups (Jackson et.al., 2015). Theories regarding leadership skills can be broken down between those who believe that leaders are born and not developed versus those who believe that leaders are developed and not born (Kilanowski & Augustyniak, 2021). When considering leadership within school psychology it is important to consider how this is defined and how this is perceived. For this research, current school psychologists will anonymously complete a 20-question survey inquiring about their involvement in leadership opportunities, their view of leadership qualities

relevant to their role, barriers, and support to leadership involvement, and how factors such as gender, race, and years of experience impact their responses.

Keywords: Leadership, School Psychologist, Perception

CHAPTER ONE: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

School psychologists are often called on to be leaders within the academic setting. They are leaders in academic intervention, multitiered systems of support (MTSS), behavioral and mental health intervention, consultation, crisis intervention and prevention, ethical practices, and advocacy, just to name a few (Kilanowski & Augustyniak, 2021). School psychologists are leaders at the individual level as well as at the school systems level and potentially beyond that. As stated by Malone et al. (2016) “Leadership is an essential competency for school psychologists. Whether formally (i.e., by virtue of appointment or title) or informally, school psychologists serve as leaders in school communities by advocating for the needs of students and their families” (p.1). School psychologists may be unaware and potentially unfazed that their daily job has slipped them into the role of a leader in their schools. This occurs due to an inconsistent view of what activities or qualities make an individual a leader. It also occurs due to a misunderstanding of whether you can be a leader without being appointed to a leadership role.

Historically, leadership has played a major role in the development of standards related to school psychological practices. In 2006, *School Psychology: A Blueprint for Training and Practice III* was created to establish and identify certain universal standards all school psychologists should hold themselves accountable for and to be an essential guide for their daily practice. In this blueprint, the connection between school psychologists and leadership was identified several times. For example, it was noted that school psychologists should be at the forefront of developing schools as a safe community, school psychologists and administrators

should recognize school psychologists as leaders, and there have never been a greater need for school psychologists to take leadership roles. (Ysseldyke, et.al. 2006).

The National Association of School Psychologists has a long history of establishing and revising professional standards for school psychological services similar to those identified in the Blueprint. The most recent version, *The Professional Standards of the National Association of School Psychologists*, was developed in 2020 and provided a unified set of national standards. (NASP, 2020) These standards are comprised of four separate areas, the Model for Comprehensive and Integrated School Psychological Services, the Standards for Graduate Preparation of School Psychologists, the Standards for Credentialing of School Psychologists, and the Principles for Professional Ethics. The role of school psychologists as leaders is a very common thread throughout these standards. For example, there are discussions regarding leadership qualities that are necessary to the role, the school psychologist's role on leadership teams within schools, and other leadership opportunities.

Additionally, the 2017-2022 Strategic Plan for The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) included Leadership Development as one of five Strategic Goals. This leadership development goal was for school psychologists to possess the leadership skills to effect change at the local, state, and national level. (NASP. 2017)

Finally, NASP has created a Leadership Development Committee (LDC) is designed to provide ongoing training in leadership skills for school psychologists, orient new and returning association leaders to their duties and responsibilities, identify and establish mentors for emerging leaders, provide technical assistance for boards and committees, compile leadership resources to support leader development, identify emerging leaders, and evaluate leadership development initiatives and their effectiveness (Malone et, al. 2016). Within the committee,

leadership initiative goals were developed including having school psychologists recognize their role as leaders, act as leaders in school settings, act as leaders within the profession, and have access to leadership development opportunities (Paige, 2020).

School Psychology and leadership go hand in hand. However, the research has done a shockingly poor job of recognizing the relationship between school psychology and leadership. This is not because of poor research but rather a lack of research in its entirety. Individual models/philosophies of leadership are difficult to create, especially in the field of school psychology which encompasses so many different individual roles. The job itself presents difficulties in defining the leadership potential and the qualities that make the most effective school psychologist leader.

Literature Review

Leadership

Despite there being significant research and literature surrounding the general concept of leadership, there has yet to be an established definition of what makes a person a leader. The concept of leadership is stuck in the middle of a philosophical debate. Simply put, the conversation is broken down into two facets; are leaders born with the innate qualities that make them good leaders, or do individuals through experiences and training gain the skills and qualities that make them good leaders? Both sides of this debate are well supported. Many people are described as having an abundance of qualities that would make them inherently effective leaders; these individuals are identified as having these skills since a young age and are believed to have been born with the “right qualities for leadership”. The natural-born leader’s stance is hard to debate. When an individual demonstrates initiative, easily figures out what

needs to be done, and effectively influences others, it is clear to most people that they were “born to lead” (Steinhoff, 2015).

On the contrary, there are people who through experience in life, education, and training are believed to have been crafted or made into good leaders. It is believed that these skills are not things we have been born with and if not presented with certain situations, we may never develop said skills. One of the major debaters of the “leaders are made” argument are organizations with the assumption that they can build their employee's leadership skills. US companies spend approximately 14 billion each year on leadership training, and higher education offers a multitude of degree courses about leadership. It encourages the idea that leadership and the skills associated with it are trainable or learnable (Boerma et al, 2017).

Theories of Leadership

There are many leadership theories, and each one carries numerous amounts of research defending them, identifying their advantages and weaknesses, and identifying the qualities of leaders important within each theory. Some of the most prevalent philosophies of leadership are trait theory, behavioral theory, contingency theory, transformational theory, and transactional theory (Antonakis & Day, 2018; Augustyniak et al., 2018). Each philosophy focuses on a different type of leader as well as a different focus that leader takes on their leadership experience.

Trait Leadership Theory. Trait Theory is also known as The Great Man Theory and is the earliest known leadership theory (Chin-Chung Chao, 2017). The basis of this theory is that the individual/leader must have leadership traits as part of their personality. This is the theory that people are born leaders rather than created leaders. It is noted though that these traits can be honed through practice, training, and experience but they have to be things you already possess

(Goff, 2003). This theory emphasizes that leadership is inherited not learned. One of the major pitfalls of this theory is it creates this premise that good/effective leadership can only arise from certain traits that are genetic and inherent. This limits motivation, advancement, and growth in individuals who believe they do not possess the list of traits. Additionally, this theory fails to consider any situational, motivational, or contingency factors in leadership (Khan, 2013). Some of the traits that often accompany this theory are extraversion, confidence, intelligence, goal-oriented, responsibility, emotional stability, integrity, adaptability, and influence. (Chin-Chung Chao. 2017).

Behavioral Leadership Theory. This theory focuses on the behaviors and actions of leaders rather than the traits the leaders possess. It is noted that with this theory leaders can be made through study practice and experience; essentially leaders are not born, they are made. In this theory, patterns of behaviors are identified and categorized as “styles of leadership” (Western Governors University, 2021). There are two major behavioral styles that behavioral leadership theory focuses on and that is employee-centered leadership which shows a genuine concern for people and job-centered leadership which emphasizes a strong desire to complete the given task/job (Goff. 2003). Behaviors that are associated with these two types of leadership are trust, sensitivity, ability to build rapport, problem-solving, communication, and flexibility (Western Governors University, 2021). A major benefit of this theory is that leaders can learn and decide the kind of leader they want to be and what actions will accompany that decision. Additionally, this theory disagrees with the trait theory in the sense that it allows the idea that anyone has the leadership capacity, it does not rely on certain traits (Western Governors University, 2021).

Contingency Leadership Theory. The contingency leadership theory is more commonly known as the situational approach. The premise of this theory is that each situation and leadership experience is different and therefore, no one approach can fit all situations. Instead, there is a certain fluidity to this theory where the leader needs to cater to the differences in the situation and adapt accordingly (Khan, 2013). A benefit to this theory is that leaders in this theory can be effective no matter the situational context because they can adapt and be flexible with each situation. It is theorized that a good/effective leader can adjust their leadership style based on the situation that is presented to them (Western Governors University, 2021). Some of the qualities that often are represented by these leaders are flexibility, adaptability, communication, empathy, patience, awareness, and organization (Zohair et al, 2021).

Transactional Leadership Theory. Transactional Leadership theory is the premise of rewarding or disciplining your followers depending on their performance (Chin-Chung Chao, 2017). Transactional leadership theory is based on the idea that leaders give their followers something they want in exchange for getting something they want. Transactional leadership is used mostly in organizations where tasks and goals are well defined; additionally, schools and educational settings tend to use transactional leadership. Some characteristics associated with transactional leadership are organized, task-oriented, concise, and structured (STU, 2014)

Transformational Leadership Theory. Transformational Leadership theory is the process that transforms individuals' values, standards, ethics, and long-term goals (Chin-Chung Chao, 2017). This is also known as the relationship theory. These leaders excel in creating close inter-relationships with collaborators, by lessening the emphasis of the leadership role and ability and putting more emphasis and belief into the followers' abilities. (Salanova et al, 2022). Transformational Leadership contains four major characteristics that are charisma/influence,

inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and consideration for individual followers. A major benefit to this theory is the leader uses their inspiration and motivation to help their followers improve and create buy-in within them (Chin-Chung Chao. 2017). Some qualities that are often found in transformational leaders are influence, communication, empathy, persuasion, trust, and self-efficacy (Salanova et al, 2022).

Qualities of Effective Leaders

Along with the many different definitions of leadership and the different theories, the other major facet of leadership is what are the qualities or attributes that a person must have to be considered an effective leader. The task of identifying the qualities of an effective leader is rather difficult. Effective leadership is subjective; it is subjective to the person identifying them, it is subjective to the field in which the leader resides, as well as it is subjective to the leadership theory the individual may fall under as described earlier. Since there is such ambiguity with the qualities that effective leaders have, this has created an inability to create a universal list of qualities that make a person a good and effective leader. Therefore, a review of the literature is necessary to identify the most commonly associated qualities of effective leaders.

There is an overlap between the qualities in the sense that different research articles identify the same or similar qualities. The list of qualities for effective leaders is endless and therefore, the most pertinent leadership qualities to this research will be identified. These qualities are effective communication, relationship building, flexibility, effective problem solving, confidence, awareness of oneself and others, effective conflict management, patience, empowerment, emotional intelligence, and intelligence pertinent to the field you are leading (Provorova et al., 2021, Buribaevich et al., 2022, & Alvarado et al., 2019).

Effective Communicator. Effective communication is defined as being able to hear different points of view and crafting unifying narratives that are meaningful to all involved (Alvarado & Vargas, 2019). An example of effective communication is the leader targeting the right audience with the right information. Communication is not just about how you speak to others but also about recognizing the audience with which you are communicating (Alvarado & Vargas, 2019).

Relationship Builders. The ability to build relationships is very important to the field of leadership because without the collaboration of others to help you achieve leader status and the individuals who serve as followers, leading would be rather difficult, impossible even. “Leadership manifests itself in relationships. There is no leader without followers” (Buribaevich et al., 2022, p. 4). Strong relationships require trust from both parties. This trust is needed in order to develop into strong teamwork, accountability for each other, and a more developed and promising completion of any mutual goals (Alvarado & Vargas, 2019).

Flexibility/Adaptability. Flexibility and adaptability are important to leadership due to the ever-changing nature of the role of a leader. By being flexible and adaptable, the leader allows for continuous improvement within themselves (Alvarado & Vargas, 2019). Additionally, by being flexible and adaptable the leader serves their role with confidence and controls the situation they are in. Flexibility is a common quality within leadership theories.

Effective Problem Solver/Conflict Management. The ability to solve problems is a necessity for effective leadership. This involves the ability to distinguish between the essential and the secondary, to assess options, to predict consequences, and to evaluate and distribute resources (Buribaevich et al., 2022).

Self-Confidence. Confidence is important to leadership because it enables leaders to push the boundaries of their abilities and allow them to gain new experiences. High Self-esteem paired with self-confidence in a leader boosts their resolve in critical situations and allows them to take risks as necessary (Buribaevich et al., 2022).

Self-Awareness. Self-awareness is vital to leadership because an effective leader knows the individual characteristics that are useful to them as a leader and can use that knowledge wisely. Additionally, it is not just their strengths that need to be identified but also their weaknesses (Buribaevich et al., 2022). Not only should leaders possess awareness of themselves but also of others so they can be aware of the strengths and weaknesses of the group.

Patience. Patience is important to leadership due to the nature of working with others. Patience finds itself within other qualities mentioned. (Alvarado & Vargas, 2019) For example, flexibility, problem-solving, conflict management and relationship building all require developed patience. Patience enables leaders to distinguish between where change requires disruption and where adapting the model is called for. (Alvarado & Vargas, 2019)

Empowering. Leadership is a social phenomenon and is people-oriented, so seeing other people, feeling their aspirations, problems, and concerns, as well as understanding the relationship of "leader-follower" largely determines the success of the organizational leader. (Buribaevich et al., 2022) This is why empowering is so important to leadership. A good leader needs to be able to take what they know about their followers and empower them.

Emotionally Intelligent/Stable. Emotional stability is a construct of emotional intelligence, which makes leaders who possess it more influential and effective in their roles. Emotional intelligence and stability are seen as key leadership qualities because successful leaders should be able to project confidence, ensure a safe atmosphere for their followers or

team, and create consistency within their team regarding the leader's reactions. Additionally, if a leader is emotionally intelligent, they are more equipped to handle the emotions of others.

(Provorova et al., 2020)

Leadership and School Psychology

While there is an endless amount of information and research available regarding leadership in general, there is little to no research on a discipline-specific model for leadership and school psychology. Shriberg et al. (2010) were one of the first researchers to look at leadership within school psychology. He identified the disconnect between school psychology and leadership and identified numerous discipline-specific models related to different fields. He also noted that, despite there not being a large amount of research that suggests that school psychologists are recognized as leaders, school psychologists themselves may already see themselves in the role of leader. Augustyniak et al. (2016) noted that, in addition to the lack of research in school psychology literature, there is also a lack of research on the perception of the leadership ability of school psychologists by other key professionals.

Qualities of School Psychologist Leaders

Despite school psychologists not always being explicitly labeled as leaders, they have been called upon to be leaders in many avenues within schools. When researching this topic, Shriberg et al. (2010) identified three major questions to be considered, including, how do school psychology leaders define leadership as applied to school psychology practice, what personal characteristics and skills/competencies do school psychology leaders associate with effective leadership in school psychology, and in what topic/areas/situations is leadership from school psychologists expected, as seen by school psychology leaders? This research found that school psychologists defined leadership as applied to school psychology as facilitating change and

promoting positive outcomes. Additionally, they defined leadership as having a level of competence, working amongst a team, having an influence on others, and possessing an ability to see the big picture. The personal characteristics of school psychology leaders were identified as competence, team skills, knowledge and expertise, personal character, interpersonal skills, confidence, internal motivation, organization, all forms of communication, creativity, advocacy, respect, flexibility, empathy, and problem-solving skills. Finally, the situations where school psychology leadership skills are needed were identified as classroom/academic interventions, behavioral interventions, crisis intervention, special education law/processes, assessment/evaluation, mental health issues, classroom eligibility, team meeting leader, consultation, school-wide interventions, data analysis, problem-solving, advocacy, conflict resolution, and staff development. Other than the research conducted by Shriberg et al (2010), which was largely based on the NASP Standards, no other lists of the qualities of effective school psychologist leaders have been identified.

CHAPTER TWO: PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Problem Statement

Leadership as a role for school psychologists is an under-researched field. There is little to no research indicating the skills school psychologists view as important to the role both at the school/district and state/national level. There is also no research indicating the availability and interest of leadership activities for school psychologists. This research will help identify the internal and external views of leadership as a direct role for school psychologists. It will also expand the research on school psychologists as leaders and identify both the perception of leadership through the lens of a school psychologist and the relationship between leadership and different levels of the role.

Research Questions and Exploratory Questions

A national survey of school psychologists was conducted to provide more information from this under-researched field. The following research questions were addressed in this research project:

Research Questions

1. Is there a significant relationship between job satisfaction and engagement in leadership activities?
2. Is there a significant relationship between job satisfaction and school district perception of leadership ability?
3. Is there a significant difference in the level of engagement in leadership activities based on school district location?
4. Is there a significant difference in the level of engagement in leadership activities based on the number of years of experience as a school psychologist?

Exploratory Questions

In addition, the following exploratory questions were addressed in this research project:

Leadership Qualities

1. What are the most frequently identified leadership qualities for school psychologists at the school and district level?
2. What are the most frequently identified leadership qualities for school psychologists at the state and national level?

School/District Leadership Experiences

3. What is the percentage of school psychologists who report being offered leadership opportunities at the school district level?
4. What is the percentage of school psychologists who report seeking out leadership opportunities at the school/district level?
5. What is the percentage of school psychologists who report engaging in leadership opportunities at the school/district level?
6. What are the most frequently identified supports when engaging in leadership at the school/district level?
7. What are the most frequently identified barriers when engaging in leadership at the school/district level?

Open-ended Questions

8. What type of school/district leadership activities are school psychologists reporting being involved in?

Methods

Participants

School psychologists currently working in school systems within the United States participated in this study. Participants were recruited through school psychology state organizations, individual school districts' special education directors/lead school psychologists/school psychologists, and school psychology-relevant social media Facebook groups. Many participants were sought after but due to varying procedures for survey dissemination and varying response levels, only school personnel, state-level organizations, and Facebook groups who consented to the dissemination of the survey were provided with a link to the survey (Appendix A).

In total ninety-seven participants consented to complete the survey. Participants were removed from data analysis if they responded to less than 100% of the survey items. The final sample size was fifty-six ($N = 56$). Some of the demographic characteristics were able to be compared to the *Status of School Psychology in 2020: Part 1, Demographics of the NASP Membership Survey* (Goforth et al., 2021) to demonstrate similarities in participant representation. The age of participants ranged from 25 to 70 with the average age being 39.8 ($SD = 10.9$). Within the sample, 83.9% of participants identified as female, and 16.1% identified as male (See Table 1). Compared to the NASP membership survey the percentage of males (12.1%) and females (87.3%); this survey has similar demographics of gender, making it representative of the field (Goforth et al., 2021). Additionally, the reported ethnicity was as follows: 5.4% Asian, 1.8% Black/African American, 76.8% Caucasian, 10.7% Hispanic/Latinx, 3.6% other, and 1.8% chose to not disclose their ethnicity (See Table 2). The NASP survey identified both races and ethnicities and therefore it would be difficult to identify comparisons; however, it should be

noted that similarly, the majority of the NASP survey participants were Caucasian (85.9%) (Goforth et al., 2021).

Table 1

Demographic Characteristic: Gender

Participant Demographics	
Gender	<i>n</i> (%)
Male	9 (16.1%)
Female	47 (83.9%)
Other	0 (0.0%)
Prefer to not say	0 (0.0%)

Table 2

Demographic Characteristic: Ethnicity

Participant Demographics	
Ethnicity	<i>n</i> (%)
Asian	3 (5.4%)
Black/African American	1 (1.8%)
Caucasian	43 (76.8%)
Hispanic/Latinx	6 (10.7%)
Other:	2 (3.6%)
Prefer to not say	1 (1.8%)

Within the survey participants were asked to provide multiple demographic characteristics both regarding their person as well as their career in school psychology. Participants were asked to identify their highest level of school psychology degree. The majority of participants were specialist-level school psychologists (See Table 3). This is a similar representation to the NASP survey, with 73.6% of the participants being specialist-level (Goforth et al., 2021). Participants were asked to identify their years of experience as a school psychologist (See Table 4) and their primary work setting (See Table 5). The majority of participants were individuals who have worked for 6-15 years and are located in suburban settings.

Table 3

Demographic Characteristic: Highest School Psychology Degree

Participant Demographics	
Degree	<i>n</i> (%)
Masters	8 (14.3%)
Specialist	38 (67.9%)
Doctorate	10 (17.9%)

Table 4

Demographic Characteristic: Primary Work Setting

Participant Demographics	
Setting	<i>n</i> (%)

Rural	14 (25.0%)
Suburban	30 (53.6%)
Urban	11 (19.6%)
Other	1 (1.8 %)

Table 5

Demographic Characteristic: Years of Experience as a School Psychologist

Participant Demographics	
Years	<i>n</i> (%)
1 to 5	18 (32.1%)
6 to 15	22 (39.3%)
16 and more years	16 (28.6%)

The participants were also asked to rate their job satisfaction on a scale of *strongly dissatisfied, somewhat dissatisfied, somewhat satisfied, and strongly satisfied*. Half of the participants identified that they were somewhat satisfied with their job, 30.4% of individuals identified that they were strongly satisfied and the remaining 19.6% identified levels of dissatisfaction with their job (See Table 6).

Table 6

Demographic Characteristic: Job Satisfaction as a School Psychologist

Participant Demographics	
Satisfaction	<i>n</i> (%)

Strongly dissatisfied	4 (7.1%)
Somewhat dissatisfied	7 (12.5%)
Somewhat satisfied	28 (50.0%)
Strongly satisfied	17 (30.4%)

Finally, the participants were asked to identify their psychologist-to-student ratios and the majority of participants identified that their caseload is around 1:1001-2000 students (See Table 7). Additionally, participants were asked to identify any membership within state and national school psychology organizations (See Table 8). A little more than half of the participants identified that they were involved with both their state and national organizations. Only 12.5% of participants identified that they were not involved in either organization.

Table 7

Demographic Characteristic: Psychologist to Student Ratio

Participant Demographics	
Caseload	<i>n</i> (%)
1000	17 (30.4%)
1001-2000	24 (42.9%)
2001-3000	11 (19.6%)
More than 3000	4 (7.1%)

Table 8

Demographic Characteristic: State and National Organization Involvement

Participant Demographics	
Involvement	<i>n</i> (%)
State only	13 (23.2%)
National only	6 (10.7%)
State and National	30 (53.6%)
Neither	7 (12.5%)

Measures

The data for this research project was collected through a digital survey created by the researcher. The survey was created with Qualtrics software. Information about the survey and consent for participation was provided at the start of the survey (see Appendix B). This survey included questions about leadership qualities, school/district leadership experiences, and state/national leadership experiences. The survey also included demographic questions. All survey questions were developed by the researcher involved in the study based on information from a review of the research.

Survey questions regarding leadership qualities. The first two questions of the survey were focused on the qualities that school psychologists perceive as being most important to being an effective leader. These qualities were chosen for both the school/district and state/national level. Participants were asked to rank the top five of twenty qualities in terms of level of importance. The qualities chosen were a mix of qualities identified during a literature review the most important qualities in general leadership and the rest of the qualities were found in the Shriberg et al., (2010), survey that previously asked school psychologists about effective leadership qualities.

Survey questions regarding school/district leadership experiences. The next set of questions identified the school psychologist's experience as a leader in the school and/or district setting. The first question asked the participants to identify levels of engagement as a leader within the school/district. Next, were two questions identifying the barriers and support that lead to higher or lower levels of engagement. Following that was a question regarding school personnel who have sought out the school psychologist for leadership opportunities. There were questions identifying how often the school psychologist is given leadership opportunities and how often they seek out leadership opportunities. Finally, there was a question addressing the individuals' current leadership activities in the school/district setting.

Demographic Questions. Lastly, a short demographics questionnaire was included at the end of this survey. The questions included level of education and years of experience, current work setting, gender, race, age, job satisfaction, organization involvement, and caseload information.

Procedure

Following approval by the research committee an application to the Western Carolina University Institutional Review Board (IRB) was completed and approved. Information about the survey was sent to school psychology organizations, school psychology Facebook groups, and individual school personnel (i.e., school psychologists, lead school psychologists, and special education directors) (See Appendix A). The researcher contacted all fifty state school psychology organizations to request the dissemination of the survey to all active members. The organizations were contacted through email or through their websites "contact us" page. Individual school personnel were contacted through email. School psychologist private Facebook group administrators were contacted to request permission to post the survey to their Facebook

group. With approval from the state organizations and school personnel, an additional email was sent with an invitation to participate in the survey, consent information (See Appendix B), and the survey link. With approval from the individual Facebook groups, the survey was posted with the survey link and consent information. All individuals who completed the survey were presented with the same survey. They were all presented with information about the study and the consent to participate. The data collected from this survey was collected in Qualtrics and transferred to Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (IBM SPSS Statistics) for analysis.

Results

Four sets of analyses were conducted. These included descriptive statistics, Pearson correlations, analyses of variance (ANOVA), and qualitative analyses.

Research Questions:

Research question one. Is there a significant relationship between job satisfaction and engagement in leadership activities? A Pearson correlation coefficient was used to assess the linear relationship between reported job satisfaction and reported engagement in leadership activities. Job satisfaction and engagement in leadership activities were significantly correlated, $r = -.13, p = .34$. In other words, the level of job satisfaction correlates negatively with the level of engagement in leadership activities (See Table 9). This indicates that as the level of leadership engagement increases, the level of job satisfaction decreases.

Table 9

Relationship Between Job Satisfaction and Leadership Engagement

Variables	Mean	SD	<i>r</i>	<i>P</i>
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Job Satisfaction	3.04	0.85	-.13	.34
Engagement in Leadership Activities	3.00	1.00		

Research question two. Is there a significant relationship between job satisfaction and school district perception of leadership ability? A Pearson correlation coefficient was used to assess the linear relationship between job satisfaction and school district perception of leadership ability. Results indicated that there is not a significant association $r(56) = -.00, p = .34$. in job satisfaction ($N = 56, M = 3.04, SD = 0.85$), and school perception of leadership ($N = 56, M = 3.11, SD = 0.78$). See Table 10.

Table 10

Relationship Between Job Satisfaction and School District Perception of Leadership

Variables	Mean	SD	<i>r</i>	<i>P</i>
Job Satisfaction	3.04	0.85	-.00	.97
School Perception of Leadership	3.11	0.78		

Research question three. Is there a significant difference in the level of engagement in leadership activities based on school district location? A one-way ANOVA was conducted to compare the location of the school district on engagement in leadership activities. The difference between the locations was not significant $F(3,52) = 0.52, p = .67$. Results indicated that there is not a significant difference in engagement levels in psychologists in rural districts ($N = 14, M$

=2.93, $SD = 1.07$), suburban districts ($N = 30, M = 2.93, SD = 1.05$) and urban districts ($N = 11, M = 3.18, SD = 0.75$). (See Table 11). The size of the effect of location on engagement was small, $\eta^2 = .03$.

Table 11

Table of means and standard deviations for engagement by school district location

	Mean	SD	<i>N</i>
Rural	2.93	1.07	14
Suburban	2.93	1.05	30
Urban	3.18	0.75	11

Research question four. Is there a significant difference in the level of engagement in leadership activities based on the number of years of experience as a school psychologist? A one-way ANOVA was conducted to compare the years of experience as a school psychologist on engagement in leadership activities. The difference between the years of experience was not significant $F(2,53) = 1.54, p = .22$. Results indicated that there is no significant difference in engagement levels in psychologists who are in their early career (1-5 years) ($N = 18, M = 2.67, SD = 0.91$) middle career (6-15 years) ($N = 22, M = 3.14, SD = 1.04$) and late career (16 and more years) ($N = 16, M = 3.19, SD = 0.98$). (See Table 12). The size of the effect of location on engagement was small, $\eta^2 = .03$.

Table 12

Table of means and standard deviations for engagement level by years of experience

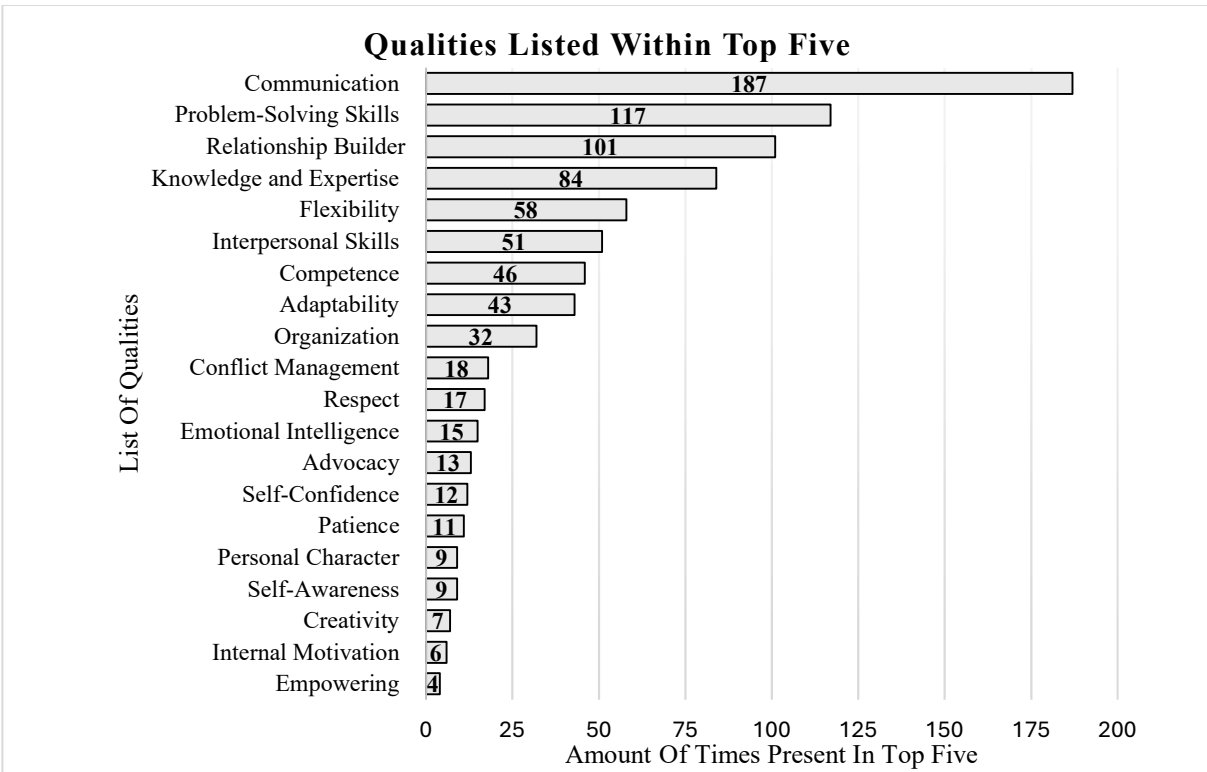
	Mean	SD	N
Early (1-5 years)	2.67	0.91	18
Middle (6-15 years)	3.14	1.04	22
Late (16 and more years)	3.19	0.98	16

Exploratory Questions

Exploratory question one. What are the most frequently identified leadership qualities for school psychologists at the school and district level? Participants were asked to rank their top five leadership qualities out of twenty presented qualities based on what they perceive makes the most effective leader at the school/district level. The qualities were analyzed to identify how many times they were listed in the top five by participants. Those occurrences in the top five were calculated and the qualities were then ranked from most occurrence to least occurrence (See Figure 1). The ranking of the top five qualities occurrences was as follows: 1. Communication, 2. Problem Solving Skills, 3. Relationship Builder, 4. Knowledge and Expertise, 5. Flexibility.

Figure 1

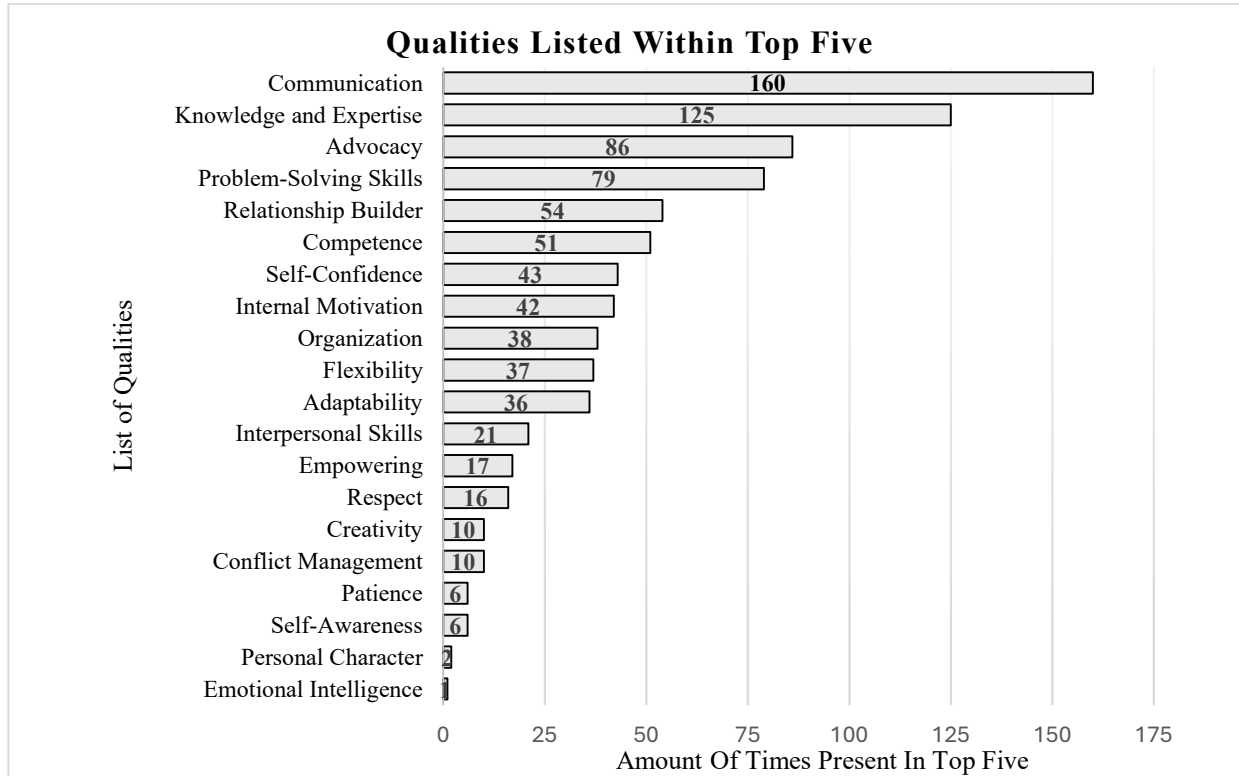
Bar Graph of the Qualities Ranked as the Most Important to being an Effective Leader at the School/District Level



Exploratory question two. What are the most frequently identified leadership qualities for school psychologists at the state and national levels? Participants were asked to rank their top five leadership qualities out of twenty presented qualities based on what they perceive makes the most effective leader at the state/national level. The qualities were analyzed to identify how many times they were listed in the top five by participants. Those occurrences in the top five were calculated and the qualities were then ranked from most occurrence to least occurrence (See Figure 2). The ranking of the top five qualities occurrences was as follows: 1. Communication, 2. Knowledge and Expertise, 3. Advocacy, 4. Problem Solving Skills, and 5. Relationship Builder.

Figure 2

Bar Graph of the Qualities Ranked as the Most Important to being an Effective Leader at the State/National Level



Exploratory question three. Descriptive statistics were utilized to examine the percentage of school psychologists who were offered to engage in leadership opportunities at the school/district level within the last year (1=Never, 2=Rarely, 3=Sometimes, 4=Often). The percentage of individuals who identified that they were offered the opportunity for some level of leadership activity was a total of 89.3% but the frequency at which they were offered these opportunities varied significantly across the participants. The participant’s responses to this question resulted in a mean of 3.0 ($SD=1.0$). A breakdown of the scale is provided. See Table 13.

Table 13*School Psychologist Offered Leadership Opportunities*

	Participant responses
Offered leadership opportunities	<i>n</i> (%)
Never	6 (10.7%)
Rarely	8 (14.3%)
Sometimes	20 (35.7%)
Often	22 (39.3%)

Exploratory question four. Descriptive statistics were utilized to examine the percentage of school psychologists who sought out leadership opportunities at the school/district level within the last year (1=Never, 2=Rarely, 3=Sometimes, 4=Often). The percentage of individuals who identified that they sought the opportunity for some level of leadership activity was a total of 83.9% but the frequency at which they sought out these opportunities varied significantly across the participants. The participant's responses to this question resulted in a mean of 2.6 ($SD=1.0$). A breakdown of the scale is provided. See Table 14.

Table 14*School Psychologist who sought Leadership Opportunities*

	Participant responses
Sought leadership opportunities	<i>n</i> (%)
Never	9 (16.1%)
Rarely	13 (23.2%)

Sometimes	23 (41.1%)
Often	11 (19.6%)

Exploratory question five. What is the percentage of school psychologists who report currently engaging in leadership opportunities at the school/district level? Descriptive statistics were utilized to examine the percentage of school psychologists who identified that they are currently engaged in leadership opportunities at the school/district level (1=Strongly disagree, 2=Somewhat disagree, 3=Somewhat agree, 4=Strongly agree). The percentage of individuals who identified that they were engaged in some level of leadership activity was a total of 76.8% but the frequency at which they engaged in leadership activity varied significantly across the participants. The participant's responses to this question resulted in a mean of 3.0 ($SD=1.0$). A breakdown of the scale is provided. See Table 15.

Table 15

School Psychologist Engaged in Leadership Opportunities

	Participant responses
Engagement in leadership opportunities	<i>n</i> (%)
Strongly disagree	7 (12.5%)
Somewhat disagree	6 (10.7%)
Somewhat agree	23 (41.1%)
Strongly agree	20 (35.7%)

Exploratory question six. What are the most frequently identified supports when engaging in leadership at the school/district level? The most frequently identified support noted by school psychologists was Support from Administration (See Table 16). Participants were able to choose any and all supports that they experienced and were not limited to choosing one. Additionally, participants were able to write in any additional support that they had experienced. The most common additional themes identified were personal motivation, knowledge and expertise, the role of school psychologist naturally creates leadership opportunities.

Table 16

Supports for Leadership Engagement

	Participant responses
Supportive factors	<i>N</i>
Support from administration	36
Opportunities for leadership engagement	35
Interest in leadership activities/training in leadership skills in graduate school/post-graduation	6
Not currently engaged in leadership within my school and/or engagement	7
Other	10

Note. *Participants could choose more than one support

Exploratory question seven. What are the most frequently identified barriers when engaging in leadership at the school/district level? The most frequently identified barriers noted by school psychologists were Time and Caseload (See Table 17). Participants were able to choose any and all barriers that they experienced and were not limited to choosing one. Additionally, participants were able to write in any additional barriers. The most common additional themes identified were time availability, working with administrators who have set ideas for leadership, and having the capacity to actually make a change through leadership.

Table 17
Barriers for Leadership Engagement

	Participant responses
Barriers	<i>N</i>
Time/Caseload	47
Lack of support from administration	15
Lack of leadership opportunities	9
Lack of interest in leadership activities	7
Lack of training in leadership skills	4
Other	5
No barriers noted	3

Note. *Participants could choose more than one barrier

Exploratory question eight. What type of school/district leadership activities are school psychologists reporting being involved in? Participants were asked to identify what

school/district leadership activities they were engaged with. Participants were provided with an open text box with no additional guidance on what the activities had to be. The participants were not required to answer this question or indicate that they did not engage in any leadership activities at this time. Only one participant noted that they did not currently engage in leadership activities. Thirty-nine participants identified multiple leadership activities they were engaging in. The most common themes collected from the results are as follows: professional development (Staff at School/District level), engagement/leadership of school-based teams (Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS), Student Support Teams (SST), Autism Teams, mental health focused teams, Crisis Teams, Specialized Instructional Support Personnel (SISP) teams, etc.), serving in supervision roles (for other psychologists, intern, and practicum students, and other special education staff), leading and mediating a variety of meetings within the school setting, consultation (staff and parent), advocating for system changes and leading conversations around data and problem-solving.

Discussion

This study looked at the involvement of school psychologists in leadership opportunities, their perceptions of leadership qualities relevant to school psychology, the barriers and supports that impact their engagement/involvement, and how factors such as job satisfaction, years of experience, and location of jobs impact their responses. The field of school psychology research is severely underrepresented, specifically around the topic of leadership.

Participants were noted to identify that both at the school/district level and the state/national level, qualities such as communication, knowledge and expertise, and problem-solving skills, and relationship builder were within the top five most effective leadership qualities. Communication was recorded as the number one quality on both rankings. The only

difference in the top five was flexibility was within the top five for the school/district level and advocacy was within the top five for the state/national level. These differences in the qualities are indicative of what role a school psychologist plays at both levels. Being within schools requires you to be more flexible to maneuver the inner workings of a school systems. Whereas school psychologists at the state/national level find effective advocacy to be beneficial when considering qualities that make an effective leader.

Participants identified the most common support for engagement in leadership as being supported by administration while the most common barrier was time and caseload expectations. The evidence of this barrier can be connected to the reports of most participants having ratios over 1 to 1,000. This would seem to indicate that when school psychologists have high caseloads there may be less support from administration to engage in additional activities such as leadership.

It should be noted that 89.3% of participants identified that they were offered the opportunity to engage at some level of leadership but only 39% indicated that they are often offered the opportunity for leadership and 36% sometimes. This indicates that the majority of school psychologists are not given leadership opportunities on a frequent basis. In addition, while 83.9% of participants identified that they seek out the opportunity to engage at some level of leadership only 20% indicated that they do this often and 41% indicated that they do this sometimes. It would appear that school psychologists tend to wait to be offered leadership activities rather than seeking it out themselves. The use of the term “wait” is not indicative of a lack of initiative by a school psychologist but would probably be more likely akin to an already heavy caseload and lack of additional time to seek out leadership activities.

When asked if they are currently engaged in leadership only 76.8% of participants identified that they were engaged in leadership. They identified engagement at the local, state, and national levels. Participants were able to individually define what activities they believed to be leadership activities. It is likely that not all participants believe their daily activities would fall into leadership engagement and would have ultimately raised the percentage of individuals currently engaged in leadership if they had. Based on the abundance of activities listed by some of the participants, it is believed that most school psychologists are currently engaging in these activities.

When looking at factors such as years of experience and job satisfaction and its impact on levels of engagement in leadership activities, results showed no significant relationship between these factors. Additionally, when looking at factors such as school personnel perception of individuals' leadership abilities and how that impacts job satisfaction, there was no significant correlation between them. However, when looking at job satisfaction related to leadership engagement a negative relationship was found. Suggesting that job satisfaction is negatively impacted by an increase in leadership engagement. Factors that may be influencing this are due to an already heavy caseload when individuals engage in more leadership activities, they are not able to feel as satisfied with the work they are doing. Additionally, if school psychologists are not feeling supported by their administration, then they may not enjoy engaging in these activities as much which ultimately leads to a decrease in job satisfaction.

Limitations

One of the limitations of this study is the number of participants who completed the survey in its entirety. It is the researchers understanding that provided with a longer survey dissemination timeline, more participants would have been inclined to participate. Unfortunately,

the field of school psychology is overworked due to low numbers of school psychologists and high numbers of caseload expectations. This impacts their ability to participate in surveys such as these. Additionally, the field of school psychology is often siloed due to low numbers and without the support of organizations disseminating the survey, individuals' participation in organizations, and school psychology-specific social media groups, it is difficult to reach current working school psychologists. Despite the low number of participants in the study; in the areas of gender, education level, and job setting, the participants were found to be representative of the field of school psychology based on the NASP participant survey completed in 2020. Additionally, some similar trends were found when looking at ethnicity particularly with the Caucasian population being the majority.

Another major limitation of this research is the lack of research in school psychology leadership. Without this research, the research had to be more general as opposed to getting specific leadership nuances within the field. Future research should consider these results when continuing to explore this necessary topic of research.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Contacted and Consented School Psychology State Associations, Individual Counties, and Facebook Groups

<i>School Psychology State Association</i>
Alaska
Maine
Montana
New Jersey
North Carolina
North Dakota
South Dakota
Utah
Washington
West Virginia
<i>Individual Counties contacted through school psychologist, lead school psychologists, and Special Education Directors.</i>
Alexander County, North Carolina
Cabarrus County, North Carolina
Carteret County, North Carolina
Catawba County, North Carolina
Hendersonville County, North Carolina
Randolph County, North Carolina
<i>Facebook Groups</i>
Early Career School Psych Support Group
Early Childhood School Psychology
School Psych AI
School Psych to School Psych
School Psychologist
School Psychologist Jobs by School Psychologist
School Psychology Job Opportunities and Discussion
The Life and Times of a School Psychologist

Appendix B: Consent and Survey

Western Carolina University

Consent Form to Participate in a Research Study

**AN EXPLORATORY REVIEW OF SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGIST'S PERCEPTIONS OF
THEIR ROLE AS A LEADER.**

Project Title: An Exploratory Review of School Psychologist's Perceptions of Their Role as a Leader.

This study is being conducted by: Jessica Arocho, B.A., and Dr. Lori Unruh, Ph.D.

Description and Purpose of the Research: You are invited to participate in a research study about reviewing leadership as a role for school psychologists and their perception of their role as leaders. By doing this study we hope to learn more about leadership involvement, leadership qualities as described by school psychologists, and the barriers and supports that impact leadership involvement.

What you will be asked to do: You will be asked to complete a survey regarding your experience with leadership as a school psychologist at the school/district level. Additionally, demographics (age, gender, race) will be collected in order to report on the generalization of the population. The data collected will not include your name or school district name. The survey is estimated to take approximately 10 minutes.

Risks and Discomforts: There are no anticipated risks from participating in this research.

Benefits: There are no direct benefits to you for participating in this research study. The study may help us better understand the role of leadership through the lens of a school psychologist.

Privacy/Confidentiality/Data Security: The data collected in this research study will be kept confidential. Participation in research may involve some loss of privacy. We will do our best to make sure that the information about you is kept confidential, but we cannot guarantee total confidentiality. Your personal information may be viewed by individuals involved in the research and may be seen by people including those collaborating, funding, and regulating the study. The research team will work to protect your data to the extent permitted by technology. It is possible, although unlikely, that an unauthorized individual could gain access to your responses because you are responding online. This risk is similar to your everyday use of the internet.

Voluntary Participation: Participation is voluntary, and you have the right to withdraw your consent or discontinue participation at any time without penalty.

Compensation for Participation: No compensation will be provided for participation.

Contact Information: For questions about this study, please contact Jessica Arocho at Jarocho@catamount.wcu.edu. You may also contact Dr. Lori Unruh, the principal investigator and faculty advisor for this project, at Lunruh@wcu.edu

If you have questions or concerns about your treatment as a participant in this study, you may contact the Western Carolina University Institutional Review Board through the Office of Research Administration by calling 828-227-7212 or emailing irb@wcu.edu. All reports or correspondence will be kept confidential to the extent possible.

I understand what is expected of me if I participate in this research study. I have been given the opportunity to ask questions and understand that participation is voluntary.

- I consent
- I do not consent

School Psychologist Survey

Q1 From the qualities listed below, drag the top five in order that you think are most important for being a strong leader as a school psychologist within your school and/or district:

- _____ Communication
- _____ Relationship Builder
- _____ Flexibility
- _____ Adaptability
- _____ Problem-Solving Skills
- _____ Conflict Management
- _____ Self-Confidence
- _____ Self-Awareness
- _____ Patience
- _____ Empowering
- _____ Emotional Intelligence
- _____ Competence
- _____ Knowledge and Expertise
- _____ Personal Character
- _____ Interpersonal Skills
- _____ Internal Motivation
- _____ Organization
- _____ Creativity
- _____ Advocacy
- _____ Respect

Q2 From the qualities listed below, drag the top five in order that you think are most important for being a strong leader as a school psychologist within your state and/or national level:

- _____ Communication
- _____ Relationship Builder
- _____ Flexibility

- _____ Adaptability
- _____ Problem-Solving Skills
- _____ Conflict Management
- _____ Self-Confidence
- _____ Self-Awareness
- _____ Patience
- _____ Empowering
- _____ Emotional Intelligence
- _____ Competence
- _____ Knowledge and Expertise
- _____ Personal Character
- _____ Interpersonal Skills
- _____ Internal Motivation
- _____ Organization
- _____ Creativity
- _____ Advocacy
- _____ Respect

Q3 I engage in leadership activities at the school/district level:

- Strongly disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Somewhat agree
- Strongly agree

Q4 If engaged in leadership within your school and/or district, what has contributed the most to you being able to successfully engage in these leadership activities (Check all that apply):

- Support from administration
- Opportunities for leadership engagement
- Interest in leadership activities training in leadership skills in graduate school and/or post-graduation
- Not currently engaged in leadership within my school and/or district
- Other: _____

Q5 Whether engaged or not in leadership within your school and/or district, what have been the biggest barriers to you being able to successfully engage in leadership activities at this level (Check all that apply):

- Time/Caseload
- Lack of support from administration
- Lack of leadership opportunities
- Lack of interest in leadership activities
- Lack of training in leadership skills
- Other: _____

- No barriers noted

Q6 Others within my school and/or district see me as a leader:

- Strongly disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Somewhat agree
- Strongly agree

Q7 Which of the following school personnel have sought you out for leadership opportunities (Check all that apply):

- Central Office Administration
- School Level Administration
- Special Education Administration
- Other SISP Support Staff (counselors, social workers, nurses, etc.)
- Regular Education Teachers
- Special Education Teachers
- Other: _____
- None

Q8 Over the past year, how often have you been given the opportunities within your school or district to participate in leadership activities:

- Never
- Rarely
- Sometimes
- Often

Q9 Over the past year, how often have you specifically sought out leadership opportunities within your school and/or district:

- Never
- Rarely
- Sometimes
- Often

Q10 What school and/or district leadership activities do you currently participate in as a school psychologist:

Q11 I identify my gender as:

- Male
- Female
- Other: _____
- Prefer not to say

Q12 I identify my ethnicity as:

- Asian
- Black/African American
- Caucasian
- Hispanic/Latinx
- Native American
- Pacific Islander
- Other: _____
- Prefer to not say

Q13 What is your current age:

Q14 What is your highest school psychology degree:

- Masters
- Specialist
- Doctorate

Q15 What is your primary work setting:

- Rural
- Suburban
- Urban
- Other: _____

Q16 What state are you currently working in:

Q17 How many years of experience do you have working as a school psychologist:

- Early (1-5 years)
- Middle (6-15 years)
- Late (16 and more years)

Q18 How satisfied are you with your current job as a school psychologist:

- Strongly dissatisfied
- Somewhat dissatisfied
- Somewhat satisfied
- Strongly satisfied

Q19 In your school district, what is your approximate psychologist-to-student ratio:

- 1000
- 1001-2000
- 2001-3000

- More than 3000

Q20 Are you a member of a state and/or national school psychology organization:

- State only
- National only
- State and National
- None