

# Building Competency in School Psychology Trainees Through the Use of Primary Project

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Fieldwork is a signature pedagogy of school psychology training that provides robust opportunities for socialization into the professional field. This article examines the use of Primary Project, an evidence-based intervention provided in the school setting, as a pedagogical training tool. All 3 levels of school psychology graduate students at William James College—terminal masters, specialist (certificate of advanced studies), and doctoral candidates—participate in Primary Project during their first year of training. Using Primary Project as a systemic training tool begins the process of student competency acquisition, professional identity, and socialization into the profession. This qualitative study examines how students and faculty supervisors perceived their experiences with Primary Project and how their experiences may or may not have aligned with the National Association of School Psychologists practice domains. Discussion of how the American Psychological Association doctoral-level core competency framework is linked to the present study provides potential training opportunities at the clinical psychology doctoral level. Implications for practice and future research across all levels of school psychology training are offered.

*Keywords:* school psychology training, professional competencies, Primary Project, fieldwork

Within the realm of school psychology training, the role of fieldwork is to connect the theoretical and conceptual contributions of classroom learning with the practical world of the school setting. This tool is one of the signature pedagogies in a variety of helping professions and is frequently used in the training of school psychologists, serving as the central mode of teaching, instruction,

and socialization for the profession (Shulman, 2005). Fieldwork provides an arena for trainees to build skills and develop competency in a variety of areas.

Competency development for school psychologists begins at the master's level, continues to grow at the specialist level, and further deepens and broadens at the doctoral level. The basic core com-

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competencies remain the same, yet deepen and broaden over time as a function of the level of education and professional development. This developmental progression of competency acquisition continues beyond formal education as professionals cycle through stages in an ever spiraling and deepening manner (Loganbill, Hardy, & Delworth, 1982).

For school psychology educators, competency frameworks, such as the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) Practice Model (NASP, 2010) and the American Psychological Association (APA) Competency Benchmarks for Professional Psychology (American Psychological Association [APA], 2012), can be instrumental in guiding curricular choices and assessing student readiness and competencies. While the APA framework is focused on doctoral-level training competencies, the current study was conducted at a college that is accredited by both NASP and APA. Therefore, the college's faculty view both frameworks as valuable in making curricular decisions and determining when and in which educational contexts specific competencies should be introduced.

The philosophy of the school psychology graduate program at William James College is that early fieldwork begins the process of competency acquisition, professional identity development, and socialization into the profession. The program has three successive levels: masters (MA), specialist (certificate of advanced graduate studies or "CAGS"), and doctoral (PsyD). While students have the option to conclude their studies following the completion of the MA/CAGS levels, many elect to continue their studies and obtain a doctoral degree. The PsyD degree provides advanced training, opportunities to develop in specialized areas, opportunities to obtain independent licensure, and enhanced career opportunities in supervision, school system administration, and higher education. All school psychology graduate students at William James College, both terminal MA/CAGS and doctoral candidates, are trained in the implementation of Primary Project during their first year of graduate education.

This qualitative study examined the perspectives of faculty and first-year school psychology graduate students involved in Primary Project, an evidence-based intervention (EBI) intended to reduce social, emotional, and school adjustment difficulties in young children. This study is the first of its kind to collect data on the experiences of student and faculty involved in this specific Primary Project training model. The training includes linkages to both the NASP Practice Model and the APA Competency Benchmarks, thereby bridging the two frameworks and contributing to the literature for school psychology masters, specialist, and doctoral programs in both the United States and Canada.

Incorporating an EBI that is aligned with school psychology competencies early in students' graduate training not only introduces evidence-based practices at the predoctoral level but can also influence the practices of school psychology educators across all levels. The current study discusses the experience of incorporating one EBI, Primary Project, into early graduate field training to increase students' professional competencies. This process could easily be adopted by other specialist and doctoral training programs to help students more rapidly acquire necessary competencies earlier in their training.

## Practice Frameworks in Professional Psychology Training Programs

Educators who design programs and training goals with the APA doctoral competency frameworks in mind contribute to the professional identity growth of their students. Furthermore, effective training often involves specific areas of competency, including consultation, multiculturalism, supervision, reflective practice, professional competence issues in training, and barriers to implementing evidence-based interventions (Barrett, Hazel, & Newman, 2017; Fouad et al., 2009; Hatcher et al., 2013; Health Service Psychology Education Collaborative, 2013; Merrell, Ervin, & Peacock, 2012; Rodolfa et al., 2014).

While the core APA competency benchmarks are targeted at doctoral training of professional psychology, the William James College school psychology program is based on the premise that competency-aligned training should occur at all stages. As such, the six APA benchmark clusters and corresponding core competencies of professionalism, relationships, science, application, education, and systems are woven into the curricular process and pedagogical decisions at William James College in addition to the 10 NASP domains of practice. Many of these competencies can be addressed by implementing an EBI, such as Primary Project, within the school context.

### Traditional Primary Project Model

Primary Project is an evidence-based early intervention program delivered in the school setting that was designed to enhance school-related competencies and reduce social and emotional school adjustment difficulties in young children (Cowan et al., 1996). The program is considered a Tier 2 Response to Intervention (RTI) intervention for children displaying school adjustment problems in the mild to moderate range (Peabody, Johnson, Smith, Sanyshyn, & Zordan, 2016). Research on the program's efficacy has shown it to be effective in reducing school adjustment difficulties in both the short and long term (Chandler, Weissberg, Cowen, & Guare, 1984; Cowen et al., 1996; Nafpaktitis & Perlmutter, 1998; Winer-Elkin, Weissberg, & Cohen, 1988). Primary Project continues to be listed in the National Registry of Evidence-based Programs and Practices, a valuable database of the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration (SAMHSA, 2018). To our knowledge, research evaluating Primary Project training is nonexistent, leaving this current study as the first to explore student and faculty perceptions of how involvement in Primary Project implementation impacts student professional competency development.

Primary Project has six core components that establish a solid foundation for success: a focus on young children; an early screening and identification process; use of paraprofessionals in a direct service role; use of mental health professionals as supervisors, consultants, and leaders; use of ongoing outcome and process evaluation; and integration of Primary Project within the school and community settings (Peabody et al., 2016). Weekly supervision provides opportunities to learn the importance of reflection and supervision when working with children.

## Adapted Primary Project Model at William James College

Primary Project was introduced into the school psychology curriculum at William James College by the program director, who believed it offered an innovative and operationalized way of providing supervised practice with implementation and delivery of an evidence-based program early in student training. Unlike the traditional model of Primary Project that uses paid paraprofessionals (called “child associates”) in the direct service role with children, the school psychology students are placed in the direct service role and spend approximately one and a half days in the school setting.

In preparation for the Primary Project experience, students spend the first few months of their first year in training building their knowledge base and learning the intervention by watching videos of play sessions, observing and participating in simulated role-plays, and participating in didactics and discussions within their practicum class. Didactics and discussions include topics such as creating positive play environments, the therapeutic powers of play, minor school adjustment issues, teacher and parent consultation, school roles and responsibilities, and basic data collection. The emphasis during this period is on helping students to acquire the basic prerequisite skills necessary to successfully engage in the play-based intervention. To maintain the fidelity of the intervention and to model ongoing collaboration with program developers, students also receive a brief training on the six key structural components of the program from the program development staff affiliated with the Children’s Institute in New York. This brief training is a condensed version of the traditional 2-day training offered at school sites that are not using students as direct service providers. Children’s Institute professionals consult with program directors at William James College to design the pretraining content in order to ensure that the brief training by Children’s Institute is supplemental and not duplicative to the training provided by the William James College faculty.

Over the past decade, the William James College faculty have adapted elements of Primary Project to fit their expanding graduate student population. Examples of how the program has been adapted include the use of electronic data collection and limiting the number of children served by each graduate student. To ensure program fidelity, adaptations were approved by program developers prior to implementation. As the college is charged with training professional psychologists, attention to the NASP domains of practice and APA competencies remains core to all curricular decision making. Table 1 illustrates how the NASP practice domains align with Primary Project student activities and the corresponding linkages to APA benchmark clusters and core competency areas. APA benchmark clusters with corresponding competencies are shown in italics.

### Method

This study sought to develop a deeper understanding of the experiences of implementing Primary Project from the perspective of beginning school psychology students and their faculty supervisors. Student evaluations collected in previous years through the traditional college-wide course evaluation process provided some insight into student and faculty perceptions of Primary Project, highlighting an opportunity for deeper exploration of this topic. The evaluations were used to help generate the research questions,

although the current authors chose not to formally use these data because explicit consent for these data to be used in research endeavors was not previously provided by participants.

A phenomenological qualitative approach was used, as researchers sought to understand and describe a specific phenomenon of interest, experience with Primary Project, from the views of the participants who were directly involved. As this was a collaborative study with researchers employed from two major institutions, William James College and the University of Southern Maine, a large public state university, approval was required from each institution’s institutional review board.

The participants for this study were William James College faculty responsible for off-site supervision and training related to Primary Project ( $n = 4$ ), first-year school psychology master’s students at the end of their first training year ( $n = 10$ ), and second-year school psychology CAGS specialist students ( $n = 5$ ) at the end of their second year of training who had administered Primary Project the year prior. First-year students included two males and eight females. Second-year students were all female, and the faculty were three females and one male.

Consent was obtained by e-mail to all eligible students and faculty. Participants had the option to opt out of participation without penalty. All eligible first-year students and faculty opted to participate. Two students in the second-year group did not participate due to scheduling difficulties. Participants were given opportunities to provide feedback or see results to ensure their comments were appropriately and accurately captured. All three focus groups were conducted by a faculty member from a separate university who was not associated with the students in any way. The focus group facilitator had previous knowledge of Primary Project as a former trainer for the program and had consulted with the faculty of the William James College program for several years prior to the study. While researchers inevitably influence the research process, strategies can be employed to help minimize this influence (Giorgi, 2011; Lopez & Willis, 2004). In this current study, the facilitator engaged in a form of bracketing, defined as an ongoing self-critical stance to contemplate preconceptions, actions, feelings, and conflicts experienced throughout the research process, by keeping field notes and a reflexivity journal. Additionally, both dependability and objectivity were met through consultation with experienced qualitative researchers during the data analysis phase.

Data were collected from three focus groups using a semistructured format of open-ended questions. All three focus groups were digitally audio-recorded and then later transcribed. The following questions were utilized as prompts during the group discussion: What were your experiences with Primary Project? What were your successes and challenges? What Primary Project experiences aligned with the NASP practice domains? What Primary Project experiences were the most influential in the preparation of becoming a school psychologist?

Data analysis followed the framework proposed by Colaizzi (1978), which includes categorizing and chunking of the data within and across groups. Using a constant comparative process, themes were derived across interviews, researcher field notes, and memos. Five independent coders identified themes from the interviews, as well as comparison of content and themes across the three different groups. Only three of the five coders aligned the NASP or APA competencies due to familiarity with the frame-

Table 1  
*NASP Domains, Primary Project Activities, and Linkages to APA Clusters and Competencies*

NASP domain	Description, related Primary Project activities, and APA competencies
Data-based decision making	<p><b>Description:</b> Involves the knowledge of various methods of assessment and data collection to aid the psychologist in the development and administration of services to effectively meet students' and schools' unique needs.</p> <p><b>Related Primary Project activities:</b> Children are screened for school adjustment in all targeted classrooms. Graduate students meet with teachers and parents to describe program and explain scores. Graduate students are involved in all steps of data collection, screening, and pre/post measures and lead the postintervention conferences where next-step referral decisions are made if warranted.</p> <p><b>Linkage to APA benchmark clusters and core competencies:</b> <i>Professionalism: values and attitudes. Relational: relationships. Science: evaluation, scientific knowledge, and methods. Application: evidence-based practice, assessment, intervention, and consultation.</i></p>
Consultation and collaboration	<p><b>Description:</b> Involves the ability to work concurrently and collaboratively with collateral supports (e.g., parents, teachers, administrators, etc.) for the benefit of children.</p> <p><b>Related Primary Project activities:</b> Students meet and consult with teachers, field-site supervisors, college supervisors, and parents throughout the entire experience. Students may communicate via e-mail or other written forms of communication. Partnerships with new school sites may involve administrator, teacher, and parent education about the program. Opportunities for leadership in school as part of social and emotional programming exist and how the program interacts with academic functioning.</p> <p><b>Linkage to APA benchmark clusters and core competencies:</b> <i>Professionalism: values and attitudes. Relational: relationships. Application: consultation. Systems: interdisciplinary systems.</i></p>
Interventions and instructional support to develop academic skills	<p><b>Description:</b> Involves the comprehensive understanding of factors influencing academic learning, as well as a thorough understanding of human learning, cognitive, and developmental processes, as well as evidence-based curricula and instructional strategies.</p> <p><b>Related Primary Project activities:</b> Students learn how to lead a developmentally sensitive intervention using play and an evidence-based methodology that improves school adjustment across the domains of task orientation, behavioral control, peer social skills, and assertiveness. Students learn how these domains impact academic and social learning.</p> <p><b>Linkage to APA benchmark clusters and core competencies:</b> <i>Application: evidence-based practice, intervention, and assessment.</i></p>
Interventions and mental health services to develop social and life skills	<p><b>Description:</b> Involves the comprehensive understanding of factors influencing behavior and mental health, how behavior and mental health are intertwined, and how various factors impact learning and life skills to inform the selection of evidence-based strategies to promote positive social-emotional functioning and mental health.</p> <p><b>Related Primary Project activities:</b> Though initially presenting with only minor school adjustment difficulties, some children may need more intensive interventions as evidenced by behavior in the sessions or classroom. Through consultation, supervision, reflective practice, and observation, the graduate student may experience this type of additional referral process and collaborate with team members to refer to another school or community-based service.</p> <p><b>Linkage to APA benchmark clusters and core competencies:</b> <i>Professionalism: ethical, legal standards, and policy. Science: evaluation. Application: consultation.</i></p>
Preventative and responsive services	<p><b>Description:</b> Involves knowledge in the areas of risk factors and resilience in learning and mental health, services in schools and communities to support multitiered prevention, and evidence-based strategies for effective crisis response.</p> <p><b>Related Primary Project activities:</b> Primary Project is often referred to as a prevention program but is considered a Tier 2 intervention. Graduate students are trained to provide an intervention based on nondirective humanistic/child-centered play, where forming relationships is the key objective. Students typically conduct individual sessions with two to three children weekly over the course of the academic year.</p> <p><b>Linkage to APA benchmark clusters and core competencies:</b> <i>Application: intervention. Relational: relationships.</i></p>
Family-school collaboration services	<p><b>Description:</b> Involves understanding the strengths, needs, culture, and strategies to collaborate with family systems.</p> <p><b>Related Primary Project activities:</b> Caregivers are involved in multiple ways. Caregivers are provided with basic information about Primary Project before granting permission for program participation. Students have opportunities to educate teachers and parents about the program and to work collaboratively with both parents and teachers.</p> <p><b>Linkage to APA benchmark clusters and core competencies:</b> <i>Professionalism: values and attitudes, individual and cultural diversity. System: interdisciplinary systems.</i></p>
Diversity in development and learning	<p><b>Description:</b> Involves knowledge of individual differences, abilities, disabilities, and other diverse characteristics, as well as principles, research, and evidence-based strategies to enhance services related to diversity.</p> <p><b>Related Primary Project activities:</b> Primary Project screening measures differentiate levels of school adjustment across four domains. Students are working with two to three students to see individual differences in children using the same intervention.</p> <p><b>Linkage to APA benchmark clusters and core competencies:</b> <i>Professionalism: self as individual and cultural diversity.</i></p>
Research and evaluation	<p><b>Description:</b> Emphasizes applied knowledge of research design, statistics, measurement, varied data collection and analysis techniques, and program evaluation to aid in informed decision making regarding evaluation of school practices and selection of effective services in the school setting.</p>

(table continues)

Table 1 (continued)

NASP domain	Description, related Primary Project activities, and APA competencies
Legal, ethical, and professional practice	<p><b>Related Primary Project activities:</b> Evaluation is woven throughout the intervention. Students are part of the evaluation process at the child, teacher, parent, program, and school level.</p> <p><b>Linkage to APA benchmark clusters and core competencies:</b> <i>Science: evaluation, scientific knowledge, and methods. Application: assessment.</i></p> <p><b>Description:</b> Involves general knowledge of the field of school psychology, as well as knowledge and application of the many theories, methods, laws, standards, and ethical codes related to good professional practice.</p> <p><b>Related Primary Project activities:</b> Students learn about legal, ethical, and best practices of working with children in schools through their course work, weekly supervision, reflection in group supervision, and ethical dilemmas that may present themselves throughout the experience. Students are educated on mandated reporting and boundaries of working with young children. Weekly supervision ensures gatekeeping, problem solving, and best practice monitoring.</p> <p><b>Linkage to APA benchmark clusters and core competencies:</b> <i>Professionalism: reflective practices, ethical, legal standards, and policy. Education: supervision.</i></p>

Note. NASP = National Association of School Psychologists; APA = American Psychological Association.

works and time constraints. Coders included the primary investigator for the study, one fourth-year doctoral student from William James College, a faculty member from William James College, and two staff members from Children's Institute.

## Results

Thematic analysis identified a number of themes within each of the focus groups related to the experience of participating in Primary Project. The narratives were also analyzed for evidence of alignment with the NASP domains of practice.

### Faculty Perspectives

**Awareness of disorienting tension.** The faculty involved in Primary Project spoke highly of the program. However, they were simultaneously aware that the experience evoked varying levels of tension in some of their students. This *awareness of disorienting tension* emerged as the first of three themes in the faculty focus group. The faculty reflected that the students who had previously worked in a school setting and older students with more work experience seemed to absorb the concepts more readily and appeared to be more patient with the unfolding process.

**Early operationalization of professional practice.** A second theme emerged as *early operationalization of professional practice*. The faculty felt Primary Project touched upon many of the NASP practice domains and repeatedly shared beliefs that a major strength of the program was its ability to build an array of foundational practice domain skills early in the students' training process. On faculty member stated, "Primary Project was a nice balance of offering systemic-level training in an intervention, as well as providing foundational clinical skills." Similarly, the fact that a multisystemic experience across varying domains of practice could be effectively packaged into one intervention stood out to the faculty as "a unique opportunity." For example, one faculty member stated, "I'm not sure there are many other training opportunities students would have at their sites to learn this sort of systemic intervention."

One faculty described that Primary Project helps to operationalize the domains of competency for students, stating, "I think that's another reason that Primary Project is so helpful—to really help students consolidate, in a concrete way, what those different

pieces of their professional life are really about." In reflection, the faculty wondered if the positive impact of Primary Project was not felt by students until time had passed, bringing to light the third theme: *time and reflection*. One faculty stated, "It's the kind of thing that you appreciate more with time. You really begin to identify, 2 years out, what that was all about."

**Time and reflection.** Two other examples were offered that highlight the temporal aspects of this process. One member of the faculty group was a fourth-year graduate student who functioned as a teaching assistant for the project after implementing the program herself in her first year. She offered,

I spoke about [Primary Project] in my second-year interview for an outpatient therapy site, and they hired me because of the way that I described my implementation of this program. I think it has really great foundational skills in terms of common factors for individual therapy work, building alliances, reflective listening, validation, agreement on what we're doing and how we're getting there.

Overall, it appeared that faculty found the program to be a valuable training tool with merits that became increasingly apparent to students as they progressed through their training.

### First-Year Student Perspectives

**Demystification.** For first-year students who had recently completed their Primary Project experience, two main themes emerged. The first theme was *demystification*. Students reported feeling that Primary Project was initially presented as something mysterious and abstract because of the multilevel parts involved in the startup of the program. Despite several didactic classroom sessions spent reviewing videos, role-playing, and discussing program implementation, students did not actually start the intervention until approximately 4 months into the semester, which contributed to anticipatory feelings. This delayed start is purposefully embedded into the traditional Primary Project best practices model, so that young children are provided ample time to adjust to the school experience.

Several first-year students shared that the anticipation of the program implementation, with its multiple components, created feelings of confusion and, in some cases, anxiety. Initially unsure of how the intervention would affect change, students carried their

uneasy feelings and budding knowledge into their initial conversations with teachers and parents. One student shared,

At the very beginning it was this mystical “Primary Project,” and they kept saying, “You’re going to do Primary Project. You’re doing it. This is what you’re doing.” And I think there’s a lot of anxiety going into it. Almost like you’re pushing it away from the very beginning because you’re not really understanding it, and you’re really not on-board, or at least comprehending it.

Another student had a somewhat different experience:

I thought it was going to be a lot more daunting than it was. It was presented as this mountain. And it was a lot of work, but it was something very doable. . . . And so, I think by the end of it, I was proud to see that I was able to figure out how to do the scheduling with teachers, and how to communicate and assert myself in meetings, and advocate for myself and for this program. . . . It was a real big growth opportunity.

**Learning to trust the process.** Students recalled an intolerance of ambiguity, which is related to the second theme: *learning to trust the process*. Students shared that while learning the skills of nondirective play and “child-centered” emotionally responsive language was awkward, they trusted that the evidence-based intervention would be effective. Students reported using the language of “child-led play” and seeing children respond favorably. One student shared this experience, stating, “It made me understand how patient I can be.” By trusting the process that had been taught to them, they recognized that they were becoming agents of change for the young children.

## Second-Year Student Perspectives

Students in the second group had also completed Primary Project during their first semester of graduate school and now were at the end of their second year of specialist-level training. With almost a full year away from the actual Primary Project experience, the second-year students could reflect on how the “child-centered” approach was an important introduction to basic counseling skills. One second-year student described the experience in this way:

I think that the complications that we all came across speak so loudly to what the job of being a school psychologist is. Working with one individual child involves knowing what is going on in the whole class, knowing how to talk to that teacher, those parents, to the principal, finding a space, working with the schedule, being flexible with schedules when the child isn’t where they’re supposed to be, being comfortable walking into a classroom and interrupting them to pull a kid, having a supervisor. . . . It lets you know all of those pieces first year, which has been super helpful to then when I’ve been slightly uncomfortable doing one of those pieces later on. Because then we have the chance in our first year to talk about all of those uncomfortable moments and know that it’s natural to be uncomfortable with them. Or that, yes, this is hard to do, but you do it anyways.

## Student Perspectives and the NASP Domains of Practice

Table 2 shows a sampling of student comments placed within NASP practice domains. Primary coders compared participant comments to reach agreement regarding which domain each statement was most aligned with.

The experience of implementing an EBI early in training provides a multisystemic introduction to the dynamic role of a school psychologist in real time. Additionally, this lived experience for students and faculty provides opportunities for investigation of how to successfully transport core components of an EBI to school settings, how to adapt the intervention to the local context, and how to address specific culture and climates of individual school settings.

## Discussion

When comparing the responses of first- and second-year students, it appeared the benefits of Primary Project involvement became clearer after the student had experienced other academic courses and had more experience in the school setting. The second-year students and faculty were far more apt to speak about the impact of the Primary Project experience as an important introductory exposure of foundational skills necessary to the field of practice. This is to be expected, as the second-year students have

Table 2  
*NASP Domains of Practice Related to Student Perspectives*

NASP domain	Sample responses
Data-based decision making	Actually, now that I think back on it, those progress notes that we had to take during [the intervention] are really helpful for what I do now with my counseling case, because I didn’t know that we had to know how to write a progress note. So it was pretty helpful to have that to fall back on. ( <i>Second-year student</i> )
Consultation and collaboration	What stood out most to me was the opportunity to like, get into the classroom and have a purpose to meet with the teachers, and establishing rapport with them. That was the most challenging part for me, actually. It really pushed me to take on that risk, and to do what was uncomfortable. ( <i>First-year student</i> )
Interventions and mental health services to develop social and life skills	What I remember most is that it helped me to let the kid lead, and not be on top of them so much. And telling them how to do things instead of letting them figure it out on their own, which was helpful for me and is still helpful now. ( <i>Second-year student</i> )
Preventative and responsive services	I also found that in talking about one of my students, it was helpful because it found that he needed more supports than just Primary Project, so that was good because he was having a hard time. If it wasn’t for Primary Project, it wouldn’t have been brought to light. ( <i>Second-year student</i> )
Legal, ethical, and professional practice	Primary Project helped me become a better leader—to step up to the plate and be a team leader. ( <i>First-year student</i> )

Note. NASP = National Association of School Psychologists.

more time away from the experience, more time in school settings, and more practice in self-reflection and supervision.

Qualitative data from focus groups were particularly helpful for understanding student anticipation and mild anxiety as largely manifestations of stress. This stress often developed in response to having to wait to apply the knowledge they had regarding the intervention, managing their course loads, and their own school adjustment issues as new first-year graduate students. Students in their first semester of graduate school want to look good, understand what is being asked of them, and be directed by faculty. A tolerance for ambiguity is often low, and the need for information and support is high.

In the year following the study, several logistical adjustments were made to the training structure that appear to have helped reduce students' stress during the training process. These changes included creation of a comprehensive training manual, which was provided to each student, delaying the formal training by Children's Institute until closer to the implementation start date and compartmentalizing program tasks into three distinct phases: pre-implementation, implementation, and postimplementation. These changes have helped to clarify the process and reduce ambiguity, seemingly decreasing the anticipatory anxiety experienced by the students. Anxiousness in understanding the nuances of a nondirective theoretical play approach at this juncture of student development is not unusual. Learning a humanistic nondirective play approach is often a struggle for beginning students as they learn to apply the tenets of a theory to different ways of talking and behaving with children (Landreth, 2002). Skills such as allowing children to lead the session, reflecting without questioning, expanding upon emotional content through the metaphor of play, returning responsibility to the child, encouraging versus praising the child, and setting limits are often unfamiliar interactional processes for many students, which often translates into an inner struggle (Landreth, 2002).

Participation in Primary Project required graduate students to be open to new approaches of learning while simultaneously implementing an evidence-based program. For some students, this became unsettling. The balance of taking students out of their comfort zone is carefully titrated to promote a supportive experience and is considered a cornerstone pedagogical practice in adult learning theory (Ericsson & Pool, 2016; Mezirow, 2000). Adult learning theory reminds us that disorienting dilemmas occur when an individual feels cognitive dissonance during an experience that challenges previous assumptions (Mezirow, 2000). While moving from the familiar can be uncomfortable, this productive discomfort served to engage the students in deeper and more reflective conversations. Learning to be a reflective practitioner is part of the competency of professionalism and includes self-assessment and self-care (APA, 2012).

The developmental nature of becoming a psychologist is a continual process of growth that requires experience, clinical supervision, professional development, mistake making, and reflective practice. This is exemplified by the faculty continuing to examine their pedagogical practices in order to best serve their students. The faculty's robust belief in embedding professional competencies early into fieldwork pedagogy, as well as their willingness to continuously examine course design and learning objectives and experience creative tension themselves, illustrates the nature of professional learning throughout one's development.

While the faculty provided continuous support for students, it remains clear that implementing evidence-based interventions within the school environment can be complex. Hicks-Hoste (2015) called for graduate training to promote recognition and understanding of the barriers and factors facilitating implementation of EBI in schools, as well as the need for leadership training that equips the school psychologist to circumvent and navigate through these challenges. The addition of Primary Project as a training tool for first-year school psychology students provides firmer grounding in implementation science for EBI in schools, as well as provides foundational skill building for counseling. In addition, it provides an opportunity for school psychology students to increase their understanding of the various factors that can impact implementation success and gain supervised practice navigating them.

### Limitations

Qualitative research is limited in its generalizability. While the participant pool was typical for a phenomenological study, findings were based on the views of 19 participants and may not be indicative of other students or faculty. It is also important to acknowledge the relationship of the researchers to the topic and their relative experience with the program. Each of the researchers held familiarity with Primary Project that could impact and shape the interpretation of the data of this study.

### Implications for Future Research

This study utilized a focus group methodology, although in future research, individual qualitative interviews or survey methodology could reach more participants. Assuming that proper consent could be obtained, existing quantitative data gathered from previous student evaluations could be used in future research to triangulate the qualitative data gathered during the current study. Furthermore, additional research could examine different delivery methods of training, such as face-to-face, blended or hybrid, and online formats. Finally, another area of research could study the impact of utilizing Primary Project as training in supervision. Aligning supervision coursework for doctoral-level students with the role of cosupervising first-year trainees in Primary Project could expand the doctoral-level student's competence and provide the faculty with another extension of measuring training outcomes.

### Conclusion

Training for school psychologists at William James College pairs a compelling, competency-focused curriculum with structured, closely supervised field experiences that focus on the development of the student's professional identity. By utilizing fieldwork and exposing students to an EBI from the start of their first semester, school psychology students gain valuable experience that truly exemplifies the role of school psychologists in the multifaceted, complex, diverse, and ever-changing school environment.

The signature pedagogy of fieldwork is strengthened when an evidence-based intervention, such as Primary Project, prepares student trainees to deal with the individual, interpersonal, and systemic challenges faced by school psychologists in the 21st century. This study shows great promise for other school psychol-

ogy programs that educate students along the leveled continuum of masters-specialist-doctoral study and view acquisition of professional competencies as a developmental process. Learning from the success that William James College has achieved using Primary Project as a multilateral learning model to teach school psychologists shows promise for many trainees. Through this article, we hope to encourage school psychology trainers, practitioners, and scholars to consider embedding Primary Project or other EBIs early in the trainee's development, bringing an increased emphasis on implementation science into the enhanced capacity of the next generation of school psychologists.

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