Research Article

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From Diagnosis to Systemic Ecological Leadership: A Transformative Vision for Educational Psychology

Flora Mor

Head of Development of Educational Psycho-Social Programs
JDC-Ashalim, Israel

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Abstract

This paper presents a comprehensive theoretical review of the evolution of the educational psychology profession. Historically focused on identifying, diagnosing, and treating individual students with learning and behavioral challenges, educational psychology has undergone a paradigmatic shift toward a broader, systemic ecological leadership role. Drawing on contemporary literature, this paper traces the profession's progression across three paradigms: the medical, personal, and interpersonal. The review highlights the limitations of traditional diagnostic and deficit-based models and describes the rise of relational and systemic approaches emphasizing resilience, social-emotional learning, and inclusion. Particular attention is given to the role of the educational psychologist in strengthening teacher self-efficacy and relational expertise—key factors in supporting student development. The paper underscores the need to redefine the psychologist's professional identity from a service provider to a systemic consultant, leader, and facilitator of school improvement. Drawing from studies conducted over the past decade, including interventions following trauma and adversity, the paper offers implications for educational policy, training, and research. It calls for updated preparation programs and practices that align with 21st-century educational goals.

Keywords: *Educational psychology, teacher self-efficacy, 21st-century educational.*

1. Introduction

The educational psychologist has historically functioned within the bounds of the medical model, responding to calls for individual assessment and remediation of deficits (Raviv, 1985; Fagan, 2002). The profession emerged in the early 20th century alongside the growth of public education, and its initial mission was clear: to identify, classify, and intervene with students who deviated from normative developmental trajectories. Diagnosis of learning disabilities, behavioral disorders, and emotional challenges was central to the psychologist's function (Merrell et al., 2011; Sheridan & Gutkin, 2000). Students were frequently categorized based on deviation from standardized norms, and support systems were structured around remediation and classification rather than systemic change.

By the late 20th century, however, this model showed significant limitations. The intense focus on pathology and individualized intervention proved inefficient and often ineffective in meeting the needs of a growing and diverse student body (Gutkin, 2012; Aran Ehrenreich, 2013). Research indicated that psychological issues were not solely rooted within the child, but were

significantly shaped by relational, cultural, and systemic contexts (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Booth & Ainscow, 2002). Calls for change came from both inside and outside the profession, leading to new paradigms of practice that reconceptualized both the purpose of school psychology and its methodologies (Conoley & Gutkin, 1995; Perfect & D'Amato, 2020).

The OECD's Learning Compass 2030 (OECD, 2018) has added policy-level momentum to this transformation by advocating for education systems that nurture not only academic competence but also social-emotional skills and values. This holistic view of the "future graduate" highlights the need for educational environments that support diverse developmental pathways, foster resilience, and enable meaningful relationships. Educational psychologists are thus uniquely positioned to lead this shift by helping schools implement relational and preventive practices aligned with these new benchmarks.

This manuscript is grounded in an extensive literature review of studies published in the last decade. The analysis identifies three core domains of practice: (a) diagnosis, treatment, and placement; (b) prevention and resilience; and (c) systemic interventions. The paper discusses the theoretical and professional foundations of these domains and examines the psychologist's evolving identity within each. The review also analyses the resistance encountered in shifting practice paradigms—by educators, administrators, and even psychologists themselves—and explores how this resistance can be overcome through policy change, training, and systemic design aimed at sustainable reform.

This paper is a theoretical review that aims to map the evolution of educational psychology from the medical model toward systemic ecological leadership, drawing on peer-reviewed studies and theoretical contributions across the field.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Medical Paradigm – The Student as Object

The first and historically dominant paradigm in educational psychology is the medical model, which conceptualizes the student as an object of diagnosis. This paradigm draws heavily on positivist, behaviorist, and clinical traditions that regard developmental deviations as internal pathologies requiring classification and individualized treatment. In its earliest applications in the 20th century, educational psychology largely mirrored the practices of medicine: diagnose a problem, prescribe a treatment, and if necessary, segregate the patient - here, the student - into a more suitable setting (Fagan, 2002; Merrell et al., 2011).

The influence of this model was particularly pronounced during the establishment of public school systems, where the need to manage large, diverse populations led to the use of standardized assessments and categorizations. Psychological services within schools primarily served students defined as having special needs, often based on IQ tests and behavior evaluations (Sheridan & Gutkin, 2000). Children who deviated from normative expectations were labelled as "slow learners," "behaviorally challenged," or "special education cases," and were removed from mainstream classrooms into specialized programs. The psychologist's role in this system was primarily gatekeeping - assessing, diagnosing, and making placement recommendations (Aran Ehrenreich, 2013).

While this model introduced scientific rigor into school-based mental health, it also embedded several structural limitations. First, the model pathologized students by defining them in terms of deficits. Second, it positioned the psychologist in a reactive rather than proactive role. Third, it placed the burden of change entirely on the student, overlooking the relational and environmental contexts that shape learning and behavior (Gutkin, 2012; Nastasi et al., 2020).

Efforts to broaden the psychologist's scope began to emerge as early as the 1990s, with scholars like Conoley and Gutkin (1995) calling for a transformation in practice. They argued that

continuing to work within a strictly medical model failed to fulfill the promise of school psychology to contribute meaningfully to educational equity and systemic change. Instead of simply diagnosing problems, psychologists were urged to become agents of prevention and advocates for socially just education systems (Perfect & D'Amato, 2020).

Additional pressure for change stemmed from logistical and ethical concerns. The rising demand for psychological services, combined with a limited number of professionals, meant that focusing exclusively on one-on-one assessments was no longer viable. Moreover, the medical model offered little guidance for working with culturally diverse populations whose expressions of distress and learning styles may not align with normative frameworks (Von Der Embse et al., 2018; Suldo et al., 2010).

Finally, outcomes associated with the medical paradigm were sobering. Studies indicated that many school-based psychological interventions had limited long-term success in improving student achievement or well-being (Strein, Hoagwood, & Cohn, 2003). Rates of special education referrals continued to rise, often disproportionately affecting students from marginalized backgrounds. This led to growing recognition that systemic, rather than individualized, change was needed (Tomlinson, 2004; Dudley-Marling, 2004).

Thus, the limitations of the medical model created the conditions for a paradigmatic shift. As the profession matured and the sociopolitical context of education evolved, a new conceptual framework began to emerge - one that viewed the student not as a passive object of intervention, but as an active subject embedded within complex relational and ecological systems. This transition set the stage for the next phase in educational psychology: the personal paradigm.

2.2 The Personal Paradigm – The Student as Subject

Following the limitations exposed by the medical model, educational psychology underwent a significant conceptual shift toward the personal paradigm, which positions the student not as a case to be diagnosed but as a developing subject embedded within dynamic social, psychological, and cultural contexts. This approach is rooted in humanistic psychology, ecological systems theory, and salutogenic models that emphasize the interaction between the individual and their environment (Antonovsky, 1988; Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

The personal paradigm views students as active agents in their own development, possessing unique psychological profiles shaped by neurodevelopmental, cognitive, emotional, and environmental factors. It emphasizes understanding the student's inner world and the environmental factors that foster growth. This shift aligns with postmodern educational theories that advocate personalized and inclusive learning (Booth & Ainscow, 2002; Dudley-Marling, 2004).

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory serves as a foundational framework for this paradigm. It highlights how development is influenced by nested environmental systems, ranging from immediate family and school relationships to broader societal and cultural norms. Educational psychologists operating within this framework assess not only the student's internal functioning but also the quality of interactions between the child and their surrounding systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Henderson et al., 2020).

Interventions inspired by the personal paradigm prioritize early detection, social-emotional development, and resilience. Resilience theories focus on the student's strengths and capacities rather than deficiencies, advocating for environments that empower students to overcome adversity (Benard & Slade, 2009). These theories support the implementation of SEL (Social and Emotional Learning) frameworks that help students develop self-awareness, self-regulation, empathy, and interpersonal skills. The CASEL (2020) framework exemplifies such approaches to promoting social-emotional competence.

Educational psychologists working within this paradigm often take on roles as consultants

and capacity-builders, collaborating with teachers, administrators, and families to develop holistic strategies tailored to student needs. The focus is on creating supportive, flexible learning environments that embrace diversity and inclusivity. This includes adapting instructional strategies to match students' cognitive profiles and cultural backgrounds and implementing universal design for learning (UDL) principles to ensure accessibility and engagement for all learners (Booth & Ainscow, 2002).

The personal paradigm also calls for redefining the teacher's role. Teachers are viewed not only as transmitters of knowledge but as significant adults who can become sources of emotional security and developmental support. A teacher's self-awareness, relational sensitivity, and emotional competence become central to student outcomes (Soutter & Timmerman, 2022). Consequently, educational psychologists are increasingly involved in the professional development of teachers, emphasizing reflective practice, relational pedagogy, and collaborative problem-solving.

Research supports the impact of such personalized and relational practices on student success. For example, studies by Gubbels et al. (2019) and Bloom & Haskins (2010) indicate that personalized learning environments that attend to the student's social and emotional needs can reduce underachievement and increase academic motivation. Similarly, studies by Henderson et al. (2020) show that teacher-student relationships characterized by trust and respect enhance students' self-esteem, sense of belonging, and engagement with school.

In this paradigm, the educational psychologist assumes a more proactive and systemic role, moving beyond casework to shaping school culture and teacher practice. However, the implementation of these practices is not without its challenges. Resistance from traditional educational systems, which often prioritize measurable outcomes and standardization, can hinder the shift to personalized approaches. Nevertheless, this paradigm lays the groundwork for recognizing relational dynamics as central to student flourishing.

2.3 The Interpersonal Paradigm – Relationships as Developmental Catalysts

Building on the foundations laid by the personal paradigm, the interpersonal paradigm represents a further evolution in educational psychology, placing relational dynamics at the center of psychological development. Rather than focusing solely on the internal attributes of the student or their fit within broader systems, this model foregrounds the quality of relationships between students and the adults in their lives - especially teachers. Drawing from relational psychology, attachment theory, and developmental systems theory, the interpersonal paradigm views the formation of secure and meaningful connections as essential to the emotional, cognitive, and social growth of students (Li, 2023; Soutter & Timmerman, 2022).

At the heart of this paradigm is the understanding that students flourish in environments where they experience emotional safety, trust, belonging. Teachers, as key attachment figures in the school setting, have the capacity to serve as "secure bases" - adults who model emotional regulation, respond sensitively to student needs, and co-create supportive learning environments (Slone, Mayer & Gilady, 2020; Wolmer et al., 2011). Educational psychologists support teachers in cultivating these relationships and in shaping a school culture that prioritizes relational health.

This model also aligns with developmental neuroscience, which underscores the impact of relational experiences on brain architecture and learning capacities. Positive teacher-student relationships have been linked to increased executive functioning, reduced behavioral problems, and improved academic outcomes (Hamre & Pianta, 2006). Relational consistency, empathy, and emotional attunement are not supplemental; they are foundational to a student's ability to engage, learn, and thrive.

This paradigm is especially powerful in contexts of trauma or adversity. Students exposed to

conflict, violence, or chronic stress are especially dependent on relational buffers to mitigate the effects of trauma and support resilience (Wolmer et al., 2011; Slone et al., 2020). School-based programs that train teachers to provide emotional first aid, recognize signs of psychological distress, and foster social connectedness have shown significant outcomes in reducing PTSD symptoms and anxiety in students.

For instance, Slone, Mayer, and Gilady (2020) evaluated a resilience-building program in Israeli schools, where teachers were trained as frontline agents of emotional support during times of political violence. Their findings demonstrated that when teachers received ongoing supervision from educational psychologists, they were more effective in implementing classroom strategies that promoted resilience and emotional recovery in students. This positions educational psychologists as bridges between theory and everyday pedagogy.

Moreover, programs like "Feeling Safe" and the trauma-informed interventions documented by Wolmer et al. (2011) demonstrate how teachers, guided by psychologists, can lead short-term initiatives that yield long-term improvements in student well-being. These programs highlight the psychologist's critical role in facilitating teacher preparedness and relational competence.

The interpersonal paradigm also requires a shift in how schools are structured and evaluated. It challenges school systems to value relational indicators - such as connectedness, trust, and emotional safety - on par with academic performance. Educational psychologists must therefore engage in systemic consultation, guiding leaders and policymakers to integrate relational goals into mission statements, evaluations, and improvement plans.

Finally, this paradigm extends the psychologist's role into teacher training, supervision, and professional development. Psychologists model reflective practices, provide feedback on teacher-student interactions, and help create emotionally intelligent classrooms. They become embedded partners in relational transformation rather than isolated experts. In essence, this paradigm recognizes that learning itself is relational: psychologists foster the conditions that enable genuine development and meaningful education.

3. Methodology

The review aimed to identify, analyze, and synthesize empirical and theoretical research concerning the professional roles and paradigms of educational psychology, with particular attention to the evolving systemic functions of educational psychologists in school contexts.

Articles were included if they met the following criteria: they were published in peer-reviewed academic journals; focused on educational or school psychology, particularly on the professional work of psychologists with teachers and within school systems; addressed empirical or intervention-based research related to systemic or school-based practices; and reflected the conceptual development of educational psychology through the medical, personal, or interpersonal paradigms. Publications were excluded if they were not peer-reviewed (e.g., books, reports, or dissertations); focused on unrelated issues such as the shortage of psychologists, advocacy, or child protection; or centered on populations or topics outside the systemic school framework (e.g., suicide, neglect, autism, or general mental health unrelated to the school setting).

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 The Educational Psychologist as Systemic Leader

As educational psychology evolves from a reactive service model to a proactive leadership discipline, psychologists must adopt systemic thinking and action. This chapter explores how psychologists move beyond individual interventions to shape school culture, improve teacher competencies, and guide institutional change.

Systemic leadership entails intervening at multiple levels, with individual teachers, instructional teams, school leadership, and policy networks. Educational psychologists act as consultants, coordinators of professional development, supervisors, and facilitators of school improvement (Augustyniak, 2014). They help develop teachers' self-efficacy - teachers' belief in their own capacity to influence student learning and behavior (Soutter & Timmerman, 2022).

Job-embedded professional development (JEPD) has emerged as a core tool for psychologists engaged in systemic leadership. Rather than conducting isolated workshops, psychologists coach teachers within daily routines, allowing for immediate feedback, modelling, and reflection (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Balta et al., 2023). JEPD promotes sustainable instructional changes, improves classroom climate, and reduces teacher burnout.

Educational psychologists also lead data-informed planning, using school-wide assessments of well-being, relationships, and classroom climate to shape multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS). These approaches recognize that academic success depends as much on climate and teacher well-being as on curriculum (Russell, 2019).

Leadership also includes direct involvement in trauma-informed schooling. Educational psychologists prepare teachers to become sensitive responders to trauma and loss, shifting the burden from a small team of specialists to the entire educational ecosystem. In Israel, for instance, school-based interventions during the 2006 war showed that training and supervising teachers in resilience-building had a far-reaching impact on student mental health (Wolmer et al., 2011). Such systemic responses reduce stigmatization and empower schools as recovery agents (Slone, Mayer & Gilady, 2020).

Another domain of system-level change is supervision. Dunsmuir and Leadbetter (2010) emphasize that supervision is both an ethical obligation and a developmental tool. When psychologists provide supervision to teachers or colleagues, they promote reflection, ethical awareness, and professional growth. Supervision also helps translate theoretical models - such as relational or ecological paradigms into everyday practices.

Psychologists also shape school leadership by promoting collaborative decision-making, emotional literacy in school governance, and inclusive policies that center well-being alongside academic achievement. Augustyniak (2014) describes this as "school improvement leadership," where psychologists act as thought leaders who coordinate mental health, instruction, and professional learning under one strategy.

This expanded role has gained policy recognition. The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP, 2020) identifies systemic consultation and leadership as core competencies. The Blueprint III (Ysseldyke et al., 2009) also emphasized systems-level consultation as a key training goal.

However, many training programs still emphasize assessment and diagnosis, underpreparing students for leadership in 21st-century schools (Perfect & D'Amato, 2020). Professional development must therefore integrate systems theory, change management, and adult learning principles.

To fulfill their potential as systemic leaders, educational psychologists must combine theoretical knowledge, relational expertise, and organizational acumen. Their work must connect the dots between teacher well-being, student development, and institutional culture - transforming schools into emotionally supportive, equity-driven communities of learning.

4.2 Resistance and Systemic Barriers

While the shift toward a systemic, relational model of educational psychology presents exciting opportunities, it also encounters significant barriers. These include cultural expectations regarding the psychologist's role, skepticism from educators and administrators, structural constraints in schools, and gaps in professional training. Understanding and addressing these

challenges is critical for advancing the profession.

A major source of resistance arises from entrenched cultural assumptions. For decades, the educational psychologist has been viewed primarily as a diagnostician - an expert called upon to assess, label, and recommend interventions. Teachers, parents, and school leaders often continue to hold this view, expecting psychologists to provide answers for individual students rather than engage in broader, relational processes (Rosenfield, 2002; Harting, 2019). Efforts to shift the psychologist's role toward collaboration and consultation can be met with confusion or rejection if these traditional expectations are not addressed.

Teachers may also view psychological involvement in relational or pedagogical matters as intrusive or as questioning their competence. Studies show that some educators resist initiatives aimed at improving relational skills, particularly if they feel overburdened or perceive such efforts as judgmental (Mägi & Kikas, 2009). This underscores the need for psychologists to approach collaboration with humility, empathy, and a spirit of mutual learning.

Administrative systems add further barriers. Schools often prioritize academic performance metrics, time constraints, and bureaucracy, leaving little space for reflection or emotional dialogue. Even when leaders value psychological input, limited resources can stifle innovation. Programs that require sustained engagement, such as supervision, coaching, or social-emotional learning, are difficult to maintain without systemic support (Augustyniak, 2014).

Resistance also exists within the profession. Some psychologists feel unprepared to adopt roles demanding systemic thinking, leadership, and relational work. Graduate programs traditionally emphasize assessment and diagnosis, leaving many practitioners more comfortable with individual student work than with facilitating teams or policy advocacy (Perfect & D'Amato, 2020).

Overcoming these barriers requires strategic and cultural change. Psychologists must intentionally redefine their professional identity - not by abandoning traditional skills but by integrating them into broader frameworks that connect diagnosis to systemic insight and relationship-building.

Relational trust is equally vital. Psychologists should demonstrate alliance with teachers rather than evaluation of them. This means listening deeply, validating experiences, and offering tools that complement teachers' expertise. Programs that frame psychologists as co-learners and co-constructors of knowledge are generally more successful (Dunsmuir & Leadbetter, 2010).

Finally, professional preparation must evolve. Training should include systemic consultation, group facilitation, and school-improvement planning - competencies now essential to 21st-century practice. Embedding such training in practicum and supervision bridges theory and practice.

Systemic change also depends on policy. Education ministries, professional associations, and accreditation bodies must explicitly promote the expanded role of psychologists. Guidelines, funding, and evaluation criteria should highlight the importance of preventive, relational, and systemic work.

5. Conclusions and Consequences

The evolution of educational psychology from a diagnostic profession to a systemic leadership discipline reflects a broader shift in contemporary education. This transformation demands a fundamental reconceptualization of the psychologist's identity, competencies, and institutional role. The review highlights how traditional models centered on individualized diagnosis have reached their limits in addressing modern schooling challenges. These have been replaced, or at least supplemented, by relational, ecological, and systemic paradigms that foreground interpersonal connections, school climate, and teacher capacity in promoting student well-being.

This paradigm shift is not merely theoretical; it has practical consequences for training,

practice, and evaluation. Training programs must integrate systemic consultation, relational practice, and adult development into core curricula. Supervision, reflective practice, and fieldwork should expose trainees to whole-school initiatives, trauma-informed approaches, and teacher-empowerment strategies.

Professional identity must also be redefined. Educational psychologists are not auxiliary service providers but central actors in shaping school culture and promoting inclusive, emotionally safe environments. This requires strong relational skills, cultural competence, and leadership capacity, extending their work from classroom consultation to district-level advocacy.

Systemic collaboration should be institutionalized. Psychologists need to be embedded in school teams, leadership planning, and interdisciplinary efforts focused on holistic student outcomes. Policies must support leadership roles in mental-health coordination, relational training, and staff supervision.

Evaluation criteria must also expand. Impact should be measured through improvements in school climate, relationships, teacher efficacy, and student engagement - rather than the number of assessments conducted. Success should reflect the promotion of resilience, equity, and human development rather than the management of deficits.

Future research should examine how psychologists function as change agents within complex systems. Longitudinal studies on relational interventions, teacher collaboration, and trauma-sensitive practices can refine professional contributions. Cross-cultural comparisons may further reveal how educational systems conceptualize the psychologist's role and what structures best support their effectiveness.

Ultimately, educational psychology must embrace its systemic potential - leading relational transformation, enhancing teacher capacity, and advocating policies that center student well-being. As education systems face increasing mental-health and social challenges, psychologists must rise as architects of caring, connected, and resilient learning environments. Their success will depend not only on expertise but on their ability to build collective capacity, foster trust, and lead with vision.

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