Strengths Illuminated: Exploring Approaches to Psychoeducational Assessments in Canadian Schools

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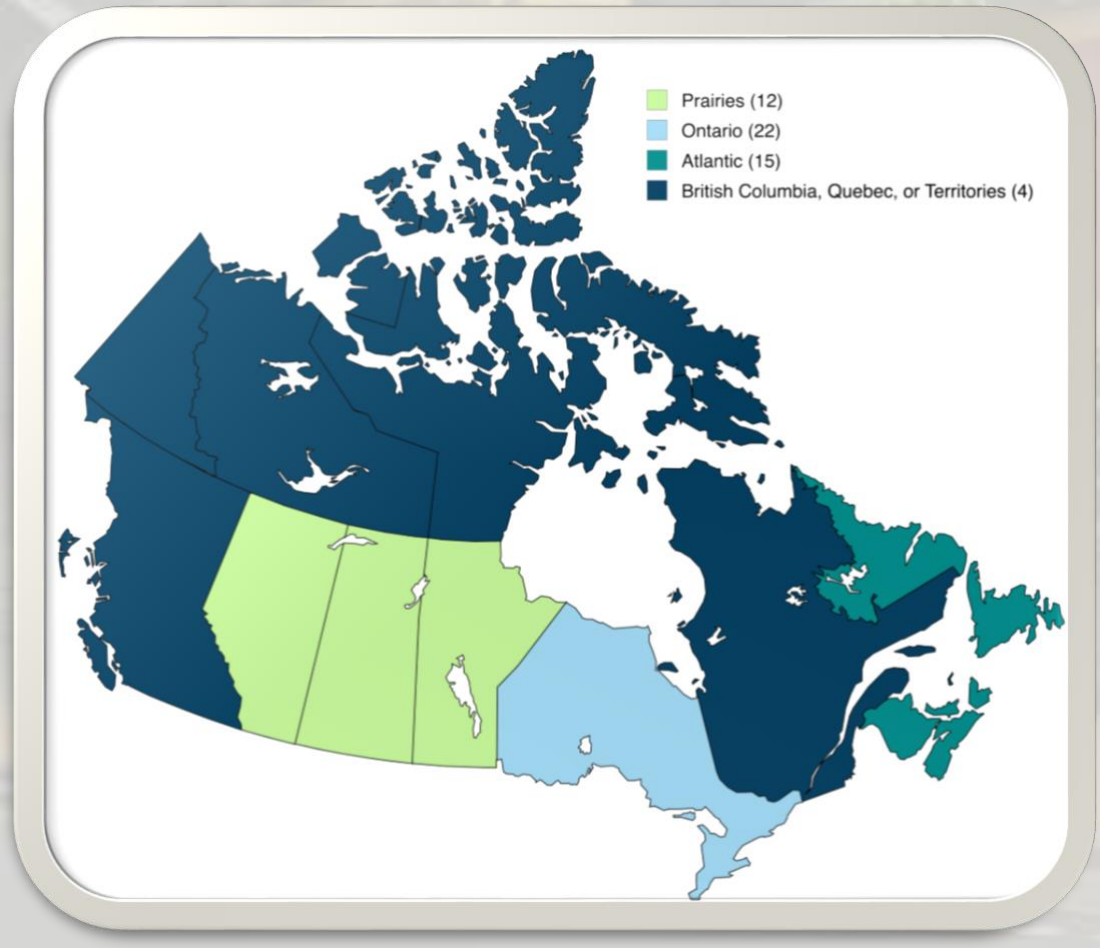
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

When students struggle in school, they may be referred for psychoeducational assessment to better understand factors that underlie or contribute to their learning, behaviour, and/or socio-emotional function. These assessments have traditionally focused on students' problems and shortcomings; however, strengths-based assessment (SBA) is an alternative approach that seeks to explore students' challenges whilst helping them, and others, to recognize and leverage their strengths.

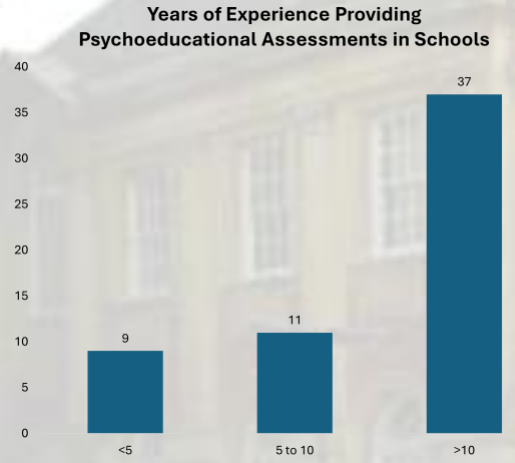
Our online study surveyed 57 school-based clinicians across Canada to explore how SBA is used in practice (see below). Results show that clinicians use a balanced approach in their psychoeducational assessments, incorporating consideration of both strengths and challenges when working with students. Clinicians were more likely to use SBA when they viewed SBA as important, were more experienced working in schools, and had less demands on their clinical workload.

These findings underscore the growing role of SBA in Canadian schools. By promoting more balanced and empowering assessments, SBA has the potential to benefit students, families, and educators, and to inform future research and training in school-based practice.



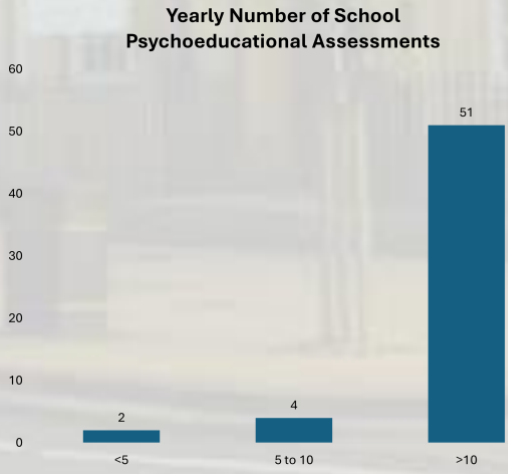
A common criticism of SBA is that it denies or minimizes the challenges students face. In reality, SBA emphasizes the integration of both challenges and strengths to provide a more comprehensive understanding of students' needs and to inform more effective recommendations (Rhee et al., 2001). Previous theoretical literature has noted that SBA is rarely integrated into school-based assessment and report writing practices (Climie & Henley, 2016; Mastoras et al., 2011). However, our study demonstrates that clinicians in Canada consider strengths to a similar extent as challenges in their psychoeducational assessments with students (i.e., a balanced approach).

Clinicians were more likely to report using SBA when they endorsed **stronger beliefs** about the importance of SBA. This finding aligns with research suggesting that clinician beliefs shape how assessment information is collected, interpreted, and communicated to stakeholders (Cox, 2006). SBA is only effective, and in some cases implemented, if clinicians believe that SBA has something of value to offer (Cox, 2006).



Clinicians also were more likely to use SBA when they had **more years of experience** providing psychoeducational assessments within schools. This finding suggests that experienced clinicians are more confident in adopting SBA in their work with students. Indeed, previous research has shown that increased years of clinical training and experience result in greater acquisition and solidification of assessment skills, including SBA (Vempaty, 2018).

The number of annual assessments completed by clinicians was not associated with the use of SBA. Research on organizational cultures and clinicians' attitudes towards adopting evidence-based practice demonstrates that while heavier workloads may impact implementation, workload alone is not a consistent predictor of practice when strong values, training, and organizational supports are available (Aarons et al., 2012; Weiner et al., 2011).



Group-level results will be shared in traditional academic outlets (e.g., conference proceedings, publications). De-identified data will be submitted to an open access repository, consistent with current standards for research transparency (https://osf.io/9mk2e). Because the study is anonymous, there is no identifying information connecting participants to their responses.

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