
Catching The Vision: Guidance And Counselling In Nova Scotia's Schools

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ABSTRACT

A province-wide evaluation of the new Comprehensive Guidance and Counselling Program undertaken in Nova Scotia provides strong support for a "program-based model" of counselling. More than 90% of the 46 school counsellors involved in the implementation of the Program responded to a survey regarding the various program components, advisory groups, needs assessment, resources, outcomes, evaluation, and roles of educational partners. Focus groups, representing all school districts, provided qualitative data related to counsellors' overall impressions of the Program, what was working, concerns, and professional needs. Evaluation results addressed questions related to the appropriateness, adequacy, efficiency, and effectiveness of the Program.

RÉSUMÉ

Une évaluation provinciale du nouveau programme intégré d'orientation et de counseling (*Comprehensive Guidance and Counselling Program*) effectuée en Nouvelle-Écosse appuie fortement un modèle de counseling axé sur les programmes. Plus de 90 % des 46 conseillers et conseillères travaillant à l'application du programme ont participé à une enquête portant sur les diverses composantes du programme, les groupes consultatifs, l'évaluation des besoins, les ressources, les résultats, l'évaluation et le rôle des partenaires éducatifs. Des groupes de réflexion représentant tous les districts scolaires ont fourni des données qualitatives basées sur les impressions générales du programme ressenties par les conseillers et conseillères, notamment à l'égard des réussites du programme, des inquiétudes et des besoins professionnels. Les résultats de l'évaluation concernaient des questions relatives à la pertinence, à la valeur, au bon fonctionnement et à l'efficacité du programme.

Since Gysbers first articulated the concept of a Comprehensive Guidance and Counselling Program (CGCP) in 1972, there has been a steady shift in school counselling from a position-based model to a program-based model (Gysbers & Henderson, 1997). This shift recently has been noted in Nova Scotia where the Department of Education describes school counselling under the heading of "School Program" (Nova Scotia Department of Education, 1999).

Most comprehensive programs in existence today are rooted in the Missouri model (Lapan, Gysbers, & Sun, 1997). In a review of the practical application of the Missouri comprehensive school guidance program model, Gysbers, and Henderson (1997) reported positive results in their evaluation of 14 different

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school and state settings. They found that the program served a greater number of students and that school counsellors and counselling programs had a higher profile. Hughey, Gysbers and Starr (1993) examined the impact of the Missouri comprehensive guidance program from the perspectives of students, parents, and teachers. Though their research yielded results indicating that the program positively affected students, teachers, and parents, the authors recommended that counsellors and the school counselling department must constantly work at informing the staff and community about the school counselling program and at addressing the guidance and counselling needs of all students. Kuhl (1994), in her research on the comprehensive program, found that the program had met its goals and enhanced learning.

Hiebert (1994) provided guidelines for an outcome-based approach to comprehensive guidance and counselling programs in a publication for the Alberta Department of Education. Based upon this report, the Department of Education produced guidelines (1997) for Alberta schools to implement a comprehensive guidance and counselling program. Evaluative literature on this endeavour remains to be published. The current evaluation research of the CGCP in Nova Scotia contributes to the growing research on the CGCP and is in keeping with what Gysbers (1995) refers to as intermediate evaluation.

The introduction of the Comprehensive Guidance and Counselling Program in Nova Scotia schools presents opportunities and challenges. This article presents findings from an evaluation of the Program. The findings include data from surveys and interviews of school counsellors involved in the program. A short description of the program is followed by a presentation of the purpose of evaluation and the evaluation plan. A discussion and concluding comments follow a presentation of the findings.

Description of the Comprehensive Guidance and Counselling Program

In response to the increasing challenges faced by Nova Scotia schools, the Provincial Department of Education initiated the design and development of a Comprehensive Guidance and Counselling Program (CGCP) to address the guidance and counselling needs of students. A task force, established with representation of interested groups, was committed to the concept of shifting guidance and counselling from a position-based model to a program-based model. The task force designed a framework, including a number of essential characteristics within which schools could develop programs to meet their particular counselling needs. The guidance and counselling program was designed and developed as a school program with defined outcomes and benefits for students from grades primary to twelve. The program was developmental in that activities appropriate to student maturity levels were systematically presented and it included achievable and measurable outcomes in the area of personal, social, educational, and career domains. The four components of the program included the guidance curriculum, professional services, life and career planning, and program management and system support. All components of the CGCP contained

preventive and responsive activities and outlined roles for all members of the school community. Other essential requirements included the establishment of an advisory group and conducting a needs assessment. Implementation of the CGCP required a qualified school counsellor who co-ordinated the program and delivered components of the program requiring particular professional expertise.

Purpose of Evaluation

The current evaluation assessed the perceptions of school counsellors involved in the CGCP in the initial three years of its implementation. Specifically, evaluation questions addressed program appropriateness, effectiveness, efficiency, and adequacy. A process-oriented evaluation set out to identify school counsellors' overall impressions of the CGCP (appropriateness), what, from their perspective, was working (effectiveness), and what concerns and professional needs they wished to identify at this time (efficiency and adequacy).

THE EVALUATION PLAN

The evaluation plan included the design and analysis of a piloted evaluation survey and the design and analysis of focus group interviews. We acted on the assumption that surveys to individuals would allow the collection of specific information about the program that could not be ascertained from group interviews and that group interviews would provide us with information and opinion that would be extremely difficult to elicit from individual questionnaires. We also believed that combining both approaches would increase the validity and the reliability of the obtained information.

Participants

All 46 school counsellors from seven school boards involved in various stages of implementation of the CGCP were mailed the evaluation questionnaire. Forty-two (90%) of the counsellors returned their questionnaires. Participants in the evaluation survey also were involved in focus group interviews. Seven of the participants represented elementary school, nine junior high school, six elementary/junior high, eight from high school, nine from junior/senior high school and three represented all levels. The school counsellors were an educated and experienced group with 80% having Master's degrees, 80% were 40 years or older, and about 75% had more than six years of experience as counsellors. Eighty percent had been in the teaching profession for more than 11 years. The program was in its first year of implementation in nearly 60% of the schools surveyed, 25% in the second year, and about 20% in the third year. The percentage of participants roughly corresponds to these percentages.

Procedure

Phase I: Survey questionnaire. Several people were involved in the development of the questionnaire and open-ended questions used in the study. The two

researchers (counsellor educators by training), met for two hours weekly for six weeks with a research assistant (Master's level trained) and three counselling graduate students, all of whom had extensive school teaching experience and an interest in the CGCP.

The research group designed a questionnaire containing approximately 120 evaluation items. The first part of the survey requested demographic information about the participant age, education, experience, training, and length of involvement in the CGCP. The principal part of the survey consisted of items related to various aspects of the CGCP: program components, advisory groups, needs assessment, resources, outcomes, evaluation, and the roles of educational partners. Most of the questionnaire items used a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = *hardly at all* to 5 = *very much*) except for instances where a simple yes/no was more appropriate. Three experienced school counsellors reviewed a final draft of the survey and provided critical feedback to the researchers.

Phase II: Focus Groups. Focus groups provided a medium for participants to express their perceptions of the CGCP. Focus groups were structured using broad open-ended questions which encouraged discussion among group participants. Individual discussion, as well as discussion of issues among participants, provided data for analysis and interpretation.

Six focus groups, lasting approximately two hours each were conducted with participants from 6 province-wide school districts in Nova Scotia. Due to logistical difficulties related to travel, four counsellors from the seventh school district, representing francophone schools, were interviewed individually by telephone. Responses from these four individuals were included as part of the focus group data. The size of the focus groups varied from four to ten participants with a total of 38 participants.

A system of rounds was used to allow each participant to respond without interruption to open-ended questions related to their impressions of the CGCP, the effectiveness of the CGCP, concerns regarding the program and its implementation, and their professional needs in relation to the program. Following the rounds, opportunity was provided for discussion among participants. Data from the focus groups were analyzed by the two researchers simultaneously using a program called MaxThink (Larson, 1991). Information in each of the four evaluation categories was then scrutinized for themes related to the overall category. Information in the "miscellaneous" file was examined for themes corresponding to categories already developed and for emerging themes not related to existing categories.

EVALUATION FINDINGS

The quantitative and qualitative data are presented in an integrated way under the four evaluation questions related to: program appropriateness, effectiveness, efficiency, and adequacy. Appropriateness addresses the relevancy of the program in meeting the guidance and counselling needs of students. Program

effectiveness addresses the perceived benefit of the program to students and staff. Program efficiency addresses primarily the use of time in implementing the program. Program adequacy addresses training and resources for the program.

Program Appropriateness

The relevance of the CGCP to the school and community was expressed in a number of different comments during the interviews: "Fills a real need in the school," "There is something for every student and staff member," "Better things are happening for students and parent involvement has increased," "The program ties in very well with the school community," "The program belongs to the entire community," "An idea whose time has come," "Our work complements what teachers are doing."

Some participants referred to their involvement in the CGCP as "a very rewarding experience." Many reported that the CGCP "provided a framework to help focus what is important in schools." Many appreciated the breadth of their work as reflected in the four components and the involvement of others in the program. Even when the implementation was slow, all participants acknowledged the potential of the program. The participants also perceived their role to be more defined and focussed: "I can refocus on what I will do and not do," "I have good participation from students, parents and my principal; we discuss many issues and they help me make decisions."

Guidance curriculum. The guidance curriculum consisted of structured experiences in the social, personal, educational, and career areas of student life. The survey asked to what extent students were exposed to structured experiences in these four domains. In the personal, social, and career areas their average response was that students were *somewhat* to *much* exposed to these experiences.

Health education is offered in the elementary schools, personal development and relationships at the middle and junior high levels, and career and life management and personally active living at the high school level. The participants were pleased with the extent to which the curriculum part of the CGCP was included in other subject areas ($M = 3.5$).

Counselling, consultation, and co-ordination. Performing their professional services role received mixed reviews: 63% reported their experiences were either *good* or *very good*, 20% said it was *fair*, and another 16% found it *difficult*. Teachers, who were consulted *quite often* and parents and community groups who were consulted *often*, were perceived as valuable contributors to the process.

About 80 % of the participants indicated that the counselling needs of students were met from *somewhat* to *much*. These ratings positively endorsed the CGCP as meeting student needs despite the fact that the program was in its infancy.

Life and career planning. Over 90% of participants believed the program met the life and career planning needs of students, with scores ranging from *somewhat* to *very much*. Counsellors indicated that other groups were involved in the life and career planning of students between *somewhat* and *much*. Teachers were

understandably more involved than other groups, although both parents and community received positive reports.

Program management and systems support. Participants were asked to what extent they spent an adequate amount of time in program management and systems support. About 75% said *somewhat* to *very much* with 25 % reporting they were not pleased with the amount of time spent in this program component.

Program Effectiveness

In the data pertaining to factors responsible for program effectiveness, three clear themes emerged: the advisory group, the needs assessments, and connections with others.

Advisory groups. The initial vision of the CGCP was that an advisory group would provide support and advocacy for the program. Eighty-eight per cent of the participants reported that they had established an advisory committee, which typically comprised one counsellor, one administrator, two to three teachers, two to three students, two parents, and one community member. The number of positive comments about advisory groups was without parallel. Some of those comments included: "The advisory group is positive and working well. I had been working in isolation prior to the CGCP," "Our advisory group is crucial, not large but very supportive," "My advisory committee is very enthusiastic," "The advisory group is great. Everyone brings something different to it," and "Teachers and administrators on the advisory committee generate great ideas." Clearly, the establishment of an advisory committee provided an opportunity for teachers, parents, and administrators to learn about the guidance and counselling program and supported the transition from a traditional model of counselling to a comprehensive model.

Needs assessment. The involvement of many people in the needs assessment proved to be an important means of communicating the CGCP to others. Some of the counsellors' comments included: "The needs assessment had a 99% return rate from students and a 90% return rate from the community," "It has raised the awareness of staff and parents and brought more exposure to students," "Really appreciated the sample surveys in the training manual," "Surveys were good in educating teachers, parents and students," "Students loved the focus groups on needs assessment," and "I've worked with more students since the needs assessment." These positive comments affected the priority participants gave to the needs assessment component.

More than 80% had conducted a needs assessment at the time of the evaluation. Though participants used various methods in conducting their needs assessments, we wanted to determine which methods they found most helpful. Participants put surveys at the top of their list and said they were *very helpful*. They also said that parents, staff, and students were also *helpful* in completing the needs assessment.

Connections with others. Many of the participants spoke about the value of their connections with each other, their administrators, students, staff, and

parents. The summer institute offered by the Department of Education provided an opportunity to catch the vision of the CGCP. This shared experience between the administrator and the school counsellor proved not only informational, but also motivational. The training session provided an opportunity for school counsellors to share information with one another and with their principals. The participants declared with one voice that principals needed to take advantage of opportunities to catch the vision if the CGCP was to be successful.

Program Adequacy

The data produced five themes pertaining to program adequacy: a mechanism for sharing the experience, administrative support, resources, staff cooperation, and the role of educational partners.

Sharing the experience. More than 80% of the participants reported attending the training institute for the CGCP whereas only 50% reported that their principals attended. Participants strongly recommended that they be given opportunities to share information about the CGCP. Several of the participants gave suggestions for fall and spring symposia on the CGCP while some requested a pre-service course on the CGCP. Others wanted a list serve. Many participants voiced their need for professional development: Some wanted more information about how to effectively co-ordinate the program, some were interested in outcomes and how to best evaluate them, several mentioned the need to learn better ways to involve staff and parents, many wished for more time to network with each other, and a few expressed a need to know how to delegate.

Administrative support. While some participants spoke highly of the administrative support they received, many counsellors spoke openly about their need for more administrative support. Comments included: "It's not that administrators are not supportive, they simply don't have time," "The amount of support is proportionate to whether or not the administrators attended the training institute," "A change in principal is difficult for the program," "The largest problem is the lack of communication with administrators," and "Even with this program there is a huge variance on what is being done in schools due to administration." Participants spoke clearly that when both the principal and counsellor attended the institute, the chances for successful implementation were high. A few counsellors expressed concerns about the feasibility of implementing the program if the principal is not involved from the outset.

Resources. Many participants reported a lack of budget for the CGCP. They appreciated the need to allocate resources for the initial development and training of personnel, but they were adamant about the further need for financial resources for implementation and continuation of the CGCP. Human resources and school facilities were considered the most helpful with scores ranging from *somewhat* to *much*. Material resources took third place and were considered more *helpful* than *adequate*. Time availability and community resources were rated *somewhat helpful* and *adequate*. Financial resources were rated *somewhat helpful*, but *hardly adequate*.

Co-operation with teaching staff. In the area of teaching staff co-operation, counsellors commented that: "Staff feel overwhelmed with the number of changes in education," "Staff are under huge amounts of stress," "Staff can easily see the CGCP as another thing dumped on them," "Teachers are possessive of their time. Asking more than 40 to 50 minutes is too much for them," "I had a three-year plan but could not get the support of staff until I could give them something in return," and "Some staff are not convinced that the CGCP is here to stay. They don't yet see it as their program."

During the interviews we noted that school counsellors, and teachers offering PDR or a related area, needed to work co-operatively. There were parts of a program that school counsellors felt better suited to deliver and other parts they felt teachers should deliver. Delivery of the guidance curriculum is co-ordinated by the school counsellor. In a separate subject area related to guidance and taught by a teacher, decisions have to be made about who should teach which topics in order to obtain what is in the best interests of the students.

Educational partners. The Department of Education, the administration, the advisory committees, and students all received very commendable ratings regarding their helpfulness in the implementation and development of the CGCP. Teachers and parents also scored well. The results suggest that those who invested much into the CGCP were seen as the most helpful. The Department of Education initiated and led the development of the program and the implementation. The administrators who attended the training on CGCP and caught the vision were perceived to be helpful. The advisory committee was also recognised for its support. Those seen as least supportive were groups more removed from the program. Over time, connections with school councils and boards are seen as valuable contributions to the CGCP.

Program Efficiency

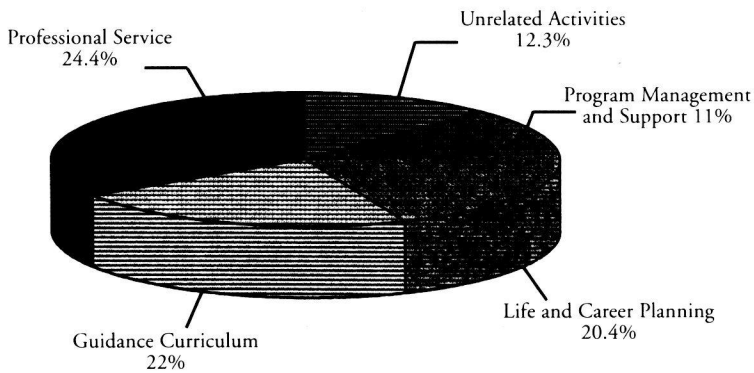
Time. Many of the participants wished they had more time to devote to the CGCP: "The first year was very time consuming," "The biggest concern is time and getting people together," "Guidance positions need to be full-time," and "It's difficult to devote an adequate amount of time to the CGCP with a 60% position." The dual role of counsellor and teacher was mentioned often in the interviews. Dividing attention between the two activities proved a challenge when the teaching was not related to guidance. Another area of concern for participants was the amount of time spent in unrelated activities. Survey responses indicated that 12.3% of their time was spent in what they perceived as non-guidance duties. Some said they had too much paper work and needed clerical help. Others stated that, while they did not think a particular duty was guidance related, they were concerned that the administrator perceived them as the only one available to do it. The issue here may be what constitutes a program, and what constitutes a fair share of other responsibilities? Addressing these questions may alleviate some of the personal issues and pressures around saying yes or no to a particular

request. In addition to counsellors connecting with a new vision of themselves, the school community also needs to know the parameters of the CGCP.

Time allocated for each component.

The CGCP manual suggested time frames for involvement in the four components at the elementary, junior, and senior high levels. Figure 1 indicates that, as a group, the school counsellors were close to the recommended percentages for each of the components.

FIGURE 1
Counsellor Time Allocation



DISCUSSION

The purpose of this evaluation was to obtain school counsellors' perceptions of the Comprehensive Guidance and Counselling Program: what they perceived to be working well and what they identified as concerns and professional needs. The evaluation questions focussed on the appropriateness, adequacy, efficiency, and effectiveness of the program.

Cross referencing survey data with interview data, we can conclude that participants in this study positively perceived the value of the Comprehensive Guidance and Counselling Program, and the appropriateness and effectiveness of the program in their school. Many expressed their appreciation for a framework in which to locate themselves and their work as school counsellors. They were positive about the appropriateness and adequacy of the essential features of the program, including: qualified school counsellors, advisory groups, local needs assessments, and the comprehensive nature of the program, as illustrated through the program components, the proactive approach, and the involvement of various groups. They understood the importance and the potential gain of

moving from a position and crisis-oriented model to a more comprehensive program model.

The adequacy question focussed on financial resources, as well as support from administrators, teachers, and boards. The role of the principal was perceived as critical in the implementation of a CGCP. Participants saw the involvement of the principal in the initial training as essential for the proper implementation of the program. To date, the Comprehensive Guidance and Counselling Program has been led by the Department of Education. If the Comprehensive Guidance and Counselling Program is to have a secure future, it requires involvement and leadership at the Board level. The transition from a "Department led and Board supported" program to a "Board led and Department supported" program is the crucial next step in the implementation of the program.

The amount of time counsellors allocated for the program reflected what we saw as an efficiency issue. For full-time school counsellors involved in more than one school, the issues are the number of committees and accountability to more than one administrator. For school counsellors assuming dual roles, the main issue is the divided attention between teaching in non-guidance areas and devoting enough time to the CGCP. This has been an issue in the province for some time. With the implementation of the Comprehensive Guidance and Counselling Program, these issues become more obvious and critical. The need for more school counsellors in schools is generally accepted. While addressing the resource issue, we need also to address the dual role issue and issues regarding non-guidance duties issue of school counsellors.

CONCLUSION

This preliminary evaluation of the Comprehensive Guidance and Counselling Program leads us to some final comments. The transition from a position-based model to a program-based model has implications for all staff, especially school counsellors. Historically, in the province of Nova Scotia, the role of the counsellor varied according to the school. Some schools placed emphasis on career counselling. Other schools valued personal counselling and some schools perceived the counsellors' role as primarily clerical. The Comprehensive Guidance and Counselling Program presents new opportunities and challenges. The province, while in need of more elementary guidance, now has elementary school programs with qualified counsellors. At the secondary level, where roles have been defined for some time, the shift from position to program is more challenging. To secure the future of the Program for the province, Board officials, principals, and school counsellors need to catch the vision and communicate it to others.

The Comprehensive Guidance and Counselling Program is in its fourth year of implementation in Nova Scotia and there are now 70 schools involved. The growing interest in the program speaks to the increasing interest in recognising and responding to the guidance and counselling needs of students.

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