

**THE NEED FOR TRAINED COUNSELLORS  
IN THE B.C. SCHOOL SYSTEM:  
A Survey of Superintendents and Directors of Instruction**

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Abstract

In order to assess the need for counsellors and to develop appropriate school counsellor training programmes, a questionnaire was sent to the Superintendents and Directors of the seventy-four (74) school districts in B.C. Replies were received from fifty-six (56) districts (a 76% return). The results indicated that (1) 100% of the respondents believed that there was a need for trained counsellors in the schools, (2) 86% felt there was a need for more counsellors and (3) 71% indicated that they would be willing to provide some financial help to experienced teachers interested in counsellor training. More counsellors are needed in the elementary schools and in secondary schools outside major urban areas. Upgrading is an important priority for many secondary school counsellors. The counselling skills seen as most benefiting to the schools at this time are: (a) Individual counselling, (b) Consultation with teachers and (c) Small group counselling. Other key skills involve those relating to: Discipline problems, crisis counselling, career education and family counselling. The findings are discussed and implications are made regarding the training of school counsellors.

Résumé

Afin d'établir le besoin pour les conseillers d'école et de développer des programmes d'instruction appropriés, un questionnaire fut envoyé aux Surintendants et aux Directeurs des 74 régions scolaires de Colombie Britannique. Les réponses furent reçues de 56 régions (un retour de 76%). Ces résultats indiquent que 1) 100% des gens qui ont répondu ont cru qu'il y avait un besoin pour les conseillers (avec un entraînement spécialisé) dans les écoles, 2) 86% ont jugé qu'il y avait un besoin pour plus de conseillers et 3) 71% ont indiqué qu'ils seraient d'accord à soutenir financièrement les professeurs établis qui sont intéressés à la préparation de ces conseillers. Il faut plus de conseillers au niveau élémentaire et secondaire des régions rurales. Une des priorités serait d'élever le niveau de spécialité de beaucoup de conseiller au niveau secondaire. Les talents des conseillers que l'on perçoit comme les plus avantageux aux écoles actuellement sont: a) les conseils donnés individuellement, b) la consultation avec les professeurs et c) conseiller en petit groupe. Autres talents particuliers inclus ceux qui ont rapport sur: les problèmes de discipline, le conseil au temps de crise, l'orientation professionnelle et le conseil de la famille. Les implications de cette recherche sont discutées en ce qui concerne l'entraînement et l'embauche de conseillers.

Within the past decade, Canadian universities have come under increasing pressure from provincial governments and their local communities to provide relevant services that will in turn result in some benefit to society. In particular, Schools of Social Work and Faculties of Education have received the severest attacks (Hackler, 1975) for failing to provide their students with sufficient practical experience or knowledge of applied skills.

In an attempt to meet some of these criticisms, our department is carrying out extensive programme revision and conducting several surveys to assess the needs of the schools and the various communities in B.C. This study represents one such survey.

*Purpose*

The purpose of the survey was threefold: (1) to gather information relating to the need for counsellors

and the financing of counsellor training for experienced teachers, (2) to determine school districts' specific counselling needs in regard to counselling services and counselling frameworks and (3) to alert the superintendents and directors of each school district in B.C. to the various changes in our Master's Degree programmes.

#### Method

The survey itself consisted of two pages: (1) a covering letter describing programme changes and (2) a one page questionnaire. This survey was sent to the Superintendents of 74 school districts in B.C. and was to be filled in by themselves or by one of their directors (included in this category were supervisors of instruction and heads of student services).

The questionnaire consisted of four main areas:

- (1) *The need for counsellors and the financing of counsellor training.*

This area dealt with 3 issues. The superintendents and directors were asked if they:

- (a) believed there was a *need* for trained counsellors in their schools
- (b) thought there was a *need* for *more* trained counsellors and
- (c) would help *finance* and *encourage* one of their experienced teachers to take UBC's 11 month M. Ed. in Counselling.

- (2) *Specific counsellor skills required.*

This question sought to determine what counsellors should do to best benefit the

various school districts. The respondents were asked to check specific activities from a list of 14 skills (see Figure 1).

- (3) *Areas of greatest immediate need.*

From the list of 14 counselling skills, respondents were asked to specify the areas of greatest immediate need.

- (4) *Preference for a particular counselling framework.*

Respondents were asked to select theoretical frameworks or counselling approaches which would best suit the needs of their school districts.

Finally, the questionnaire encouraged the respondents to write in their own comments regarding the above four areas.

#### Results

Questionnaires were returned from 56 school districts, representing a 76% return. Of these, 28 were from Superintendents and 28 from the various Directors. Essentially, there were no appreciable differences between the responses of the Superintendents and those of Directors. Also the non-responding school districts were randomly distributed across rural and urban areas.

The results from the four main areas of investigation are now given in greater detail.

- (1) *The need for counsellors and the financing of counsellor training.*

These findings are tabulated in Table I.

TABLE I  
THE NEED FOR COUNSELLORS AND FINANCING OF TRAINING

	YES	NO	% Positive
Need for Counsellors	56	0	100%
Need for <i>more</i> Counsellors	48	8	86%
Providing of financial help	40	16	71%

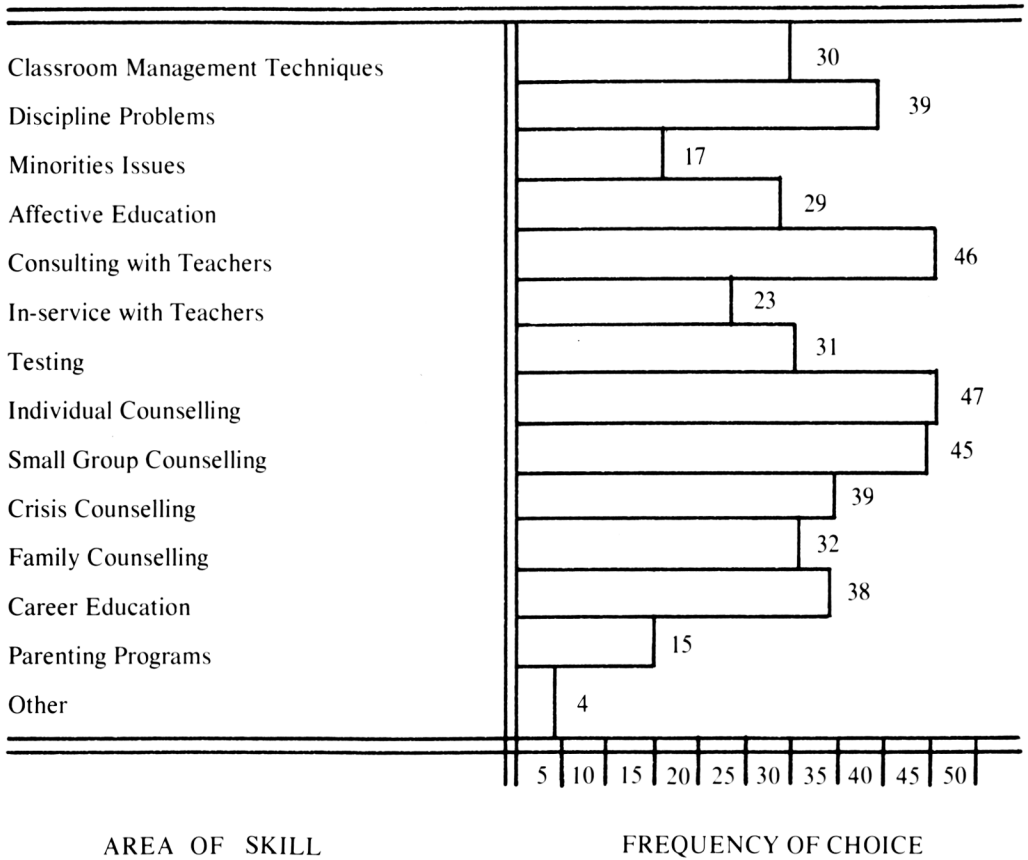
As can be seen from the table, all 56 respondents felt there was a need for counsellors in the school system, while 48 (86%) felt there was a need for *more* counsellors. In regard to providing encouragement and financial support for some experienced teachers

to take counsellor training, 40 (71%) replied in the affirmative.

(2) *Specific Counsellor Skills Required.*

These findings are described in Figure I.

FIGURE I  
SPECIFIC COUNSELLOR SKILLS REQUIRED



These findings indicate that Superintendents and Directors saw counsellors as being most beneficial to their school districts if they were trained in the areas of:

Individual Counselling,  
 Consultation with teachers, and  
 in  
 Small Group Counselling.

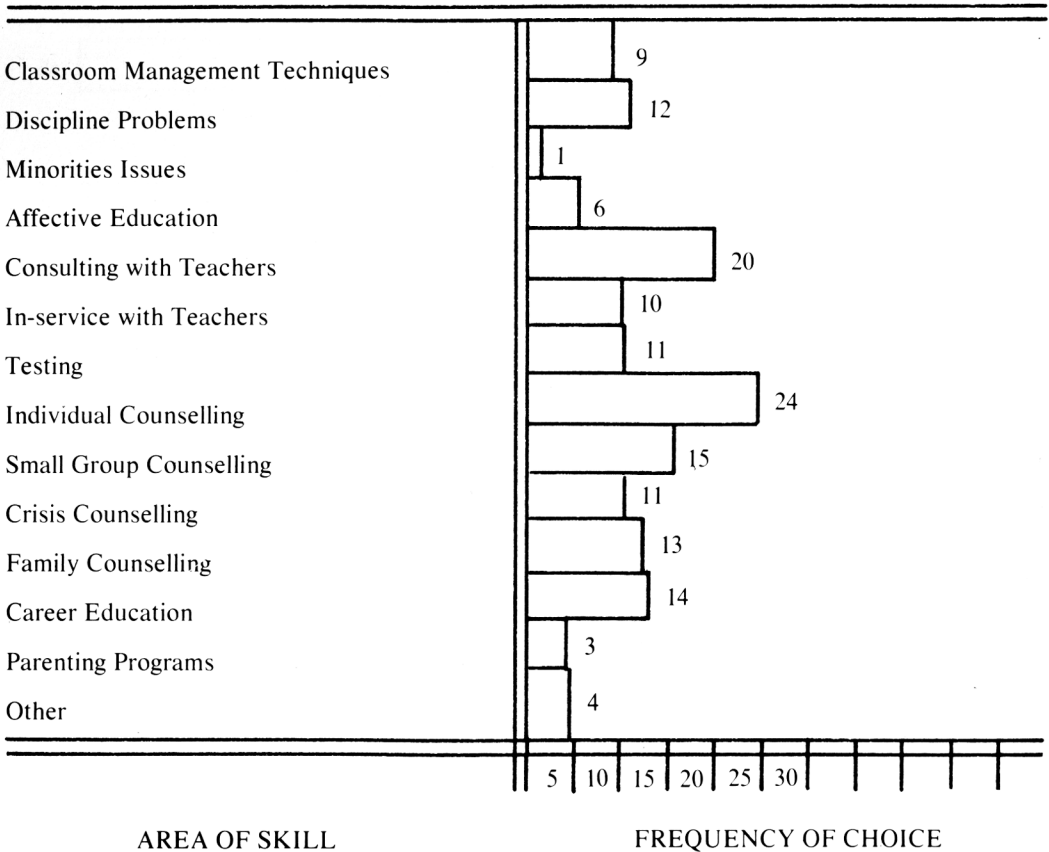
The following groupings were also significant:

Discipline Problems,  
 Crisis Counselling, and  
 Career Education.

(3) *Area of Greatest Immediate Need.*

The purpose of this item was to determine in which area the Superintendents and Directors saw the greatest need for counsellors at the present time. The results are presented below in Figure II.

FIGURE II  
 AREAS OF GREATEST IMMEDIATE NEED



The results show that the greatest immediate needs are for counsellors with skills in:

- Individual Counselling,
- Consulting with Teachers.

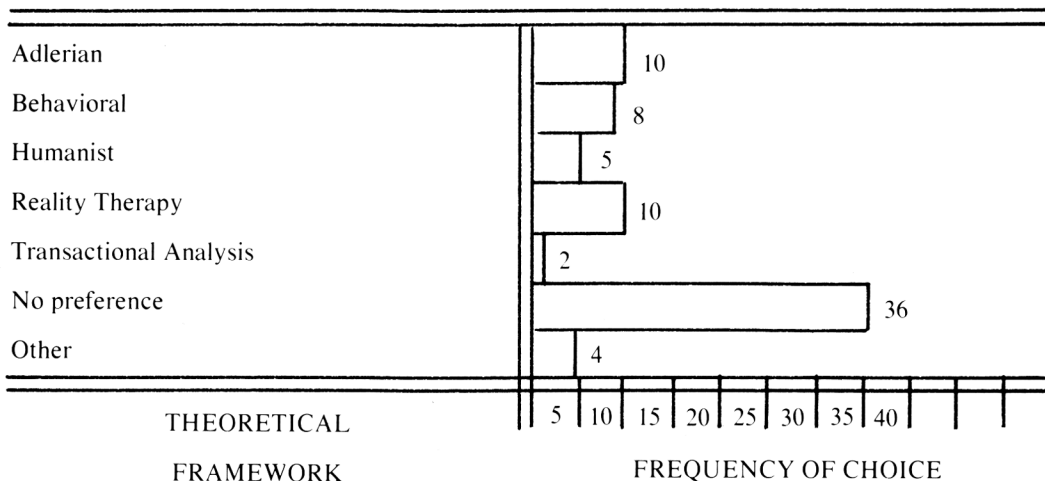
These areas are followed by requests for counsellors with skills in:

- Small Group Counselling,
- Career Education and
- Family Counselling.

(4) Preference for a particular counselling framework.

The results of these findings are shown in Figure III.

FIGURE III  
PREFERENCE FOR A PARTICULAR COUNSELLING FRAMEWORK



Clearly, superintendents and directors have “no preference” in regard to favouring one particular mode of counsellor training over another. However, the written comments to this item added additional information which will be discussed below.

*Discussion*

(1) *Need for counsellors and the financing of counsellor training.*

The results showed that 100% of the respondents thought that there was a need for counsellors in the schools and 86% were in favour of more trained counsellors. Two main themes emerged from the written comments to this last item: the need for more elementary counsellors and the need for better trained secondary counsellors. These issues will now be discussed in greater detail.

(a) *Need for elementary school counsellors.* The comments indicated a growing awareness of the need for primary prevention and early intervention and that the elementary school was the natural place where this could occur. There were no comments about the quality of training of the elementary counsellors, but rather an awareness that most have totally unrealistic and unmanageable case-loads. For example, in B.C.

many elementary or “area” counsellors are responsible for anywhere between 4 to 12 elementary schools giving each counsellor a case load of between 2,000 - 8,000 children. However, over the past 2-3 years, some school boards have become aware of the valuable preventative work that can be done in the elementary schools and have begun to assign one counsellor to two schools and, in some locations with severe social problems, one counsellor per school. Indeed, the recommendation of the B.C. School Counsellor Association is one counsellor per 600 elementary school children.

(b) *Need for secondary school counsellors.* The requests for more secondary counsellors came from the semi-urban and rural areas whereas the greatest emphasis from the urban locations was for better trained secondary counsellors.

It seems that the situation in B.C. might be different from that of other provinces regarding the use of the term “counsellor” and the amount of training required before one can call oneself a “counsellor”. In this province there is no certificate requirement for a counsellor and in most school districts the only requirement is to be a teacher. Practically any teacher can be given the “job of

counselling" if deemed fit by a principal. Indeed it is common knowledge in the B.C. school system that principals tend to move 3 groups of teachers into counselling positions: (1) those who are "good" with students, (2) those who have administrative aspirations, and (3) those who "cannot make it in the classroom". (A group of high school students, when describing "counsellors" to the writer referred to this group as "failed teachers".)

The inadequacy of training of B.C. school counsellors was also shown in a survey of high school teachers and their speciality areas conducted by the Department of Education (1973). This survey found that out of all the high school speciality areas, counsellors were the poorest trained with 70% having fewer than 3 courses in counselling. Courses described as representative of the counselling area, however, were those of an undergraduate level and included such general topics as mental health in the schools and adolescent psychology. Only 10% were found to have Master's Degrees and not all of these were in counselling.

From the comments of the 14% who indicated that there was *not* a need for more counsellors, three points were emphasized: (1) more counsellors would adversely affect the pupil-teacher ratio and hence increase classroom size, (2) more specialists were not needed in the schools, and (3) it would be more effective to train teachers in counselling techniques. [Indeed, there is some research evidence to support this contention (Berenson, 1971)].

(c) *The financing of counsellor training.* Seventy-one per cent of the respondents said they would encourage some of their experienced teachers to take counsellor training and would try to help finance part of a one-year training program. The "NO" responses (29%) emphasized that: (1) counselling was not a district priority, (2) there were insufficient funds available, (3) by agreement with the teachers' local, no fees could be paid for credit courses, and (4) up-grading was essentially the teachers' responsibility. One respondent mentioned that his district was very interested in our graduates but not in financing them through their training!

## 2. *Specific Counsellor skills required.*

This item sought to identify specific areas of counselling which were viewed as beneficial and meeting the needs of teachers and students in the schools.

The three most important areas were those of individual counselling, consultation with teachers and small group counselling. There was an awareness in the written comments that some students bring into the classroom situation problems that originate in the home. For example, such problems as separation, divorce, death, and/or alcoholism in the parents and

gross deprivation greatly affect the emotional life of a student, which in turn can disrupt his ability to concentrate and learn in the classroom. Children who have suffered in these situations often need individual counselling. Family help is also required here though there were comments that in severe situations the counsellor should call upon the services of the community social agencies.

In regard to consultation with teachers, the counsellor was seen as providing the teacher with valuable support and insight, particularly when the counsellor was available for discussion of problems, to make observations on classroom dynamics and to help the teacher establish a relationship with a "difficult student". The emphasis here was placed on the counsellor working directly with the teacher and not the child, and in developing approaches that would facilitate a successful teacher-child relationship.

One superintendent summed up the comments of the others when he emphasized the need for "individual counselling for vulnerable students and a skill in assisting teachers with strategies in maintaining this type of student in the classroom."

Other respondents mentioned that small group counselling is important because it provides an economical way of helping the students and gives them some chance to experience peer group evaluation of their behaviour.

The second cluster of important skills a counsellor needs were those related to discipline problems, crisis counselling and career education. Discipline problems and crisis counselling frequently go together in that discipline situations often result in high intensity exchanges, both verbally and physically, that a crisis situation emerges. At times, a crisis situation is not related to discipline but stems from a myriad of factors which are inevitable when one has 600-2000 students gathered together in one setting. Career education, vocational awareness and preparation for the future job market are still deemed as an important aspect of the counsellor's role, though seemingly not as important as the therapeutic-consultative skills at this moment in time.

The third cluster of skills centered around those required in family counselling, testing, classroom management techniques and affective education.

## 3. *Area of greatest immediate need.*

Once again, it was the counsellors with skills in individual counselling and consultation with teachers who were in most immediate demand. This was followed by requests for counsellors with skills in small group counselling, career education and family counselling. In this sample then, there is only a slight difference between the general skills required of

counsellors today and the skills most needed. Help with families replaces that of discipline problems and crisis counselling in the area of "greatest need right now".

The written comments yielded some important additional information. Many respondents stressed once again "the need for upgrading the level of training of our present counsellors", developing professional counselling skills", and lastly, from rural areas, "the acquiring of the services of a qualified counsellor". In terms of priorities, it was clear that the Superintendents wanted better trained counsellors rather than more counsellors.

Others mentioned that the greatest needs were in the areas of attitude change; that is, in helping develop a positive attitude in parents and teachers towards counselling and in establishing services oriented to the needs of the students ("not just an arm of administration and teaching staff"). Another area of attitude change involved that of the students themselves; namely, helping students see that one does not have to be "bad" to go to the counsellor.

#### 4. Preference for a particular counselling framework.

The results shown in Figure III clearly indicate that most superintendents and directors do not prefer any one counsellor training approach over another. The written comments of 24 respondents, however, stressed that counsellor training and counsellor practice should be *eclectic*. More specifically, these respondents stated that counsellors should have a workable knowledge of all theories and in practice be able to draw freely from these as appropriate situations arose. As one superintendent said: "The approach should fit the child and not the opposite." In sum, it is probably more accurate to say that the respondents have a preference for an eclectic approach to counsellor training.

Other written comments to this question emphasized the importance of the personality of the counsellor, as well as his age and prior work experience. It was generally agreed that, except for unusual cases, counsellors should have 3-5 years experience in teaching, human resources or industry before beginning training and should have a well developed, workable personal philosophy of life. These aspects were seen as important in developing credibility with students, teachers, administrators and parents.

Another personality variable stressed was that of trust and the ability to keep confidences. It was thought that this was particularly important if counsellors were to be effective and respected by students and teachers alike.

#### Implications

There are some important implications here for the training of school counsellors.

- (1) Counsellors need to be competent in working with both individuals and small groups.
- (2) Counsellors need consultation skills in working with both teachers and parents.
- (3) Counsellors need to be able to deal effectively with discipline problems and crisis situations.
- (4) Counsellors need to know how to help students understand their strengths and interests in developing career plans.
- (5) Basic standards for counsellors need to be established.
- (6) Universities need to develop appropriate training programmes for the upgrading and updating of counsellors.
- (7) Counselling departments should encourage applications from mature students.
- (8) Counselling departments need to give a greater input into undergraduate teacher training programs.

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