

NEED ASSESSMENT: A SURVEY OF PRINCIPALS, PRIMARY AND INTERMEDIATE TEACHERS PERCEPTION OF THE COUNSELLOR'S ROLE IN B.C.'S ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

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Abstract

In order to assess the need for counsellors in B.C.'s elementary schools, a questionnaire was sent to the principal, a primary and an intermediate teacher in 150 schools randomly distributed throughout the province. The return rate was 83%. The results indicated that most respondents: (1) wanted the services of a counsellor at least 2-3 days a week, (2) preferred a school-based teacher-counsellor to a counsellor coming into the school, (3) thought counsellors ought to be trained in developmental, preventive and remedial approaches, (4) believed counsellors ought to provide direct services to teachers and students alike and (5) perceived the counsellor's role in regards to parents as that of a consultant. Comparisons are made with other studies and some implications for school counsellors and counsellor educators are raised.

Résumé

Afin d'établir le besoin de conseiller dans les écoles primaires en Colombie Britannique, un questionnaire fût envoyé au préfet, un instituteur de classe primaire et intermédiaire dans 150 écoles, choisies au hasard dans la province. 83 pourcent des questionnaires furent retournés. Les résultats indiquaient que la majorité: (1) souhaitaient les services d'un conseiller au moins 2 à 3 jours par semaine, (2) préféraient un instituteur-conseiller attaché à l'école plutôt qu'un conseiller visiteur, (3) étaient de l'opinion que les conseillers devraient être formés dans les domaines du développement, des mesures préventives et de rémédiation, (4) croyaient que les conseillers devraient fournir leurs services de façon égale aux instituteurs et aux étudiants, et (5) percevraient le rôle du conseiller quant aux parents comme celui d'un consultant. Des comparaisons sont faites avec d'autres études et quelques implications pour la formation de conseillers sont suggérées.

Over the past ten years there has been a tremendous increase in the number of elementary school counsellors in the United States (Myrick & Moni, 1976; Peck & Jackson, 1976). Though not documented as yet, a similar increase has probably occurred in Canada. For example, in 1973 in our own department three students per year were trained whereas this year (1979) twenty are in training at the M.A. and M.Ed. levels.

This rapid growth has not been without its problems. Witmer (1975) points out that the initial programs were crisis oriented or established by hiring counsellors and letting them design their own job. Grobe, Myatt, and Wheeler (1978) believe that most guidance programs in the elementary school have evolved by chance rather than by "a systematically planned program based upon student needs as seen by teachers and parents" (p. 257). Other researchers, too, emphasize that the most effective approach to program development is one based on needs

assessment (Bernknopf & Hartley, 1974; Stiltner, 1978).

The purpose of this study was to assess the need for elementary school counsellors as perceived by principals and teachers in the province of B.C. It was hoped that such an assessment would yield pertinent information regarding useful areas for the training of counsellors. This study was seen as the first step in a series of need assessment projects. Other projects are presently being conducted and involve the assessment of needs as perceived by practicing elementary school counsellors, (Allan & Ross, 1979) parents and students.

METHOD

A survey consisting of a covering letter and a one page questionnaire was sent to 150 B.C. elementary schools covering all 75 school districts. The schools were randomly selected and the larger school districts received proportionally more

questionnaires than the smaller districts. Three questionnaires were sent to each school and were to be completed by the principal, a primary and an intermediate teacher.

The questionnaire consisted of six major areas: Assessing the teacher's perception of the amount of time counsellor spend with children, teachers and parents; the amount of time a school required counselling services; type of counsellor preferred; type of intervention strategies preferred; counsellor skills required, and assessment of the counsellor's relationship to parents. Room was also provided for the respondents to write in any of their own views relating to counselling.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The results will be presented for each area of investigation and will then be followed by a brief discussion (specific tables may be obtained from the senior author).

A. Return Rate of the Questionnaire

The return rate from the school districts was 100%, from the schools 83%, from the principals 83%, and from the primary and intermediate teachers 77%. The non-responding schools (26) were randomly distributed across rural and urban areas.

The sample then was sufficiently representative of principal-teacher perceptions to indicate trends towards counselling needs within the B.C. elementary school system.

B. What Proportion of Their Time do Counsellors Spend with Children, Teachers and Parents?

The purpose of question was to assess both the principals' and teachers' perception of how counsellors spend their time. It was found that only a very small percentage of teachers (15%) knew how counsellors proportioned their time between parents, teachers and children and just over a third of the principals were aware of these proportions.

When the respondents who know how the counsellor functioned were asked to assess the percentage of his/her time spent with children, teachers and parents there was general agreement that counsellors spend 70% of their time with children, 20% with teachers and 10% with parents. Most teachers then have the image of counsellors doing primarily one-to-one remedial counselling rather than being available to them or to parents as consultants.

One must bear in mind, however, that these figures reflect teacher-principal *perception* of counsellor functioning and do not reflect the actual amount of time a counsellor spends in

liaison activity with community agencies and resource personnel.

C. Time Required by a School for Counsellor Services

The schools were asked to indicate the amount of time they thought they needed the services of a counsellor. The choice ranged from full time, to 2-3 days per week, to one day per week to "not at all." The results indicated that 73% of the teachers and 57% of the principals clearly thought they needed the services of a counsellor at least full time to 2-3 days a week. Other findings to this question indicated that teachers who did not have a counsellor, tended to indicate the need for a full time counsellor whereas teachers with counselling services, checked the 2-3 days per week category. This suggests that teachers without counsellors feel a pressing need for such services. There is some lack of agreement on this question as 18-22% of the teachers as opposed to 34% of the principals thought that one day/week was sufficient.

D. Type of Counsellor Preferred

In regards to the type of counsellor preferred the respondents were asked to choose between a teacher-counsellor (i.e., one of the teaching staff, trained in counselling, being given some release time for counselling) or the services of a counsellor who came into the school. The responses showed that by a ratio of almost 2:1 the staff clearly preferred a teacher-counsellor to a counsellor coming into the school from the outside. Most of the comments to this question suggested that this preference arose from the teachers' need for insight and support around the handling of crisis situations. For example, they stated: "the counsellor should be within reach when needed", "students need counsellors at the time of crisis" and "teachers need counsellors to handle problems which arise in the classroom during teaching time." This latter comment was particularly true of intermediate teachers.

The teachers in favour of the counsellor coming into the school were concerned whether the teacher-counsellors could retain objectivity and felt that their greatest concern would still be for their class.

E. Counselling Frameworks for the Elementary Grades

The respondents were asked to state their preference for specific counsellor frameworks; i.e., whether they preferred an emphasis on developmental, preventive, remedial or an approach which encompassed all three functions. The results clearly indicated that most of the respondents (60%) were in favour of counsellors having skills in developmental, preventive and

remedial areas. All saw a close relationship between remedial and preventive areas with most (60%) preferring preventive skills; i.e., counsellors being able to identify problem children before a crisis occurs and to develop appropriate teaching and counselling strategies for them. Teachers saw preventive counselling as stopping the "band-aid" approach so often a part of the counsellor's job and expected that good preventive counselling in the primary grades would alleviate much of the remedial counselling in later grades. Early recognition of problems in kindergarten and grade 1 would enable extensive long term counselling to occur then, when chances of improvement were the greatest.

F. Training in Specific Counselling Skills

The respondents were asked to select specific counsellor skills that would benefit their school from a list of 14 skills. The results are shown in Table 1.

TABLE 1
Counsellor Skills Required

Function	Primary	Intermediate	Principal	All
Individual Counselling	103	103	105	311
Discipline Problems	92	90	91	273
Consulting with Teachers	79	71	89	239
Small Group Counselling	73	74	81	228
Classroom Management	65	71	79	215
Crisis Counselling	39	39	36	154
Consulting with Agencies	44	46	57	147
In-Service for Teachers	60	35	51	146
Testing	42	46	51	139
Affective Education	31	37	42	110
Articulation to 8th Grade	19	33	32	84
Orientation for Preschools	28	11	31	70
Minority Issues	22	22	21	65
Career Education	7	12	5	24
Others	7	2	2	11

The outstanding characteristic of these findings was the almost universal agreement in the perception of the primary, intermediate teachers and the principals regarding the most important functions of the counsellors. For example, they clearly agreed in terms of priorities and thought that in order for counsellors to benefit their schools, counsellors need to be competent in:

Individual Counselling Skills
Handling of Discipline Problems
Consulting with Teachers
Small Group Counselling and
Classroom Management Techniques.

A second cluster of skills were also generally agreed upon. These were:

Crisis Counselling
Consulting with Community Agencies
In-service for Teachers, and
Testing.

G. Greatest Immediate Need

When the respondents were asked to state their area of greatest immediate need, Individual

Counselling and help with Discipline Problems were still clearly the most important areas for all three groups. However, it was interesting to note that a third and new priority emerged for the primary and intermediate teachers; namely that of Family Counselling.

H. Counsellor's Function Relating to Parents

The respondents were asked to comment on how they saw the counsellor's role in relating to parents. The results showed that consulting with parents was a key skill required of counsellors and that this was followed by an emphasis on limited family counselling. Many teachers expressed the view that behaviour problems arise because "some parents simply have no idea of how to cope with, discipline or guide their children." Other counsellor functions relating to parents included providing the teacher with a clearer understanding of a child's family situation, counselling parents of special needs children and acting as a liaison person for Community Family Services and the school. Another comment emphasized that parents need to be made aware of the availability of the school counsellor as a resource person and the type of skills and services he or she can offer.

COMPARISON OF FINDINGS WITH OTHER STUDIES

When the results of this study were compared to those of the superintendents and directors perception of the need for counsellors in B.C. (Allan, 1976) and the perception of the principals of secondary schools in B.C. (Misuraca, 1976) considerable similarity was found. For example, in regards to specific counsellor skills that would benefit the schools the following rank-ordered pattern was revealed. See Table 2.

TABLE 2
Comparison of Superintendents, Directors, High School and Elementary Principals, and Primary and Intermediate Teachers in B.C.

Superintendents and Directors	High School Principals	Elementary School Principals & Teachers
Individual Counselling	Individual Counselling	Individual Counselling
Consulting with Teachers	Testing	Discipline Problems
Small Group Counselling	Small Group Counselling	Consulting with Teachers
Discipline Problems	Career Education	Small Group Counselling
Crisis Counselling	Vocational Counselling	Classroom Mgmt. Tech.
Career Education	Consulting/Teachers	Crisis Counselling
Family Counselling	Crisis Counselling	In-Service for Teachers

These descriptions were chosen from a list of 14 areas and, as can be seen, there is considerable agreement amongst the three groups: an emphasis on skills relating to individual counselling, small group counselling and consulting with teachers. The biggest difference seemed to be between the high schools and elementary schools. In addition

of the above, high schools need counsellors who have testing, career education and vocational counselling skills while elementary school personnel are asking for consultation with discipline problems and in classroom management techniques.

DISCUSSION

A number of aspects stand out from this survey: there is considerable agreement among primary and intermediate teachers and principals regarding the role and use of the counsellor. Most respondents want the services of a counsellor at least 2-3 days a week and prefer a school based teacher-counsellor rather than an "outside" counsellor coming into the school. According to the principals approximately 26% of the schools in the sample do not have the services of the counsellor available to them. These were mostly in rural or small northern communities.

It is interesting to note that in regards to the need, principals saw less of a need than either the primary or intermediate teachers. This could be due to the fact that the principals frequently do not have to teach five hours a day.

However, the *wish* for more counsellors does not match the present reality. Most elementary school counsellors and area counsellors in the province are spread over 4-12 schools (Allan, 1976; Allan & Ross, 1979) and are often very overburdened to be too effective. The implication here is that *many more counsellors are clearly needed for the elementary schools* and that there is a preference for a resident teacher-based counsellor. If this were to occur every school could become self contained in terms of mental health needs.

The study also found that most teachers (85%) did not know how counsellors spend their time. Clearly counsellors need to alert the teachers and principals to the services they provide, how they distribute their time and to ask the teachers how they can best be of service to them. Ideally this should be done near the beginning of every year at a full staff meeting.

Another trend to emerge was the respondents' emphasis on the counsellor's knowledge and skill in all three major areas of counselling — developmental, preventive and remedial with the principals in particular stressing the importance of preventive skills. Once again a discrepancy is revealed for this survey shows that at present in British Columbia teachers perceive counsellors as spending most of their time (70%) in remedial counselling with children. In regards to specific counsellor skills, five areas were clearly rated more highly than others: Individual Counselling, Discipline Problems, Consulting with Teachers, Small Group Counselling and Classroom Man-

agement. It seems then that teachers and principals are asking counsellors to: *provide direct service to themselves, to children and to parents*, to children in the form of individual and small group counselling, to themselves through techniques to handle discipline problems and to situations that require classroom management expertise and to parents in the form of consultation.

IMPLICATIONS

This study has important implications for (a) school counsellors and (b) counsellor educators.

A. School Counsellors need to:

1. Focus on their P-R image and to be aware that their relationship to principals and teachers is the foundation stone of their work. They can do this by being visible and available in the staffroom before and after school and during coffee and lunch breaks were possible. They need to become part of the school and to be identified with it.

2. Be both educative and receptive. That is, they need to inform the teachers of the three main dimensions of counselling — developmental, preventive and remedial, the different types of skills and services they provide in each area. Likewise, counsellors need to be receptive to the needs of the teachers and students. As well as really listening to the teachers and helping them express and identify their needs, counsellors can carry out periodic need assessment surveys, address staff meetings, provide in-service (on how to use a counsellor) and obtain a permanent area or corner of the staff bulletin board for counselling notices.

3. Demonstrate competency in counselling. Often this is hard for the teacher to see if the counsellor is treating the child in isolation. Perhaps the counsellor should focus more on the teachers as the clients first and work directly with them to bring about a change. This might also entail some direct classroom observation and/or working with the teacher and a child together. The goal here would be for the counsellor to help the teacher and child explore the problems, come to some understanding of the issues and to develop appropriate action steps together. In this way the counsellor would be demonstrating and sharing his knowledge and skills with the teacher, thus teaching the teaching counselling concepts and methods.

4. Try new counselling approaches which would avoid tying up a lot of counsellor time in one-to-one remedial counselling. For example, the counsellor could establish and supervise peer helpers (Allan, 1978), use peer models (Hayduk, 1978) or offer to do small modules, 2-4 sessions on

developmental counselling issues to all classrooms (k-7) throughout the school year. Thus every teacher and pupil in the school would get to know the counsellor and to experience one aspect of his or her work.

5. Try new models of working, i.e., rather than working in 5-6 schools the average load for a counsellor in B.C. (Allan & Ross, 1979), the counsellor could work in one school as a counsellor-teacher, having learning assistance tasks or teaching responsibilities for subject areas such as P.E., Art, Drama, and French.

6. Become more politically active. For example, where the number of schools and referrals are overwhelming, counsellors need to document every request for help, the details of the working week and to encourage the school board to hire more counsellors (the findings of this study clearly support the need for more counsellors).

B. Counsellor Educators, Trainee Counsellors need:

1. To be competent in working with both individuals and small groups. They need to be aware of both the theory and practice of individual and small group counselling in the school situation and have supervised practicums in these areas.

2. Skills in handling discipline problems and in a variety of classroom management techniques. Pertinent here would be classroom observation skills including how to analyze patterns of disruptive behaviour and how to suggest alternative methods of control.

3. Consultation skills relating to the concerns and problems of principals, teachers and parents.

4. To be trained in developmental, preventive and remedial counselling skills. In particular, they need to know how to identify children "at risk", especially in kindergarten and grade 1, and how to develop appropriate teaching and counselling strategies for such children.

5. To be familiar with community resources and agencies and to know when to refer children and their families and how to use such agencies for back-up services.

6. Crisis intervention skills.

7. To know how to provide appropriate in-service training.

8. To be familiar with a variety of need assessment and evaluation techniques so that they can evaluate communication blocks, what types of work need to be done and the effectiveness of their intervention programs.

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