

A Call to Resurrect the Hope and Promise of Comprehensive School Counselling Programs and Practices

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In the summer of 1996, I attended a training retreat for what was being introduced to Nova Scotia as the Comprehensive Guidance and Counselling Program (CGCP). A school counsellor and school administrator team participated on behalf of each of the seven schools that would engage in the provincial pilot. As we set off to return to our respective communities after the training, we were enthusiastic, energized, and maybe just a little intimidated by the prospect of the mission we had undertaken. My administrator and I were brimming with ideas and we brainstormed many more on the three-hour drive home.

Collectively, the pilot site trainees were particularly thrilled that the province was bringing to fruition the aspirations of the school counselling profession as encapsulated in a 1954 newsletter article. Though the precise origins of this newsletter have blurred over time, the call to action was as timely in 1996 as it had been more than four decades earlier. The seven pilot site teams wholeheartedly endorsed the slogan “Better late than never” as we picked up the call to engage in collaborative, whole-school counselling programming and practices coordinated by qualified school counsellors:

Guidance is a service that should be available to all students, from elementary to high school. This service should be flexible and adaptable to meet the needs of individual students and specific school circumstances. While it is both necessary and desirable for every classroom teacher to participate in a guidance program there is a definite need for trained counsellors to coordinate the service which should be offered and to provide specialized counselling over and above that which the average teacher and parent can provide the student (source unknown, 1954).

Over the course of my ten-year involvement with CGCP as a school counsellor, our school staff actively engaged in comprehensive school counselling programs and practices at the site level, and also became involved in a number of outreach initiatives at the district and provincial levels, including training workshops and conference presentations on: peer mediation, intrapersonal and interpersonal skill development programs such as Second Step Violence Prevention Program, career exploration programs such as the Real Game Series, and crisis response. A culminating accomplishment, which I feel reflected in large part the success of CGCP, was that our school won one of five provincial Psychologically Healthy Workplace Awards in 2005.

During my time as a school counsellor at a CGCP site, I felt that the model became well-recognized and respected at the school, district, and provincial levels because its implementation entailed the input and efforts of an array of stakeholders from the school community. Rather than promotion of CGCP by the school counsellor alone, which would carry the risk of perceived vested interest and bias, most of our education of others about the tenets of CGCP and our own program’s initiatives involved students, parents/guardians, teachers, educational assistants, administrators, and CGCP Advisory Committee members. We also made sure to capture and represent the voices of our bus drivers, cafeteria workers, custodial staff, office staff, library technicians, local community groups (e.g., seniors, Lions Club, Rotary Club), etc.

Throughout that first decade of CGCP implementation in Nova Scotia, momentum increased at what we felt to be an optimum pace. School counsellors and administrators at the original pilot sites participated in the training of new sites at annual retreats where networking was strongly encouraged as a means to establish connections for support and consultation. The seven sites expanded to well beyond 100, with the hope that eventually all schools in the province would endorse the CGCP model that espoused a common framework with room for tailoring programs and practices to reflect the unique needs of each school community.

Then, midway through the first decade of the new millennium, commitment to CGCP began to falter, apparently at both district and individual school levels. The constraints of educational funding meant that school administrators were facing challenges in staffing their schools in a manner that would address each of academic, behavioural, and psychosocial and emotional concerns. Whereas concerns in the latter category often were less evident, or at least less disruptive to school culture and systems, students' academic and behavioural needs demanded attention. Resource teachers, Learning Centre teachers, and behavior specialists were retained or hired at the elementary and middle school/junior high levels while school counselling positions were phased out in some of those schools. Concurrently, school counsellors in secondary schools conveyed challenges in implementing a comprehensive model due to a much more compartmentalized approach to education at this level and concomitant requirements to tend to administrative tasks associated with course registration and preparation for post-secondary study.

At all levels of public schooling – elementary, middle school/junior high, and secondary – school counselling tensions emerged, primarily on two fronts. School counsellors communicated a perception that implementation of CGCP involved a dichotomous, all-or-nothing decision. If school counsellors did not feel that they had the time or resources to fully flesh out the CGCP framework, particularly with respect to forming an advisory committee and conducting a needs assessment, then they felt that they could not get out of the 'starting blocks.' Also, school counsellors across the province echoed each other's parallel concerns about feeling invisible as key players in the education system and unrecognized as mental health professionals within and external to their schools. Therefore, they often felt compelled to establish themselves as bona fide allied health practitioners by adopting a more agency-based model of meeting with clients on an individual basis for counselling and psychotherapy.

Fast forward now to 2015. It has been more than 60 years since the auspicious newsletter entry heralding the advent of a new approach to school-based counselling, one that recognized the value in appointing qualified school counsellors to coordinate comprehensive school counselling programs and practices. While CGCP continues to be promoted as ideal school counselling practice in Nova Scotia, I venture that it has lost some of the vitality of the hope and promise it offered at its point of inauguration in 1996. In fact, I don't think that it would be an exaggeration to suggest that CGCP has been 'limping' along, based on consultations and conversations in my roles as school counsellor, school psychologist, and counsellor educator over the past 19 years.

I maintain a strong allegiance to the principles and practice of CGCP, as students who have taken Acadia University's School Counselling Programs course with me over the years will attest. I acknowledge that I speak from a primarily Nova Scotian perspective, although I also promoted and taught the comprehensive school counselling model to graduate students in West

Virginia. I suspect that Nova Scotians are not alone in our experiences and challenges and so I encourage you to consider along with me some options for breathing life into comprehensive school counselling approaches and the rationale for doing so.

Ensure that the title of the comprehensive school counselling model is current and relevant.

I recommend renaming the Nova Scotia *Comprehensive Guidance and Counselling Program* (CGCP) as *Comprehensive School Counselling Programs and Practices* (CSCPP). The proposed title acknowledges the obsolescence of the application of a vocational model to today's public school system. The CGCP title references school counselling roots in the vocational counselling work of Parsons in the early 1900s. However, although career counselling is an integral element of a comprehensive school-based program, the connotations associated with *guidance* tend to evoke dated conceptualizations of the role of school counsellor as a directive expert.

Evaluate the domains and components of the comprehensive school counselling model for suitability or fit.

While the comprehensive school counselling model depicted in many American texts identifies three focal domains of personal-social, educational, and career (Baker & Gerler, 2008; Dollarhide & Saginak, 2012; Erford, 2011; Schmidt, 2008), the CGCP model has not collapsed the personal and social into one and so comprises four domains (Nova Scotia Department of Education, 2010). I support a four-domain model based upon my perception that each of the personal and social domains is quite substantial and encompasses discrete knowledge and skill sets. The four components of the CGCP model include counselling, consultation, and coordination; guidance curriculum; career and life planning; and program management and system support. These components also might translate to responsive services, proactive programming, and administrative tasks.

The CGCP framework that connects the four domains and four components is constructed as a series of implementation steps: establishing an advisory committee; developing and conducting a needs assessment; targeting prioritized needs; delineating expectations and desired outcomes; identifying resources available to the program; designing activities to address targeted needs; preparing a program plan; communicating the plan to the school community; implementing the plan; and evaluating program activities and participant outcomes to assess the program's success in addressing targeted needs. In seeking to revitalize the CGCP model as a CSCPP model, it will be important to assess the philosophical and practical fit of the domains, components, and framework to ensure suitability.

Embrace CSCPP as a continuum.

One of the most commonly voiced concerns by school counsellors is that being required to wear more than one professional hat in their school (e.g., engaging in the roles of school counsellor and teacher) or working as a school counsellor in more than one school, presents significant impediments to the implementation of comprehensive school counselling. Rather than adopting a dichotomous, all-or-nothing approach to CSCPP, I encourage school counsellors to envision a continuum ranging from partial implementation of the framework (equating to *practices*) to full implementation (equating to *program*). Employed inclusively, a CSCPP framework allows tailoring, not only to reflect the unique counselling needs of the school community, but also the resources available to the school counsellor as coordinator (e.g., personnel, materials, facility,

time, budget, community, etc.). Thus, the framework offers flexibility rather than imposes constraints, and the CSCPP undertakings can expand and contract to reflect current resource levels.

Encompass both proactive and responsive elements.

Knowing what we do about the prevalence of mental health concerns in children and youth today, we cannot afford not to incorporate a preventative and proactive approach in school counselling. While it is unrealistic to aspire to a 100% focus on primary prevention, as there always will be a demand for responsive services, I do believe that increased primary prevention initiatives in CSCPP will decrease over time the need for secondary and tertiary prevention. Even allocating 20% of program time and resources to proactive elements would represent laudable progress. By definition, primary prevention, via education and promotion of proactive mental health practices, would confer some immunity to mental illness and its psychological ravages in our school-aged population. Depending on the nature of the preventative and proactive approaches incorporated, these might be introduced to, and/or carried out by, students, families, school staff, and members of the larger school and professional community.

Establish credibility and enhance valuing of school counsellors as mental health professionals through a balanced mission and mandate.

On the one hand, many current and aspiring school counsellors have indicated to me their desire to be recognized as qualified and competent mental health practitioners and allied health professionals. On the other hand, the predominant approach adopted in this pursuit is that of an agency-based model in which school counsellors see clients individually for counselling and psychotherapy. One of the challenges, then, is the relative invisibility of the school counsellors and their work. Additionally, this model sees school counsellors tending to the needs of the few when, almost without exception, the overall needs of the school are great. For example, if we presume that one in five children and youth meets criteria for mental illness (Coalition for Children and Youth Mental Health, May 2012), this would mean that 100 students in a school of 500 are struggling psychologically.

Aligned with the previous recommendation for adopting combined proactive/preventative and reactive/responsive approaches, a CSCPP model that goes beyond offering individual counselling and psychotherapy to include group work, psychoeducational sessions (for students, families, and staff), and community outreach, balances the services offered. When families, staff, and community members are privy to, and benefit from, the services and programming coordinated by CSCPP school counsellors, this is likely to foster a culture of valuing of school counselling and to enhance the professional reputation and credibility of school counsellors as competent mental health providers. Simply put, it is difficult for others to assess that which they cannot see. When members of the school community participate directly in CSCPP offerings, it facilitates positive extrapolation in their assessment of CSCPP program elements that are subject to confidentiality.

Educate the public about the philosophy and approach to comprehensive school counselling programs and practices.

The concept of comprehensive school counselling programs and practices likely will require clarification for those members of the school community who attended schools with a traditional

model of school counselling where the school counsellor focused only on educational and career counselling, if indeed the school even had a counsellor.

Comprehensive school counselling contrasts with the traditional *position* model in that there is a total school community focus, involving all students (not just those in psychological distress), staff, families, extended community members, and other school-related agencies and organizations. The collaborative approach to design, implementation, and evaluation invites the contributions of all of these stakeholders. Comprehensive school counselling is viewed as an essential and integral component of each student's educational experience. It is comprehensive, inclusive, developmental, and progressive in nature.

While operating within provincial/territorial parameters, comprehensive school counselling programs and practices reflect the unique culture and needs of the school community. Each school operates from a similar framework while remaining flexible enough to adapt and modify programming as needs are met or new needs arise. Comprehensive school counselling embodies proactive and preventative elements in addition to more traditional reactive and responsive approaches and calls for long-term vision, goals, and commitment.

Enlighten CSCPP stakeholders about the importance of emotional intelligence and literacy.

Daniel Goleman's (1995) exploration of emotional intelligence and literacy suggested that emotional IQ is an important co-predictor (better than cognitive ability alone) of future productivity, success, and fulfillment. Emotional IQ subsumes self- and other-awareness and understanding, intra- and interpersonal skills, empathy, affect regulation, impulse inhibition, problem-solving and decision-making, motivation, etc. Comprehensive school counselling programs and practices foster the development of emotional IQ, in all students, at all grade levels, with positive spillover to the students' homes and communities when parents/guardians and community members are invited to take part in psychoeducational sessions and training.

Emphasize accountability.

In this era of emphasis on accountability, comprehensive school counselling models stand strong. As coordinators of CSCPPs, school counsellors are expected to conduct, analyze and regularly update needs assessments. Comprehensive school counselling program plans and practices arise out of the needs that have been targeted, and their success is tracked through formative and summative evaluation. A CSCPP Advisory Committee monitors and offers input into the program and practices, and feedback ideally is sought from all stakeholders. CSCPP growth and development may be communicated to students, parents/guardians, school staff, the larger school community, the school board/district, and the provincial education department via face-to-face meetings and presentations, formal and informal reports, and creatively via videos, photo journals, etc. Again, the spokespersons may be any of the CSCPP stakeholders; sometimes updates carry more impact when conducted by individuals other than the school counsellor or school administrator.

Elicit support through professional connections.

Finally, what I believe to be an often overlooked variable in the success of comprehensive school counselling programs is the support afforded through professional connection at the family of schools (group of feeder and receiving schools), district, provincial/territorial, national, and

international levels. For example, in Nova Scotia, there are “Lead Teams” of school counsellors at the district level who respond to professional development needs and requests, family of schools and regional Professional Learning Communities comprised of school counsellors who meet regularly, and the Nova Scotia School Counsellors Association that produces a newsletter and provides networking and professional development opportunities. At the national level, CCPA has a very large and active School Counsellors Chapter. Layered on top of these Canadian resources are American (e.g., American School Counselor Association), and international (e.g., International School Counselors Association) associations and organizations.

The nine options outlined above are offered with the aspiration of assisting comprehensive school counselling to get its ‘second wind.’ Comprehensive school counselling is based on a sound and extensive empirical research base, dating back to its inception with Norm Gysbers’ work at the University of Missouri in the 1970s (Good, Fischer, Johnston, & Heppner, 1994; Gysbers, 2010; Gysbers & Henderson, 2012; Thompson, 2012). It is my hope that renewed investment of energy in comprehensive school counselling programs and practices will move school counsellors away from their reported experiences of feeling invisible, undervalued, and like a voice “in the wilderness,” and toward a sense of full acknowledgement as competent and valued school-based mental health professionals and allied health professionals. I believe that comprehensive school counselling is the vehicle best suited for arriving at this desired destination.

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