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**EDUCATIONAL COUNSELLING IN  
SINGAPORE SCHOOLS**

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Paper presented at the  
Conference on New Frontiers for Counselling in the 21st Century  
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# EDUCATIONAL COUNSELLING IN SINGAPORE SCHOOLS

by

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Paper presented at Conference on New Frontiers for Counselling in the 21st Century, York Hotel, Singapore, July 20-21, 1991.

## Introduction of Educational Counselling Schools

In the Singapore context, educational counselling in schools takes the form of pastoral care involving classroom teachers as frontline care givers. At its simplest, pastoral care can be defined as "organized care in the school involving all the teachers in a developmental programme addressing the needs of all the pupils". Although the term "pastoral care" is a relatively new one introduced to Singapore schools in recent years, the concept of care in schools is not new at all. In fact, for many decades care and concern for the welfare of pupils have always been given due recognition in Singapore schools. Some schools have set up pupil welfare programmes to meet both expressed and identified needs of pupils while in other schools, selected teachers double up as student counsellors to identify and help pupils in need.

Since care and concern in schools is not a new concept in Singapore, what then, is new about Pastoral Care? I would like to highlight three characteristics that distinguish the current practice of Pastoral Care from the Pupil Welfare programmes of the past : -

The first of these is the shift from a reactive approach to a proactive approach. Pastoral care is developmental, a caring programme designed to facilitate the total development of the pupil, not just to remediate in times of need and crisis. Because of this proactive and developmental nature, pastoral care is not something reserved for badly behaved pupils or the underprivileged. It is for all pupils regardless of their age, ethnic background and stage of development.

The second important feature is the use of the group approach in the delivery of pastoral care in schools. Because of its developmental nature, pastoral care is best delivered through a series of planned group guidance activities whereby pupils attain learning and growing in a conducive, tension-free atmosphere. Under the guidance of their pastoral care tutor and in the security of a caring school community, the pupils learn and grow together through fun and participation.

The third characteristic in the current practice is the adoption of the whole-school approach in pastoral care. In the past, pupil welfare programmes in schools usually involved only a handful of teachers who would work with a selected group of pupils known to be having some learning difficulties or behavioural problems. In the current practice of pastoral care, the preference is to have the whole school staff to be involved in a concerted effort to plan and implement a developmental programme which enhances the quality of school life and facilitates the growth of all pupils. The ultimate goal is to ensure that all pupils in the school community feel wanted and valued as individuals, being given opportunities to develop their potentials in all areas of their development regardless of their age, abilities, social and cultural background.

#### Pastoral Care - Singapore Style

A review of the scenario in Singapore schools show that in most schools with a formalized pastoral care programme, usually a needs survey is done to ascertain the needs of the pupils before aims are identified and a "pastoral curriculum" drawn up for implementation. This means that the specific objectives and the resulting programme may vary from school to school. For instance, in a school of low academic standing where many pupils lack confidence and motivation, the main aim of pastoral care may be to promote learning through building up self-esteem and teaching study skills. In another school where majority of the students join the work force soon after completion of secondary school, career guidance becomes a major component of the pastoral care programme to teach the pupils life skills and prepare them for the world of work. In yet a third school where many children from broken homes act out their frustrations by misbehaving in schools, the priority in pastoral care becomes one of building a positive self-concept and teaching interpersonal skills. But whatever the emphasis, all the pastoral care programmes in the schools share a common feature, namely, the provision of time and opportunity for pastoral care tutors to interact with the pupils, and, through a progressive programme, build up a trusting relationship with them to promote self-confidence and to facilitate self-awareness. Such pastoral efforts are also concerned with the modification of the learning environment, adapting it to meet the needs of individual pupils so that every pupil has the maximum chance of success, whatever his background or general ability.

## The Structure

In most of the schools, the whole-school approach is adopted in the delivery of pastoral care. This is often done through involving all teachers in a vertical house system or the horizontal year system. The vertical House system organizes the pupils into groups called "houses", each under the care of a Head of House assisted by a team of tutors. The horizontal year system groups pupils according to their age or level and are looked after by tutors under the organization of a "Year Head".

## Role of the Tutor

Whatever the pastoral structure, all schools recognize the importance of the role played by the pastoral care tutors who serve as the first point of contact for the pupils. These pastoral care tutors (usually form teachers) are expected to implement and promote pastoral care activities through informal interactions with pupils placed under their care on a regular basis, either within or outside of curriculum time. Their main responsibility is to know their pupils well, to promote relevant social skills and to care for each pupil's personal and academic progress.

## The Pastoral Curriculum

In all the schools in the pilot scheme, pastoral care is delivered through the implementation of a "pastoral curriculum" which is sometimes called "Personal and Social Education". This pastoral curriculum comprises a series of planned tutorial activities tailored to meet the specific needs of pupils and delivered through structured group activities such as group discussion, workshops, role play, values clarification activities and simulation games. Examples of themes forming Personal and Social Education courses are : -

- \* The pupil's place in the school
- \* Relationships and interpersonal skills
- \* Communication skills
- \* Thinking skills, decision making and problem solving
- \* School work and study skills
- \* Health and hygiene
- \* Vocational interests and career planning

Besides the specially tailored pastoral curriculum, pastoral care can also be delivered through enrichment programmes (residential or non-residential), pupil profiling, home-school relations, academic guidance, peer support, management of discipline, pupil counselling, extra-curricular activities as well as co-curricular activities.

### **How Well Is Pastoral Care Working in the Schools?**

You may be interested to know - how well is pastoral care working in the schools? The Ministry of Education has just completed a comprehensive evaluation on the effectiveness of pastoral care in all the 17 schools involved in phase one of the pilot scheme but the results have not been made known yet. What I can share with you today are only views gathered through informal feedback obtained from teachers.

In schools where pastoral care has been implemented, teachers have reported that activity-based group guidance carried out during contact times either within or without curriculum time have given them opportunities to interact informally with their pupils, resulting in more open communication and better teacher-pupil rapport.

Since in most of these schools the pastoral care curriculum is worked out by the teachers themselves, a sense of pride and ownership is also evident. This in turn leads to a more positive and caring school community.

As for the pupils, teachers have observed amongst them a greater readiness and willingness on the pupils' part to express their feelings amongst themselves as well as with their teachers. Many of them have also shown a general improvement in self-concept as well as interpersonal skills.

On the part of teachers, some have concluded that their being "frontline care-givers" or being the first point of contact when pupils have problems has helped to facilitate a more effective referral system and better networking with community agencies in seeking professional help for pupils with special needs.

## **The Challenge for Teacher Education**

Initially introduced into 17 schools , the pilot scheme has been extended in the lapse of two years to include a total of 54 secondary schools. Meanwhile, many other schools, including primary schools, have also embarked on pastoral care programmes on their own initiative. Since the success of any pastoral care programme depends on the quality of the care-givers, these developments pose a new challenge to us at the National Institute of Education, - that of providing comprehensive and adequate training to equip teachers for their pastoral care role in schools.

This sudden and sharp increase in the demand for trained pastoral care-givers also brought with it two very basic issues - what kind of pastoral care-givers do we need in the schools and what are they expected to do?

Looking around at the school guidance scenes in other countries and learning from their experiences, it seems that Singapore has two options. One is to give in-depth training to a selected group of teachers to equip them as guidance counsellors in schools. This trend of specialization in the provision of care can be observed in countries such as the US and Canada where schools have full-time counsellors whose main responsibility is to give educational guidance and personal counselling to the pupils. These school counsellors are further assisted by visiting school social workers, school psychologists and school psychiatrists who provide specialized care to pupils facing more serious problems (Ontario Ministry of Education, 1985; Tennyson, Miller, Skovholt & Williams, 1989; Thomas, 1989).

The second option is to adopt a generic approach in providing care for the pupils as in the case of many British schools. It has been observed that in the British pastoral care system, all form tutors are frontline care-givers charged with facilitating the overall development of the pupils placed under their care. This is often done through the implementation of a pastoral curriculum and programmes of Personal Social Education (Hamblin, 1978, 1986; Lang & Marland, 1985). The responsibilities of these tutors are many - conducting group guidance activities, offering individual counselling to pupils, collaborating with colleagues and working with parents. To discharge such a wide range of responsibilities, these teachers need a repertoire of guidance knowledge and counselling techniques in addition to teaching skills.

Learning from the experiences of the United States and the United Kingdom, what then, would be a viable model of providing care in Singapore schools? It is obvious that in Singapore we cannot afford the luxury of a high level of specialization in the provision of care for the development and welfare of pupils. Since currently there is still an acute shortage of classroom teachers, it will be some time before we can afford to have full-time counsellors in schools. On the other hand, adopting a generic approach in providing care has its limitations. It is neither possible nor realistic to expect classroom teachers to be experts in everything - teaching, pastoral care, counselling and career guidance - all four in one!

After much deliberations, it was felt that perhaps a more feasible approach would be to introduce a two-tier guidance system in the schools providing generic care to all pupils as well as specialized services for those who need them. The first level of intervention provides developmental guidance as well as some form of career guidance to facilitate the total development of the pupils and will be the responsibility of the generalists who are classroom teachers doubling up as pastoral care-givers. The second-line care-givers are the key personnel such as level-heads or year coordinators who will provide counselling as well as crisis intervention to pupils in need. In addition, these "specialists" will also take on the leadership in planning, implementing and evaluating pastoral care programmes in their respective schools.

In view of the constraint of manpower in Singapore schools, it is unrealistic to have full-time school counsellors as in the case of the U.S. and Canada. Thus while frontline care-givers carry a full teaching load in addition to their pastoral duties, the second-line care-givers are to be given a lighter teaching load to allow them time to carry out their "specialist" responsibilities (D'Rozario & Chia, 1988; Lang, 1988). Working side by side, these two groups of teachers perform different functions which complement each other. They also require different skills and differential training as summed up in the following table:



Table 1

**Functions of Pastoral Care-givers and Required Skills**

Type of Intervention	Major Concerns	Training Needed
Developmental Guidance	enhancing pupils' self-concept; developing study skills, social skills & communication skills civic/moral education	life skills training knowledge and skills in group guidance
Career Guidance	career self-awareness career exploration career decision making job hunting skills	principles and practice of careers guidance
Individual Counselling & Crisis Intervention	short-term counselling for learning and personal problems  remedial help in time of need	counselling & assessment techniques networking with community resources

**The Training Programme**

To face this new challenge, we at the Institute introduced in 1988 a specially designed part-time in-service training programme known as the Specialist Diploma Programme in Pastoral Care and Career Guidance. Keeping in mind the wide range of training needs of our teachers, this Specialist Diploma Programme is designed to provide basic training for the frontline care-givers as well as in-depth training for a smaller group of key teachers to assume leadership roles in the planning, implementation and evaluation of pastoral care in the schools.

This Specialist Diploma Programme is organized on a modular approach. It comprises eight modules of 30 hours each, adding up to a total of 240 hours of course work plus about 60 hours of practicum work in the schools. The modules are arranged in sequential order at two levels.

## Level One Training

Level One courses are foundation courses to meet the general needs of classroom teachers who are preparing to be frontline care-givers (generalists) in the pastoral provision of their schools. These courses are intended to provide them with the basic knowledge and skills in pastoral care, counselling and career guidance to help them make optimum use of their "Contact Time" with pupils under their care : -

### Module 1 Introduction to Pastoral Care and Career Guidance in schools

This first course provides an overview on the nature, scope and function of pastoral care and career guidance in schools. The course emphasizes the proactive aspect of pastoral care and encourages teachers to examine critically their pastoral care role in schools.

### Module 2 Basic Skills in Tutoring and Group Guidance

This course examines the place of group guidance in pastoral care and introduces the teachers to theories of group process as well as a whole range of group guidance techniques.

### Module 3 Basic Skills in Pastoral Casework

This course focusses on the remedial aspect of pastoral care. It aims at enhancing understanding of mental health and maladjustment. The teachers are introduced to a variety of counselling methods covering affective, cognitive and behavioural approaches in pupil counselling.

### Module 4 Planning and Implementing Career Guidance in Schools

This course aims at equipping the teachers with both knowledge and skills in careers guidance. It examines theories of career development and introduces the teachers to a variety of approaches in career counselling.

While providing basic training for the front-line care-givers in the schools, these foundation courses also form the pre-requisites for teachers who wish to proceed to the advanced level of training.

## Level Two Training

Level Two courses are designed to provide both breadth and depth in the training of specialist counsellors in schools who are expected to provide leadership in planning and implementing pastoral care and career guidance in the schools. Thus in addition to more in-depth training in guidance and counselling, the teachers are also taught managerial skills, programme development skills as well as assessment and evaluation skills: -

### Module 5 Developing and Implementing a Pastoral Curriculum

This course is designed to address the training needs of pastoral leaders who are entrusted with the responsibility of leading a pastoral team to plan and implement pastoral care programmes in schools.

### Module 6 Assessment and Evaluation in Pastoral Care and Career Guidance

This course focusses on the role of assessment and evaluation in pastoral care and career guidance. It introduces the teachers to a variety of assessment methods and examines critically issues in programme evaluation.

### Module 7 Advanced Skills in Pastoral Groupwork and Casework

This course probes deeper into the realms of group guidance and individual counselling. It aims at further sharpening the teachers' counselling skills and thus prepares them for supervisory roles in the pastoral setup of their schools.

### Module 8 Research and Development in Pastoral Care, Counselling and Career Guidance

This course examines research issues and surveys current practices as well as new developments in pastoral care in Singapore and other countries.

While front-line pastoral care-givers are encouraged to complete all four basic courses at Level One, pastoral leaders in schools are expected to proceed on to Level Two training. Upon successful completion of all eight courses in the training programme, the teachers will be awarded a Specialist Diploma in Pastoral Care and Career Guidance.

## **Innovative Approaches to Training**

In order to meet the challenge of training a great number of pastoral care-givers to function at different levels within a short period of time, we at the National Institute of Education have experimented with two non-traditional approaches along side the conventional method of in-service training.

Since Pastoral care and Career Guidance in the Singapore context adopts the "whole-school" approach involving all the teachers, we were convinced that the most effective way to prepare front-line care-givers is to conduct school-based in-service courses for staff of the pilot schools. So instead of the teachers coming to the Institute to attend classes, lecturers from the Institute go to the school to conduct weekly training sessions for the whole teaching staff. Such an approach has three advantages. Firstly, this is one way to train many generalists within a short period of time. Thus in a lapse of less than three years, more than 2,000 teachers have completed module 1 trainign in this manner. Secondly, this approach allows teachers from the same school to get together to share experiences and to engage in problem-solving in issues pertaining to their particular school. Thirdly, such involvement of the total teaching staff is an effective way of creating a caring environment and a school ethos that is conducive to the implementation of pastoral care and career guidance.

In addition to school-based in-service courses, we also conduct what are known as campus-based School-focused in-service courses. This means schools can send a specified number of staff (usually about 30 from each school) to form a cohort but the training is to be conducted on campus. Such an approach allows 60 to 120 teachers from two to three schools to undergo training at one time. The format of training includes mass lectures for the whole cohort to be followed by workshops in smaller groups led by a team of lecturers. In the workshops, the grouping of teachers is according to the school they come from so that discussions in the workshops can be school-focused. We have found that this is a good way to cover several schools at one time.

To cater to the needs of the non-pilot schools that wish to send only a handful of key teachers to be trained, we also continue with the traditional format of campus-based training courses for which enrollment is open to all teachers from both primary and secondary schools. Thus a class of 30 often comprise of teachers coming from 15 to 20 schools. The advantage of such an approach is that it allows teachers from many different schools to interact and share professional views as well as to discuss practical problems, in this way obtaining mutual support and mutual help.

Regardless of the format of training, course work comprises lectures followed by group discussion and workshop activities. As the emphasis in training is on experiential learning, there is much opportunity for hands-on activities such as micro-counselling sessions. Two approaches are used in the training and supervision of counselling skills. The first is through videotaping of role-play sessions which are later replayed in class for critique and feedback by course lecturers and fellow participants. The second is by audio-taping as well as videotaping of actual counselling sessions conducted in schools which are then played back in class in small groups for critique and feedback. Initially feeling rather shy about having their taped sessions heard and watched in class, most of the teachers eventually overcome their shyness and are able to benefit from these practicum sessions.

### **General Feedback on the Training Programme**

To evaluate the effectiveness of the training and to ascertain the extent to which the teachers are able to put into practice what they have learned in the in-service courses, the participants are followed up three to six months after completion of their training. This is usually done through a survey using either the questionnaire or the interview method.

One such follow-up study was conducted in December 1988 with a random sample of 100 teachers from 10 secondary schools who had completed Module One training. As shown in Table 2, the results of this follow-up study revealed that at least 75% of the respondents were able to apply the knowledge gained to understand their pupils better. They had also put their newly acquired group guidance and counselling skills to good use. When asked if they had the opportunity to develop pastoral curriculum for use in their schools, about 50% answered in the affirmative. More than half of the teachers had the opportunities to share their knowledge with their colleagues. Lastly, 80% of the teachers indicated that they had benefited from the training and would strongly recommend the course to their fellow teachers.

Table 2

**Feedback on Training**

N = 100

Comments	Response	
	Yes %	No %
I have used the knowledge to understand my pupils better	75	25
I have applied the group guidance skills gained in tutoring my pupils	82	18
I have put the counselling skills learned to good use	62	38
I have been involved in the development of pastoral curriculum	48	52
I strongly recommend this course to my colleagues	80	20

Another method of obtaining feedback is through informal meetings with principals and key teachers to obtain their views on the effectiveness of the training programme as measured by the level of functioning of the trained teachers. One such meeting was held at the Institute in October 1988. On the whole feedback from the principals present had been both positive and encouraging. They felt that their teachers had benefited from the training. They also spoke enthusiastically in favour of the school-based approach in in-service training, pointing out that this approach has the advantage of involving practically the whole teaching staff of the school, including the principal, and is therefore an effective way of promoting a conducive school environment to facilitate a whole-school approach in implementing pastoral care in schools.

## Progress of the Programme

In the lapse of two years, more than 3,000 teachers have completed the basic module in this programme. Of these about 100 have completed Level One training (up to Module 4 ) while 22 will be completing Level Two soon. Details of the number of course participants for each module are as follows :

Table 3

### **Distribution of Participants in the Programme**

Level of Training	No. of Course Participants
Level One	
Module 1	3,144
Module 2	273
Module 3	150
Module 4	101
Level Two	
Module 5	67
Module 6	23
Module 7	22
Module 8	22
Grand Total	3,802

Currently 22 teachers are enrolled in the final module (Module 8). They hope to complete the course successfully by early September to become the first batch of graduates of the Specialist Diploma Programme.

## Conclusion

The training programmes I have described in this paper arose from a strong desire to meet a growing demand in teacher education in pastoral care in Singapore. They also reflect the concerted efforts of a team of teacher educators in search of better and more effective methods of preparing teachers as pastoral care-givers in schools. In the two years of experimentation, we have succeeded in some areas. We have also failed in other aspects. What is important, however, is that we have learned valuable lessons in the process. Such a comforting thought is enough to urge us on.

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