

Improving Life Skills Curriculum and the Comprehensive Guidance Program:  
Concepts and Strategies\*

**Professor Norman C. Gysbers**  
**University of Missouri-Columbia**

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Thank you very much for your very kind introduction. I am delighted to be here today. I want to thank the organizers of this conference because the topic we are addressing is a very important one, not only in Hong Kong, but certainly in the United States and worldwide. So thank you for inviting me to participate in this outstanding symposium on this very important topic. It's a topic to which I have devoted my professional life.

I begin by asking a basic question: Why is it important that young people possess life skills? To answer this question it is necessary to stop and consider what is happening to young people today. We know that young people are growing up and developing in a very rapidly changing world. I didn't have to come to Hong Kong to tell you that. You are well aware of how rapidly our global work world and society are changing; globalization is affecting everybody. I put this in perspective for myself by reflecting on my own family. My father was born in 1882. I was born in 1932. In a span of 120 years, since my father was born, the world changed dramatically. Then if you consider my life span I have seen industry, occupations, society, and personal values change even more rapidly. Consider the impact of technology. For example, this morning I went to the library in Robert Black College to check my email at home. To me it is simply amazing that it is even possible

to do. Another example of the impact of technology is cell phones. I'm told there're two cell phones for every person in Hong Kong. Is that correct? Around the world we're connecting through technology in many ways, which twenty or thirty years ago wasn't even possible. All of these rapid changes are affecting our young people. These changes are creating substantial challenges for them. They are not abstract issues, they're very real because they are with us every day.

The rapidly changing world in which we live makes it more and more difficult for young people to understand their place and identity within society. The challenges created by these changes include increased violence in society and in schools. Other challenges include bullying, substance abuse, sexual experimentation, and peer pressure. As young people are growing up facing these challenges, they are asking such questions as: Who am I? Where am I going? What are my next steps? I remember that when I was in school, chewing gum was one of the behaviors for which we would be disciplined. Somehow, I think that's rather trivial compared to some of the student behaviors we face today. So, the challenges that our young people face are substantial and are very real.

Given all of these changes and the resulting challenges, countries around the world are reassessing their educational systems. In the United States we are involved in "educational reform" trying to change our educational system. One emphasis in the United States is "academic achievement". There is substantial emphasis on helping students succeed academically. As a result we have instituted testing to assess whether or not students have the knowledge and skills to succeed academically. Unfortunately, this emphasis has tended to reduce the opportunity to address life skills because some administrators see no room for life skills in the curriculum. And yet, if you look at the challenges that our young people are facing, we can clearly see the need to address life skills within our educational system. It should not be an either/or situation – just academic or life skills. It

should be both. So it is my considered opinion that we must look beyond academics to a broader array of knowledge and skills that are needed by young people today.

A publication titled *Community Programs to Promote Youth Development* was published in the United States recently by the National Academy Press (Eccles & Goatman, 2001). In it are descriptions of the personal and social assets that the authors feel facilitate positive student development. The first asset considered is physical development including good health habits as well as good health risk management skills. The next asset is called intellectual development. It emphasizes life skills, the very topic that we're talking about today, as well as knowledge of essential vocational skills, school success, rational habits of mind (critical thinking and reasoning skills), and in-depth knowledge of more than one culture. In addition this asset focuses on good decision-making skills and knowledge of skills needed to navigate through multiple cultural contexts. The next asset is social development. It includes connectiveness (good relationships, trust with parents and peer and other adults), and attachment to pro-social conventional institutions such as school, church, and non-school youth programs. The final asset is psychological and emotional development. It focuses on mental health, emotional self-regulation skills, coping skills, and good conflict resolution skills.

When all of these assets are considered you see the whole individual, the whole student because the development of these assets in students helps facilitate their physical development, personal/social development, academic development and career development. When these kinds of development come together, the overall concept of life skills emerges. This leads us to appreciate how important it is to help all of our students with their total development, to help them begin to get a sense of self, a sense of direction, focus, and purpose in their lives within the context of the society in which they will live and work.

How can this emphasis on total student development be fully integrated into our educational systems? I believe that for this to occur, it will require a whole school approach to guidance, implemented through a comprehensive school guidance program. You are all familiar with the whole school approach to guidance because that's a focus of the Hong Kong school system.

In the United States we often talked about life skills, we talked about working with young people, yes, in fact we talked about the whole school approach to guidance. However, we found that we did not have a system to deliver life skills. We did not have a way to put the whole school approach to guidance into our educational system so that we could actually deliver it in a very direct way to students. So it became apparent that we needed a different way to organize guidance in the schools. This realization led to the development of the comprehensive school guidance program concept that would serve as an organizer and delivery system to bring to students the life skills that they need to achieve their goals and resolve their problems.

What should be the objectives of a comprehensive school guidance program? When I was searching for a list of objectives, I had the opportunity to read a document titled *Guidance Work in Secondary Schools* (Education Department, 2001), a document with which I suspect you are all familiar. In it there is a list of objectives. Let me share those with you to remind you of what this document said concerning objectives for school guidance work. The first one is to create a pleasurable and inviting learning environment in school. If you stop and think about that for a moment, one of the conditions necessary for academic achievement to occur is an inviting place to learn. Thus creating an inviting learning environment is a very important focus for school guidance work. Next is an objective that focuses on helping students develop a better understanding of themselves, their abilities, strengths, and weaknesses. This objective focuses on students learning about who they are and what they need to do to be successful in the work that they do. And finally,

here are the rest of the objectives: raise students' awareness of their feelings and develop their skills in handling emotions, help students build up self-confidence and enhance self-esteem, promote desirable learning and social behavior, facilitate students' life planning, goal setting, and career formulating, and identify problematic areas in an early state and provide initial and frontline intervention to help students cope with their problems. When you examine these objectives closely, and then think about the knowledge and skills students require today to meet the challenges they face that we talked about just a moment ago, you can see clearly direct connections between these objectives and those knowledge and skills students require.

Given these important objectives, what would a comprehensive school guidance program look like, when fully implemented, that would assist schools achieve objectives such as these? Let me share with you the concept of a comprehensive school guidance program that I developed some 30 years ago that brings together guidance activities and services in a coherent and systematic way. In the United States, beginning in the 1960's and the 1970's, we became more and more concerned about helping students reach their goals and resolve their problems. Various programs were undertaken to assist students. Also a variety of personnel became involved in delivering these programs including school counselors, school psychologists, social workers, and nurses. As these programs unfolded we found that personnel were often focused in their own areas; they were not working together. There was an obvious need to develop an organizational framework that would bring all of the professionals who were working with students together so they could see how they were connected, so that their focus was on the students and parents with whom they were working. To counter this disconnectedness the idea of a comprehensive school guidance program (Gysbers & Henderson, 2000) was born as a way to bring all school personnel together so they could carry out a whole school approach to guidance.

The comprehensive school guidance program consists of three elements: content, organizational frameworks, and resources (See Figure 1). The content element contains the knowledge and skills that young people need for their development that can be best delivered by guidance. Currently in Hong Kong, you're developing life skills organized around various themes. This is the content of the program. Next is the organizational framework. It consists of structural components and program components. The structural components contain the definition of the program, the rationale for it and the assumptions we make about the program. For example, one assumption is, that the program provides activities and services to all students. Why is this important? It is important because it emphasizes that the program is for all students, not for just a few who are having specific difficulties. That's a very important point, because some people think that guidance is for students who have problems or difficulties. Certainly guidance is for those individuals, but there is also a developmental emphasis which assumes that all students can and should benefit from guidance activities and services in the school. The program components that come next are the delivery systems for the various kinds of guidance activities and services that we need to provide for all students, elementary through secondary. The guidance curriculum is one of the components, one that is being emphasized in Hong Kong today. The goal is to provide all students access to a guidance curriculum that is delivered on a systematic basis. I use the word systematic because it's a very important word. For many years in the United States we provided guidance activities and services to students but they were often provided in a fragmented way. Sometimes we would do an activity in the elementary school, and then another activity in the middle school and finally still another activity in the high school, but the activities were not delivered in a systematic way. What we needed to do was start in the elementary school to build a solid base of knowledge and skills, and then move progressively with guidance activities through our middle schools and high schools. What was needed was a seamless approach to deliver the knowledge and

skills that our students required. To accomplish this the guidance curriculum takes place at all levels of education often within classrooms, but also in larger school-wide group settings as well. The guidance curriculum is organized so that students of all ages, circumstances, and educational levels can gain the life skills they require.

A second component called individual planning focuses on helping each student consider carefully and plan for their next steps, educationally and occupationally. The activities of individual planning build on the knowledge and skills students develop in the guidance curriculum, so that students, working closely with parents, can plan for such next steps as going to a university, into the work world, or wherever their next steps may take them. Portfolios are used by students to assemble information about themselves and about the directions they see themselves going. Counselors and other professionals assist students, along with their parents, to review pertinent information and consider students' next steps on an ongoing basis.

The guidance curriculum and individual planning components represent the developmental part of the program. They are delivered systematically to all students. The assumption is that all students can benefit from guidance curriculum and individual planning activities as they progress through the educational system.

A third component of the program is responsive services. Some students need special help. Some students are hurting, they're in pain, they're experiencing difficulty, and they need that special help a school counselor, or a social worker, or school psychologist can provide to assist them work through some of those issues and problems. The responsive services component consists of individual counseling, small group counseling, consultation, and referral. In most of the schools in the United States, we do not emphasize long-term counseling. We turn to the community to look for specific help on a longer term basis from professionals in our community agencies. This helps us

form close relationships with community agencies, mental health agencies, and other groups in the community.

Those three components constitute the direct services to students that provide a way to deliver important activities developmentally or responsively to all students. Finally, the last component, called system support, contains the management part of our program as well as professional development activities, community relations, and research and development activities. Committee work also is included in this component.

A critical issue in the United States in implementing comprehensive school guidance programs is time; the time school counselors and other professionals have to deliver the program. I know that we differ on how guidance services are delivered to students because we have full time school counselors in the United States. They work full time within the program so it is important for them to consider how much time they plan to spend on conducting activities and providing services. The program components offer a way for them to manage their time. A rule of thumb we use is 80% of the time of school counselors working in direct services for students including the guidance curriculum, individual student planning, and responsive services.

The last element of the comprehensive school guidance program includes the resources needed to operate the program. These resources include the personnel required to operate the program and the financial support needed to support them as well as purchase necessary materials. Finally a very important resource is political support including policies to guide the operation of the program.

When you put all three of these elements together, we have a comprehensive school guidance program. It is a developmental program, as well as one that responds to immediate



concerns, all within a comprehensive organizational framework. To me, the comprehensive school guidance program provides a way to actually implement the whole school approach to guidance. I found, at least in the schools that I have worked in, in the United States, that the typical structure and organization of the school did not often provide for a way to deliver life skills; there was no room. Thus there was a need to restructure the school through the use of the comprehensive school guidance program to accommodate the delivery of life skills as well as the other activities and services of the overall comprehensive school guidance program.

The comprehensive school guidance program provides a way to bring professionals in schools together with a common purpose; the common purpose being to implement the whole school approach to guidance to help students grow and develop. All of this is done working collaboratively with teachers, parents, administrators, and community members. What evidence do we have that this approach to guidance makes a difference? Here are some research findings from three studies. The first study is from the state of Utah in the United States (Nelson & Gardner, 1998). They have been using the comprehensive school guidance model for the past 12 years in their public schools. In the late 1990's a team of evaluators compared schools that were more fully implementing a comprehensive school guidance program with schools that were less fully implementing the program. Students in high implementing schools rated their overall educational preparation as more adequate. They also rated their job preparation as better. They took more advanced math and science courses. Fewer students described their program as "general". They took more vocational technical courses and they had higher scores on the ACT college admissions test. Initial data from the state of Utah indicates that when a comprehensive guidance program is in place, students do better. If you think about that for a moment, that makes sense. When students know more about themselves, they have goals and direction, they tend to do better in school.

In the state of Missouri we analyzed data from almost 23,000 students in 236 high schools across the state. (Lapan, Gysbers, & Sun, 1997). Schools with more fully implemented guidance programs had students who reported having earned higher grades, that their education was better preparing them for their future, and that more information was available. One of the more interesting findings was that the schools had a more positive climate. To us this was a very important finding, because we believe that when schools have a positive climate, students will feel more comfortable and will be ready to learn.

A similar study was completed in the middle schools of Missouri. (Lapan, Gysbers, & Petroski, 2001). We examined data from 184 middle schools across the state focusing on almost 23,000 7<sup>th</sup> graders. When middle school classroom teachers, some 4,800 of them, in these 184 middle schools, rated their guidance programs as more fully implemented, 7<sup>th</sup> graders said they earned higher grades and that school was more relevant for them. And they stated they had more positive relationship with teachers. And finally they said they were more satisfied with their education and that they felt safer in school. So, does a comprehensive school guidance program make a difference? We believe the answer is yes, the program does make a difference in the lives of our students.

Now the question is, what is required of us to make this happen? I believe it begins with a belief in the whole-person development of all students. The word “all” is a critical word. It isn’t just some students, it’s every student. Then it requires the effective and supportive leadership of the administration. Also, if it is indeed a whole school approach it must involve everybody. It’s not just one professional in the school. Everyone has to become involved. The word I use to describe this is collaboration where all of us are co-laboring together.

What does collaboration require? First of all, no one is excused. Everybody must be involved.

Second, collaboration is messy, frustrating, but indispensable. Sometimes it's easier to do something by yourself rather than collaborating with somebody else. However, if we are to carry out the whole school approach to guidance, it means that we must all collaborate. Yes, collaboration is messy, it is frustrating, but it is indispensable. Then third, the collaboration agenda gets tougher. That means, as we go through the process of fulfilling the dream of the whole school approach to guidance, it's not easy. If we want something that is easy we would do something else. But if we want to accomplish something that's important, we all appreciate that we must work together. And then finally the fourth and last point, and I want to emphasize this one very strongly: it is never over. We must understand that collaboration is never never over. We're always involved in this process, as messy, as frustrating as it may be.

In conclusion let me close by reminding you that the work we are doing helps meet the needs of our young people. That's why I believe all of you are here today; that's why I believe you are involved in the important work that you are doing and I commend you for that. I particularly commend you for taking a Saturday morning to attend this symposium. I've been searching for the definition of the word professionalism and I think I've found it here today. It is embodied in you, coming here on a Saturday morning to devote yourself to this topic. You came here not because it's good for you, but because it's good for the young people and the parents that you serve. So ladies and gentlemen, I commend you for the important work that you're doing because you are fulfilling a most critical mission of education.

Thank you very much.

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