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**Exploring Hong Kong Chinese guidance teachers' positive beliefs:**

**A focus group study**

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# **Exploring Hong Kong Chinese guidance teachers' positive beliefs:**

## **A focus group study**

### **Abstract**

The author reports the findings on the positive beliefs of guidance teachers for school guidance. Five focus groups, involving 24 secondary school guidance teachers in Hong Kong, were conducted. Five categories on positive beliefs emerged from the data: *Care and concern for students*, *Guidance for educating the whole person*, *Students' individual needs for growth*, *Growth and change through the helping process*, and *Demand for guidance and counselling training*. The implications of the findings were discussed from the perspective of implementing a whole school approach through the comprehensive school guidance programme.

Key words: Guidance, Counselling, Guidance Teacher, Teacher Beliefs, Focus Group, Comprehensive School Guidance Programme.

## **Exploring Hong Kong Chinese guidance teachers' positive beliefs:**

### **A focus group study**

During the past decade, school counselling and guidance has been reported as a part of the daily duties of teachers in many countries (e.g. New Zealand (Arnott, 1994), Germany (Fess, 1998), the United States (Galassi & Gullledge, 1997), Scotland (Howieson & Semple, 2000), Israel (Katz, 1998), Australia (Martin, 1994), England (McGuinness, 1989), Denmark (Reinsholm, Kryger, Moos, & Reisby, 1994), and Singapore (Salim & Chua, 1994)). Most teacher educators would acknowledge the idea that knowledge and skills, in and of itself, is insufficient for the preparation of teachers in their caring role. In preparing teachers for their guidance role, it has long been assumed that the best practice is to foster the development of appropriate caring attitudes (Lang, 1995a; Patterson & Purkey, 1993). Recent research on quality teachers has revealed that across different cultures one of the key characteristics of quality teachers is their love of children (Hopkins & Stern, 1996).

In Hong Kong secondary schools, the *guidance teacher* model has been around since 1986 and has become widely established. The guidance teachers, who are full-time teachers, are given the duties of managing and developing the general guidance programme and providing guidance and counselling to students in school. With guidance on top of their teaching duties, the guidance teachers, along with the

school social worker and the school principal or the vice-principal, form a guidance team. The guidance teachers play crucial roles in delivering a comprehensive school-wide guidance programme and act as change agents for promoting a caring environment in schools (Hong Kong Education Department, 1995; Hui, 1994). Apart from this, *all* teachers are to be involved to some extent in guidance work. The regular class-teachers' duties often include supporting individual students, conducting classroom guidance activities, and collaborating in school-wide guidance activities. This *whole school approach* and shared responsibility for guidance aim to create a nurturing and supportive environment for all students (Hong Kong Education Commission, 1990; Hui, 1994). In addition, guidance personnel, such as school social workers and school psychologists, provide specific support services to students with learning, emotional, and behavioral difficulties, and provide consultation to teachers and parents (Working Group on Review of School Social Work Service, 1998). Table 1 summarizes the key features of school counselling and guidance in Hong Kong secondary schools. Although guidance is regarded as an essential part of a teacher's role, many teachers do not appear to have had any training in guidance during their teacher-education programmes. In Hong Kong, to compensate for this inadequacy in guidance training, short courses and seminars are run for guidance teachers by the Education Department (Hong Kong Education Department, 2000). The tertiary

institutes also run four one-year part-time certificate programmes for secondary school guidance teachers. About 58% of the guidance team leaders and 20% of the guidance team members have been trained at certificate level (Luk Fong & Lung, 1999). Research studies found that guidance teachers tended to experience more stress than non-guidance teachers, but they were less burnt out. They reported a greater sense of accomplishment in their job (Chan & Hui, 1995; Hui & Chan, 1996; Watkins, 2001).

**INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE**

Table 1

*School Counselling and Guidance in Hong Kong Secondary Schools*

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- \* **The term *school guidance*** is used to describe the structure and activities that support students' personal and social development.
  - \* **All teachers** are to be involved in guidance work. This is called a whole school approach. Class-teachers are required to perform guidance and discipline roles. The class-teachers' duties include supporting individual students, conducting classroom guidance activities, and collaborating in school-wide guidance activities.
  - \* **Guidance teachers** are full-time teachers who are given the additional duties of managing and developing the general guidance programme and providing guidance and counselling to students in school.
  - \* Guidance teachers have the opportunities to receive a one-year **part-time certificate training in counselling and guidance**. Teachers may receive some basic training in counselling and guidance in their pre-service or in-service teacher training programmes.
  - \* **Full-time school social workers** provide school-based support services to students with learning, emotional, and behavioral difficulties, and consultation to teachers and parents. Some school psychologists may serve a group of secondary schools through regular visits.
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Teachers' beliefs are known to influence their practices (Agnes, Greenwood & Miller, 1994). There appears to be little evidence in previous studies which have sought to explore the teachers' perspectives on *their practices* in guidance work, although a growing number of studies have focused on teachers' beliefs in counselling and guidance (e.g. Gibson, 1990; Hui, 1998a, 1998b; McPhee, 1985). Hui (1999) interviewed 19 teachers from two Hong Kong secondary schools to explore their views on effective school guidance services. The teachers perceived that all-teacher involvement, teachers' care, good teacher-student relationships, and systematic management were important elements of effective practice. In a survey study, Hui (1998a) reported that teachers favoured developmental guidance over remedial guidance work. Teacher care was considered as the most important aspect of the guidance programme. Teachers also tended to consider the goals of school guidance as helping students' personal growth and teaching values. However, these studies do not focus specifically on positive beliefs conducive to effective practices in guidance work.

Although lifelong learning and education for life have been a central theme of the recent education reform proposals (Hong Kong Education Commission, 2000), teachers in Hong Kong tend to work under the constraint of large class size, diversity in the classroom, inadequate training and professional support, and high expectations on students' academic performance in public examinations (Rao & Yuen, 2001; Yuen &



Westwood, 2001). If a whole school approach to guidance is to be successful, one of the most important conditions is that teachers have to hold positive attitudes towards guidance (Hong Kong Education Department, 2001). The present study extends existing knowledge on teacher beliefs about guidance by focusing on the guidance teachers' positive beliefs in school guidance. This article, which describes a component of a larger research project, reports some of the findings of a focus group study on positive beliefs and effective practices among secondary school guidance teachers in Hong Kong. Other aspects of the findings of the research project, including issues on effective practices, teachers' involvement, training needs, time allocation, and programme structures, were reported elsewhere (Yuen, Lam, & Shek, 1999; 2001).

The focus of this article is on the following research question: what are the positive beliefs about school counselling and guidance among the secondary school guidance teachers? In the context of the present exploratory study, *positive beliefs* is defined as the ideals and philosophical assumptions that are conducive to school counselling and guidance. The focus of the present study emerged as the author listened to guidance teachers talking about their practices, and observed that teachers' beliefs made differences in the ways in which they worked with students. These beliefs shape their practices and the orientation of the school-based guidance programme that they developed and managed. Theoretically, the identification of these positive beliefs

contributes to the literature of teacher beliefs, in particular, philosophical assumptions towards school guidance and counselling in Chinese learning communities (Hui, 2000b; Watkins, 2001). In the context of the current education reforms and implementation of a whole school approach through the comprehensive guidance programmes in schools (Gysbers, 2000; Watkins, 2001), practical implications can be drawn from the findings so as to improve school counselling and guidance in Hong Kong and other parts of the world.

### Method

The study involved 24 Hong Kong secondary guidance teachers in five focus groups. These guidance teachers came from schools from different parts of the territory with student intakes of different levels of academic aptitudes. All participants were guidance teachers with at least three years of guidance practice experience and had completed at least a one-year part-time certificate course in student guidance and counselling. They were nominated to take part in the focus group by their former counselling supervisors or their colleagues as *effective guidance teachers*. The researcher and an experienced guidance teacher co-modulated the focus groups following the procedures as outlined by Morgan (1988). The participants were asked to describe examples of effective practices in counselling and guidance from their

experience as a guidance teacher and their beliefs in relation to the practices. A research assistant helped to tape, take notes and transcribe the tapes into Chinese. The data were analysed following the procedures of data reduction, data display, interpretation and drawing conclusions (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Preliminary coding labels were used to code transcripts of focus groups. The researcher and co-modulator read the transcripts several times and discussed the categories that emerged from the data. Each meaningful unit in the transcript was underlined and labelled with a category. Categories were then written out and classified. In addition, an experienced school guidance inspector was invited to act as an independent reviewer and review the categories that the researcher developed. Comparing the independent reviewer's and the researcher's categories and sub-categories of all the protocols, the inter-rater reliability of the categories and sub-categories was .93. Adjustments in the labelling and grouping of categories and sub-categories were made after thorough discussion between the independent reviewer and the researcher.

## Results

Nearly all the guidance teachers that we interviewed had positive beliefs in school counselling and guidance. Out of the 747 responses on positive beliefs and various effective guidance practices, 62 responses of the participants (8.30%) were related to

positive beliefs in guidance and counselling. Five major categories involving positive beliefs in guidance and counselling emerged from the data, namely: *Care and concern for students*, *Guidance for educating the whole person*, *Students' individual needs for growth*, *Growth and change through the helping process*, and *Demand for guidance and counselling training*. These are described below.

#### *Care and Concern for Students*

The guidance teachers believed that care and concern for students are natural elements in a student-teacher relationship. One participant commented, "Concern and care are spontaneous, not intentional. Spontaneity helps build relationships." Another participant pointed out, "I believe that to build harmonious relations with students we need to respect their feelings and be very much concerned about them. The Chinese consider this concern and love." The guidance teachers valued their relationships with their students and attended to the individual feelings of students.

#### *Guidance for Educating the Whole Person*

The guidance teachers believed in guiding student development in affective aspects and proper values; something beyond mere intellectual and academic education. One guidance teacher commented, "I think that the most important thing is an overall improvement at school, or a change in education. We believe that not only intellectual education, but also affective education and other aspects of development, are

indispensable.” Another guidance teacher commented, “Education itself is to guide students to grow.” In addition, the guidance teachers believed that education in values is as important as academic development. A verbatim quote from a participant was that

Some bad students think that as I am a guidance teacher, I might not be so strict and serious. But I consider it very important to abide by school rules; one could not be lax about that. For me, honesty is the most important thing. I don't like students cheating. Zero marks in examinations? It doesn't matter. What matters are values. I have strong values.

While emphasizing the importance of affective education, the guidance teachers were critical of the teacher training programme. They revealed a lack of confidence in handling values and teaching values because of inadequate training in teacher education. One guidance teacher said, “However, I think that our training or the common teacher training course stop short of these things. We not only pass on knowledge but teach people how to be human beings.”

#### *Students' Individual Needs for Growth*

The guidance teachers generally believed that guidance aims to meet students' individual needs. One participant commented, “Teaching is not about our own needs, but meeting students' needs.” Students' needs are considered to be a top priority compared with teachers' needs. Another guidance teacher pointed out, “As there are

limitations of time, place, and manpower, when changes come, I need to flexibly manage the needs of every single child.” The needs of an individual child could only be met when guidance teachers responded flexibly in terms of time, place, and services.

#### *Growth and Change through the Helping Process*

The guidance teachers believed that people can grow through the counselling and guidance process, as a result of which problem situations can be changed and improved. One guidance teacher commented, “I believe people can change through the process of counselling.” They believed that change can occur in individuals, groups, and the whole school organization. Another guidance teacher remarked, “I believe that both the clients and the group change as a result of counselling.” In addition, the guidance teachers pointed out that it is a common goal for every teacher to help students grow and manage their problems. One guidance teacher commented, “All the teachers, whether they are guidance or discipline teachers, must have an objective: use effective and appropriate ways of dealing with individual situations, so that problems may be improved.”

#### *Demand for Guidance and Counselling Training*

The guidance teachers believed that guidance and counselling training is essential for every teacher and administrator. They demanded further professional training for performing and coordinating guidance and counselling in school. A verbatim quote

from a participant was that: “I think that we hardly play our roles well and therefore only training can help us understand the directions.... There is a need for further training in counselling skills.” In addition, the guidance teachers wanted their school principals to receive some training in counselling and guidance. One guidance teacher commented, “I think school principals and all teachers should receive appropriate [guidance and counselling] training.” In their opinion, guidance training should be incorporated into all teacher training programmes. Another guidance teacher commented, “I believe that guidance is something that every teacher does. It is the basic requirement of a teacher.” Generally speaking, the teacher’s role in counselling and guidance was well received by the guidance teachers. They thought that every teacher in one way or another is a guidance teacher.

## Discussion

How do these findings compare with the principles in official guidance guidelines? How do these guidance teachers’ positive beliefs compare with findings about teachers’ beliefs in guidance and counselling in Hong Kong? It is interesting to note that guidance teachers’ positive beliefs in school counselling and guidance are very close to the assumptions and principles set out in the Hong Kong Education Department’s guidelines on guidance work (1993, 1995, 2001). For example, all teachers and

administrators are supposed to be involved in guidance work: “In a school with a positive and caring atmosphere, all teachers contribute to helping students develop into whole persons. Functional teams are well coordinated to work towards a school mission” (Hong Kong Education Department, 1995, p. 4). Moreover, the focus of an effective comprehensive guidance programme is the whole person growth of all students. The Education Department Guidelines stated, “we recognize that the ultimate goal of provision of guidance service in schools is not merely remedial or correctional but to create an inviting and caring school environment for the development of all students as whole persons” (Hong Kong Education Department, 1995, p. 2). Compared with the findings on teacher perceptions of guidance in Hong Kong secondary schools, the present findings are consistent in their agreement in developmental guidance, teacher participation in student guidance, and the helpfulness of individual guidance (Hui, 1998a; Hui, 1998b). The findings show that the philosophical assumptions and principles in guidance work are not just guidelines stated on official policy papers but beliefs shared by the practitioners. This is important as in the literature of teacher education and counselling, researchers have found that positive beliefs are closely associated with effective training (Proctor & Niemeyer, 2001), less negative and more positive emotion (Hafer & Correy, 1999), and influence professionals’ effectiveness (Agnes et al., 1994).



### *Teacher Care in the Chinese Context*

Another significant contribution of identifying the convictions in school counselling and guidance is the clarification of the concept of caring in the Hong Kong Chinese school context. The guidance teachers considered caring a spontaneous element in teacher-student relationships. Teachers respect and attend to the whole person development of individual students. This may be a result of the deep-rooted Confucian beliefs about adult-child relationships and teachers' role in children's socialization. For example, *The Three Character Classic* says, "to feed the body, not the mind – fathers, on you the blame! Instruction without severity, the idle teacher's shame" (Pang, 1999, p. 20). Confucian beliefs also assume that every student is teachable. For example, Mencius pointed out that human nature is good (Lee, 1996). Every human is born with a sense of compassion – the source of humanity; a sense of shame – the source of righteousness; a sense of respect – the source of propriety; and a sense of right and wrong – the source of wisdom (Lee, 1996; Mencius, 1970). Teachers have the responsibility to develop students' potential for personal growth and learning. The present data suggest that though Hong Kong is a Westernized Chinese society, the conceptions of teachers' caring role is still very much influenced by Confucian beliefs.

Scrutinizing counselling literature in other Chinese communities revealed evidence that teachers were expected to perform the tasks of counselling and guidance.

For instance, regular class-teachers and teacher-counsellors in Taiwan were responsible for student guidance. The demand for counselling training for teachers and teacher-counsellors was found to be on the rise (Wu, 1993). In Guangzhou, China, class-teachers conducted class guidance lessons and interviewed individual students with learning and emotional problems (Kwong, 1994). In Shanghai, class-teachers played multifaceted roles including helping and supporting students with personal, emotional, study, and family problems, and training students in life skills (Lo, 2001).

#### *Caring as a Universal Teacher Quality*

In Western countries, teachers are also involved in caring about students and their education. Caring has always been considered a significant aspect of a teacher's work (Best, Jarvis, & Ribbins, 1977; Best, Ribbins, Jarvis, & Oddy, 1983; Fletcher-Campbell, 1995; Lang, 1995b; Noblit, Rogers, & McCadden, 1995; Noddings, 1992). Even in countries such as the United States with full-time professional counsellors responsible for delivering the guidance programmes in schools, class-teachers still have important roles to play in guidance work (Gibson & Mitchell, 1999; Gysbers & Henderson, 2000). Gibson and Mitchell (1999) described a three-level model of school counselling and guidance. The second and third levels involve professional school counsellors and counselling psychologists. The first level is described as follows: "Persons with appropriate experience or training and the skills to communicate can function at the

advice-giving level. In the school setting, for example, all teachers and most staff would qualify as advisors for many occasions and should in this important role in the school's program of pupil guidance" (p.47). Class-teachers assume the roles of listener-adviser, referral and receiving agent, discoverer of human potential, career educator, human relations facilitator, and counselling programme supporter. The findings in this study, along with the studies in the West, suggest that caring is a universal feature common to quality teachers in different cultures (Hopkins & Stern, 1996).

#### Limitations

Limitations of the present group study include: (a) possible over-generalizations based on the guidance teachers' comments, and (b) possible sources of researcher bias (Fern, 2001; Ruef, Turnbull, Turnbull, & Poston, 1999). The purpose of the focus group study was not to make general statements about school counselling and guidance. Rather, it was to give the guidance teachers an opportunity to share experiences and voice their views in an attempt to better understand their convictions behind their effective practice. Participants were carefully selected from those who met the criteria of being nominated as effective guidance teachers from different sources of experienced counsellor educators and guidance teachers. The researcher conducted five focus groups with 24 guidance teachers, in which important categories emerged and

re-emerged. However, it is still possible that some important categories had not emerged and the relations between categories remained obscure. In addition, as the informants in the focus groups were all nominated effective guidance teachers, their views might not represent those who have little training in counselling and guidance. Precautions were taken to minimize researcher bias by the involvement of a co-moderator in the focus group and an experienced guidance inspector as independent reviewer in data analysis. However, researcher bias could still have mediated the identification of categories.

### Conclusion and implications

The present article has reported some of the findings of a limited focus group study undertaken among secondary school guidance teachers in Hong Kong. It has provided some insights on guidance teachers' positive beliefs: Guidance is an ideal condition of care and concern in student-teacher relationship. Its goal is to help students to grow as whole persons; it is about meeting students' individual needs. The underlying philosophical assumptions are that students can grow through the counselling and guidance process; guidance and counselling training is essential for every teacher and administrator.

What are the implications of the present findings to the development of school guidance in Hong Kong and other cultures? In the context of the current debate on

improving school guidance, the present findings provide supporting evidence for implementing a whole school approach to guidance through a comprehensive guidance programme in Hong Kong (Chan, 2000; Gysbers, 2000; Hui, 2000b; Yuen, Lau, & Chan, 2000). The findings in this study not only suggest that positive beliefs are one of the important elements contributing to effective school guidance. These positive beliefs are shared by the Hong Kong Chinese guidance teachers and are compatible to the philosophical assumptions of the comprehensive guidance programme which is a model developed in the U.S. (Gysbers & Henderson, 2000; Gysbers, Lapan, & Jones, 2000). Based on the conceptual framework of the comprehensive guidance programme (Gysbers, 2000), some implications can be drawn for guidance professionals in Hong Kong and other parts of the world.

First, in implementing a whole school approach to guidance through a comprehensive guidance programme, the administrators and guidance personnel should make every effort to infuse these positive beliefs throughout the content, structural, programme, and resources components of the guidance programme (Gysbers, 2000; Gysbers & Henderson, 2000). For the content element of the programme, life skills competencies should be balanced with those of personal/social, career, and academic for educating the whole person. For the structural component, care and concern for all students should be emphasized as the fundamental of the

comprehensive guidance programme. For the programme components, the guidance curriculum offers opportunities for all students to experience growth and change enhancement through classroom and school-wide activities. Individual needs of students are met through individual guidance and planning. Student problems are solved through consultation, personal counselling and referral. For resources, more guidance and counselling training opportunities should be provided to teachers, guidance personnel and administrators. On policy level, the Government Education Department and the school administrators can make specific policies that balance academic, personal and social development in their educational goals. Caring for students should be integrated into the role of every teacher. Counselling and guidance should be an integrated part of the school programme (Gysbers, 2000).

. Second, counsellor educators and teacher educators should make greater efforts to provide opportunities for guidance and teacher trainees to reflect upon their own beliefs in guidance and education. Supporting teachers in their guidance work, counselling and guidance professionals should also be more sensitive to teachers' beliefs towards school guidance. Counsellors can conduct workshops for teachers to reflect on their convictions in guidance and education. Given proper training and support, teachers can incorporate personal and social development objectives into their teaching lessons and their subject's curriculum. Teachers can be involved in the development and

implementation of personal and social education/life skills curriculum in schools (Chan, 2000; Hui, 2000a, 2000b; Sultana, 1992). Thus, guidance professionals and teachers can be collaborative partners.

Third, the present study demonstrates the possible usefulness of the focus group methodology in investigating perceptions of elements of effective school counselling and guidance (Fern, 2001). Researchers should continue to explore the beliefs of various partners (e.g. administrators, teachers, parents, and students) who are involved in the school counselling and guidance programme.

The present study is an important step towards better clarifying the meanings of *positive beliefs about school counselling and guidance*. In future research, it would be interesting to compare teachers' beliefs in school guidance across different cultures, and to explore how beliefs change with changing practices. Another research direction is to develop assessment instrument of positive beliefs, and to examine relationships among positive beliefs, level of training, and level of involvement in school counselling and guidance.

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