Brief Intervention for School Problems:
A Practical Approach for Hong Kong Teachers

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In the search for time-sensitive, brief and effective interventions for school problems, a practical approach is suggested for Hong Kong teachers. This approach endorses the competency orientation of the humanistic tradition, offers the advantages of systems thinking, and provides a theory of change with cognitive-behavioral and solution-focused strategies of intervention that is complementary with the constraints and needs of the school environment. Specifically, based on these assumptions, three general intervention guidelines are suggested and illustrated with corresponding case examples, demonstrating successful applications of this practical approach for brief interventions in the school setting. Implications for the use of this practical approach are discussed in the context of the whole school approach to guidance in Hong Kong schools and the movement toward a constructivist perspective in school guidance and counseling.

Beginning teachers in Hong Kong frequently comment that there is erosion of the original excitement and a loss of the sense of possibility that they have when they first decide to pursue a teaching career. More experienced teachers, in the same connection, may even become cynical and decide that students are more unmotivated than they initially think, or that parents are not interested in their children's education, or that school personnel are being asked to solve society's problems. These somewhat negative attitudes, though not well documented empirically, are generally

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regarded as relatively prevalent based on anecdotal reports by teachers. Such negative attitudes can be partly attributable to the serious challenges posed by students' behavioral and emotional problems that teachers and school personnel face in today's schools (Chan, 1992).

The serious consequences of these behavioral and emotional problems cannot be overemphasized, as they often detract from learning opportunities, preclude positive peer relationships, and may go beyond classroom difficulties and stem from outside influences. Occasionally, teachers may also have to deal with unexpected events and crisis situations, and make split-second decisions in emergency (Chan, 1993; Schwartz, 1990). Nonetheless, in many cases, teachers need to be prepared to take up the role of helping practitioners or clinicians (Chan, 1992). While they must be careful not to probe too deeply into personal issues of students, they need to offer a supportive position to students requesting help. In addition, very often, teachers not only have to work with students, but also their parents, or other teachers as clients. In recent years, with the introduction of the whole school approach to guidance in Hong Kong schools, teachers are overwhelmed with work in teaching and helping troubled students (Chan & Hui, 1998). Under conditions of time constraints and limited human resources, teachers are constantly seeking a practical, time-sensitive and effective approach to intervention for school problems.

In Search of a Practical Intervention Approach to School Problems

An examination of the approaches in counseling and psychotherapy however reveals that there is a proliferation of systems, each purportedly unique and superior despite the absence of rigorous empirical evidence (see Corsini & Wedding, 1995; Prochaska & Norcross, 1999). Since each system has its respective limitations and contraindications, the immediate concern of teachers will be the choice of an approach that has demonstrated its practical applicability in the school setting, and one that works effectively with a variety of school problems. A cursory review suggests that a number

of approaches have indeed made great impact on the educational scene. Among them are the Person-Centered or Rogerian approach, the Individual Psychology or Adlerian approach, the Rational Emotive Behavior approach, the Reality Therapy approach, and the variety of cognitive-behavioral approaches as well as the behavior modification approach (see Gibson & Mitchell, 1999). The additional concern with contextual factors and multicultural considerations has also led to the emphasis of using a family therapy approach with the ecological or systems perspective. Thus, while teachers as practitioners may base their intervention approach on a specific theory, it is more likely that an eclectic approach integrating what works will be more appealing to teachers.

In recent years, the great concerns for accountability, cost containment, and evidence-based efficacious interventions especially in North America (see Chan, 1997) have also led to the emergence and increased acceptance of different short-term therapies or brief intervention approaches based on the traditional orientations in the practice of psychotherapy for mental health clients (e.g., Basch, 1995; Bloom, 1997). Even though advocates of different orientations may disagree on what "brief" in brief interventions means, most agree that "brief" refers to the time a client spends in treatment, and that brief interventions help client spend less time resolving difficulties than traditional approaches (see Koss & Shiang, 1994).

Despite the claims of wide applicability of nearly all the different brief intervention approaches, there are as yet few systematic attempts to apply any of these approaches to problems in the school setting. Some notable exceptions are the variety of brief approaches that have their origin in systemic therapies, which are designed originally as active, short-term treatments that initiate the change process (e.g., Fisch, Weakland & Segal, 1982; Haley, 1987; Watzlawick, Weakland & Fisch, 1974). Applications of these approaches to the school setting have been encouraging (e.g., Kral, 1992; Metcalf, 1995; Molnar & Lindquist, 1989; Murphy, 1996; Murphy &

Duncan, 1997). While these approaches under the names of strategic, ecosystemic, narrative, and solution-focused approaches have their different emphases, their similarities outweigh their differences, which can largely be attributable to their different languages or ways of talking about the theories and techniques of intervention (Miller, Duncan & Hubble, 1997). Thus, the following is an attempt to organize these approaches based on their common assumptions of the humanistic tradition, their views of problems and their solutions in the systems perspective, and their utilization of cognitive and behavioral strategies in problem resolution. Based on these assumptions, a practical approach with three corresponding intervention guidelines is suggested. It is anticipated that this practical approach with a unifying language may help bring order into the somewhat confusing scene of competing models of intervention in the school setting. In addition, this practical approach may help ensure that teachers as practitioners may practice, and students, parents, and other teachers as clients may benefit from brief and efficacious interventions for school problems.

The Humanistic Tradition

Based on the humanistic tradition, the first assumption of this practical approach is an optimistic competency orientation that clients (students, teachers and parents) have the resources and strengths to resolve school problems (e.g., Horney, 1950; Rogers, 1951, 1961). This view of clients as capable and adaptive, emphasizing a future-oriented focus on possibilities and solutions rather than a past-oriented focus on problems departs radically from the student-deficit diagnostic-remedial perspective prevalent in schools. Viewing problems as a result of ineffective interaction patterns rather than as deficits residing exclusively within the clients allows an accommodative or collaborative position in relation to students, teachers, and parents. This accommodative position adapts the language, content, and style of therapeutic conversations and interventions in response to clients' goals and beliefs and their unique circumstances (Murphy & Duncan, 1997), promoting a broader range of change possibilities and interventions that build on the existing

competencies and resources of clients. Specifically, in working with a client collaboratively, the practitioner views the client as the guide to the client's own world (e.g., Kelly, 1955). The client teaches the practitioner about the client's worldview and beliefs, perceptions of the problem and solution. The practitioner, in order to understand and help the client, enters the client's internal frame of reference. A full understanding of client problems and concerns can thus be attained through a relationship of empathy, respect, and genuineness (Rogers, 1951).

Based on the humanistic assumption, the first intervention guideline for the practitioner is to respect the client's view on what to change and how to make changes. Hence, it is important to establish a therapeutic alliance within which the client should be trusted to be the one who knows best, reflecting that the views of the client (student, teacher, and parent) should be made central to the intervention process. Accordingly, the client's perceptions of alliance, therapeutic goals and tasks of intervention are superior to the practitioner's perceptions. While the practitioner with specific knowledge, theories and skills may suggest a specific view of the problem situation or strategies that may or may not be useful, the client has a lot to say about what to change and how to make changes. Thus, following this guideline, practitioners treat clients as experts on the problem, honor their theories of change, and draw upon their experiences for solutions. In seeking help, clients generally hold a desire to change and a tendency to protect themselves if change threatens their personal dignity. By respecting that clients know best, practitioners permit clients to keep their pride, accept help on tolerable terms, and progress toward improvement. In addition to capitalizing on the contribution of client factors through recognizing and utilizing client competencies and resources, the practitioner also lays the foundation for clients' rightful ownership of desired changes.

The teacher, in the following case example, described how she only began to get genuine responses from a student when she tried to understand

the student's school refusal behavior from the student's perspective, highlighting the importance of the first guideline in brief intervention. This case scenario and all subsequent reported illustrative cases are real. For confidentiality, all background information and names have been altered to protect the actual identity of the clients.

Case Example I: The School Refuser

As Siu-ming's Primary 3 class-teacher, I called his mother again that morning to express my grave concern regarding Siu-ming's school non-attendance that had become frequent in the past week. Siu-ming's mother, as she did the last time I called her, started complaining about Siu-ming's aggressive behavior toward his young kindergarten brother. Apparently, the two brothers did not get along with each other even on trivial matters, and they inevitably got into fights that ended with the younger brother crying to seek help from his mother and the older brother suffering from bitten marks all over his body. Mother's frequent admonitions that an older brother should always help and protect a younger brother was not helpful, but appeared to aggravate the conflicts. Siu-ming had often been accused as the one provoking the fight, and judged to be the one deserving punishment. Ironically, Siu-ming often felt unwell following incidents of fights and had to be absent from school.

Upon my request, mother brought in Siu-ming that afternoon. When we met, Siu-ming's mother discounted the importance of Siu-ming's school non-attendance, but wasted no time in enumerating the details of his misbehaviors and the aggressive behaviors he had against his younger brother. Obviously, mother wanted me to take concerted action to punish Siu-ming for his misbehaviors. For some 15 to 20 minutes, I was nearly convinced that Siu-ming acted out his problems and that his school non-attendance might simply reflect his truancy. Throughout my conversation with Siu-ming's mother, Siu-ming looked on angrily without emitting any words, occasionally bending down his head to avoid direct eye contact with me when I glanced to check his reactions to his mother's accusations.

Suddenly, I felt I need to speak alone with Siu-ming, and I said so to his mother. When we were alone, I asked how he would respond to his mother's accusations. Siu-ming remained silent. Finally, I broke the silence, gathering that he might feel that I sided with his mother. I ventured to say that I did not see a misbehaving child, I saw instead an unhappy child full of anger and frustration. At this point, Siu-ming burst into tears. I then seized the opportunity to make the point that it was difficult for him to bear this all by himself, and that he might choose to share his story with me in case I might be of help to him. The story that he told about his fear that his mother only loved his brother but no longer loved him was revealing. He began to paint a picture of school refusal rather than one of truancy.

The Systems Perspective

The second assumption of this practical approach is based on the systemic, cybernetic and ecological notion of homeostasis and feedback that a small change in any aspect of the problem situation can initiate a solution (see Von Bertalanffy, 1968; Wiener, 1962). Thus, any changes in the perceptions or actions of anyone associated with the problem may help to resolve it. Based on this assumption, teacher-practitioners who typically do not have sufficient time to carry out extended interventions may choose to work on a specific aspect of the problem situation, and to work with a given member of the client system (student, parent, and teacher) at any given time, trusting that small changes in one area of the problem situation may amplify and generalize into larger and more lasting changes in other aspects of the problem situation.

Based on the systems perspective, this practical approach establishes the second intervention guideline, borrowing heavily from the strategic and the solution-focused approaches. To put it in simple language, the second guideline has two parts: If a solution works, do more of it; if it works a little, build on it. The first part is the emphasis of capitalization on success by applying more of the same. The second part alerts practitioners to listen for

and validate changes, no matter how small or unusual, whenever and for whatever reason they initially occur (Miller, Duncan & Hubble, 1997). For this reason, the practitioner should be careful in not overlooking changes that occur alongside the stable pattern of problematic behaviors. This second guideline can be understood as the utilization of "exceptions" to the problem as suggested by solution-focused practitioners, or of "unique experiences" as suggested by narrative practitioners. Here "unique experiences" or "exceptions" refer to circumstances in which the stated problem does not occur or occur less often or intensely, or that are different in other ways from problem circumstances. This strategy of utilizing exception has evolved largely from the solution-focused model of de Shazer and colleagues (Berg & Miller, 1992; de Shazer, 1985, 1991). Conceptually, it is simple and pragmatic to find something that works, and encourage the client to do more of it so that past success can be encouraged to continue.

Related to this second guideline is the assumption suggested by strategic and solution-focused practitioners that it is often more productive to increase existing successes, no matter how small, than it is to eliminate problems. A student who disrupts class constantly, or never does any schoolwork has probably behaved appropriately in class at one time or another, and has completed some assignments. The goal in intervention is therefore to help the client discover the exception, increase existing successes, no matter how small, and to "do more of it." The client's perception of what has worked, or might work, toward his or her goal is a vital consideration in suggesting interventions and ideas that are meaningful and acceptable to the client.

In the following case example, the teacher described how he attempted to build on the past success of a student to reverse her underachievement.

Case Example II: The Underachiever

Pam, a Secondary 2 student in my class, was new to the school. She was transferred from a prestigious school known for its somewhat accelerated

curricula. Prior to her transfer, she had been referred to an educational psychologist for assessment because she was said to be underachieving. After reviewing her record, the educational psychologist noted that she functioned solidly within the average range on normed group tests but was performing at a level considerably lower than her peers at the prestigious school did. A recommendation of transfer was then made to her parents, which led to her transfer to this school.

Upon entering this school, Pam's parents were worried because she continued to show a lack of investment in her studies. In my interview with her, Pam stated that she wanted to do well and had done so for several weeks in the beginning, but was falling a bit behind currently. For half an hour, I attempted to get Pam to specify clearly her problem and reasons for her lack of motivation. Suddenly, I realized I was not getting anywhere. I began to shift the focus of her underachievement to her competencies, resources, and exceptions, and explored what it would take from her and others to help her repeat that success. At this juncture, Pam recalled her satisfaction with her parents' special reward. With further guidance, Pam was able to start formulating plans to gain new special awards from her parents.

The Change Process and Cognitive-Behavioral Strategies

The third assumption of this practical approach is that changes are possible and that persistent problems are often maintained by efforts intended to alleviate them (Fisch et al., 1982; Watzlawick et al., 1974). It is not uncommon in school and at home that well-intentioned efforts by teachers and parents to correct a problem actually make matters worse. Consider the case of a student who has difficulties in school performance. Her parents grounded her from the phone and watched over her study habits. When her grades have not improved, they grounded her from the TV, and eventually it was total house arrest. Doing more of the same did not influence her grades, and these difficulties got worse and developed into a problem of running

away from home. Thus, difficulties may turn into problems when they are not handled well or more of the same ineffective solutions are applied even if the difficulties are not resolved. In this connection, attempted solutions might contribute most to the problem's persistence and escalation, and might become an integral part of the problem cycle (e.g., Fisch et al., 1982).

Based on the third assumption, the third intervention guideline of this practical approach states that changes can be initiated and maintained by utilizing cognitive and behavioral strategies. In essence, borrowing from the strategic and the solution-focused terminology, if the attempted solution does not work, try something different. Specifically, the third guideline of trying something different includes two general classes of change strategies: doing something different, and viewing something different (Cade & O'Hanlon, 1993). In any given problem situation, there are many possible interventions (doing and viewing something different) that could result in improvement. Behavior therapists and cognitive therapists have contributed much in suggesting different strategies for a variety of problems (e.g., Cormier & Cormier, 1997; Hughes, 1988; Martin & Pear, 1999). For brief interventions, strategic and solution-oriented therapists have also contributed much to the literature (e.g., De Shazer, 1985, 1991; Duncan, Solovey & Rusk, 1992; Haley, 1987; Madanes, 1981; Miller & Berg, 1994; O'Hanlon & Weiner-Davis, 1989; Selvini-Palazzoli, Boscolo, Cecehin & Prata, 1978; Watzlawick et al., 1974).

In practice, "doing something different" takes many forms, including tasks, rituals, prescriptions, direct suggestions, and homework assignments, encouraging clients to alter their usual performance of the problem or their response to the problem. These interventions are action-oriented, interrupt the problem cycle, and validate the client's theory of change. In developing and selecting any of these interventions, the practitioner should carefully consider the resources of the clients, and ensure that the intervention directly addresses the client's goals and is what they want. Intervention is then

designed to interrupt unsuccessful solution attempts, enabling the opportunity for new directions and perspectives.

"Viewing something different" provides an alternative view of the problem that validates the client's experience and expands solution opportunities. Viewing something different is based on the constructivist perspective that there are multiple views or realities that accurately describe the "facts" of any given situation, and attempted solutions are often generated from the chosen particular way the problem is viewed (see Neimeyer, 1995). Offering different views of the problem is referred to as reframing (e.g., Haley, 1963). Reframing a problem may take the form of simple relabeling (depression as realistic pessimism), positive connotation (student misbehavior as creative ways of meeting needs), and redefining (adolescent rebellion as necessary steps toward individuation). For example, the complaint of a student who is angry all the time may be reframed as a child bothered by anger at times. This externalizing of the problem may help stop the complainant (teacher or parent) from seeing the student as the problem (see Freedman & Combs, 1996). The practitioner may ask both the complainant and the student to notice when anger does not bother the student as much, encouraging the complainant to perceive the student differently, and the student to become more aware of anger so that he or she can take on a new behavior. Since the focus is not in the pursuit of "correct" views of the problem, but in offering alternative views, the practitioner selects and offer views from any theory that fits and validates the client's problem experience. The alternative view facilitates exploration of the problem and expands its context to include possible solutions. The viewpoint expressed by the client is neither discounted nor challenged, but rather validated and then expanded to include the possibility of a more helpful connotation.

As "trying something different" is related to the notion that there is no one right way to do or view things, it follows that there is no single concept of "mental health" or "adjustment." The practitioner needs to work

collaboratively with the client to develop a creative solution useful for the client rather than to fit the client into a preconceived notion of what is right for the client, or a pathological disorder category of a diagnostic system. In the following case example, the teacher described how she reframed provocative labeling to prevent aggressive behaviors from a "conduct disordered" student, and how she has managed to help the student to respond differently to teasing.

Case Example III: The "Fat Boy"

Although Greg was not in my class, I knew Greg because he was well known among teachers and students in school. He was well known for his obesity and his temper tantrums, which frightened teachers and students, because at the age of 13, he was physically capable of hurting others. While he did reasonably well in school, he could be argumentative in class, and could easily get angry on the slightest provocation by other students. His peers sometimes provoked him on purpose by calling him "fat boy." In the previous week, his classmates teased him and called him "fat boy," and his math teacher with whom he befriended also jokingly addressed him as "fat boy," following the other students. In a sudden rage, he could not control himself and assaulted his teacher. While his teacher did not suffer any injuries and did not want to report it to the police, the principal was about to suspend him from school, but would like me to talk to him first to see what could be done to help in his anger management.

Last week, I patiently heard him tell his story, exploring what it meant to him to be called "fat boy." I was particularly careful in exploring what the term meant to him, for he was born overseas with parents as first generation immigrants, and the whole family migrated back to Hong Kong only recently. While I agreed with him that the term could be used pejoratively, I challenged him to consider that the Chinese people also called each other names when they were on intimate terms. Although he was half convinced, he agreed to experiment with a different response of smiling when he was addressed as "fat boy."

This week, I heard from colleagues that his temper tantrums had reduced as he was less frequently teased. And when he was teased, his different response of smiling often disarmed those who teased him. He told me that when he was called "fat boy," he would recall my interpretation that the person might have a positive motive of befriending him, and he was proud of himself in being able to appreciate the subtlety of the Chinese culture.

The Practical Approach in the Hong Kong Setting

With the introduction of the notion of a whole school approach to guidance, Hong Kong teachers have increasingly accepted their changing roles in the education of students through both teaching and guidance activities. Consequently, teachers are gradually moving from the conception of a purely diagnostic-remedial model of school guidance and counseling in dealing with school problems by specialists (e.g., school social workers) to one that emphasizes brief interventions with preventive, psychoeducational, and developmental considerations by all teachers. Yet, as anecdotal evidence has indicated, teachers as frontline workers, and school social workers as specialists in the Hong Kong school system, have been overwhelmed with diverse school problems that include nonattendance, truancy, school refusal, academic underachievement, classroom misbehaviors, aggressive behaviors, bullying, depression, suicide, and other emotional problems. Teachers in general, and novice teachers in particular, with little training in intervention approaches, will be at a loss when confronted with these problems. This practical brief intervention approach will precisely meet the needs of these teachers, drawing on the common therapeutic factors shared by different orientations. Thus, proceeding from a positive and nonpathological view of human problems, this practical approach outlines a practitioner-client collaborative framework for teachers in their conceptualization and resolution of a variety of problems in the school settings. This approach is in line with humanistic education and offers the advantages of systems thinking as well as providing a theory of change and associated cognitive-behavioral strategies, which are complementary with the constraints and needs of the school environment.

Ideally, this suggested approach should serve to integrate the diverse approaches theoretically and technically. However, with very different philosophical foundations and theoretical assumptions of the different approaches, theoretical integration remains a Herculean and elusive task yet to be accomplished. What the present practical approach aims to achieve is to provide a set of useful intervention guidelines that are coherent and internally consistent to Hong Kong teachers, who are minimally trained in intervention, and who despite different persuasions in their training might benefit from incorporating these guidelines in their practice. Nonetheless, the use of this practical approach emphasizing intervention guidelines that focus on clients' personal meanings and self-empowerment might serve to facilitate the movement of school guidance and counseling toward a constructivist perspective in the postmodern era of the new millennium (Forster, 1997).

Finally, questions may be raised as to the outcome effectiveness of this practical approach in the Hong Kong setting. While there has been a paucity of research on the psychotherapy of Chinese people in Hong Kong (see Chan, 1997), findings from research studies on psychotherapy outcome and processes in non-Chinese setting are revealing. The humanistic notion of client competence, for example, is indirectly supported by psychotherapy outcome research linking successful outcomes to certain common factors (Frank & Frank, 1991; Lambert, 1986, 1992; Orlinsky, Grawe & Parks, 1994). These factors include relationship factors (e.g., empathy, respect, and acceptance of client goals and benefits), and client perceptions of the therapeutic relationship and process (e.g., perception of alliance and collaboration, and accommodation to client goals and tasks of intervention), and client factors (e.g., competencies, resources, unplanned events that help clients resolve problems, and spontaneous remission of problems). Client factors and relationship factors contribute the largest percentage to the change process (40% and 30%, respectively), followed by placebo factors (e.g., expectancy of being helped, the instillation of hope, and the practitioner's

credibility) and model factors (e.g., practitioner's theory and techniques), each accounting for about 15% of the change process. In this connection, this practical approach that utilizes cognitive and behavioral strategies in effecting change in dealing with school problems is consistent with the findings of empirically supported or validated interventions (see Chambless et al., 1996; Chan, 1997). Although this practical approach emphasizes brief intervention procedures and strategies rather than theoretical integration as a treatment modality, its effectiveness for dealing with specific school problems in the Hong Kong setting warrants careful examination in future research.

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從實用取向探討香港教師
處理校內學生問題的簡易介入模式

本文針對香港教師如何處理校內的學生問題提出一個快捷、簡易和有效的實用取向介入模式。此介入模式源自傳統「人本主義」中的能力取向，配合學校環境的限制和需要，著重從「系統思考」、「認知行為」和「尋解導向」實施介入輔導。基於這些假設，本文提出三個一般的介入原則，配合真實的個案作例子，說明如何能夠成功地將有關的介入模式應用在學校的實際環境中。討論部分結合了香港學校現行的校本輔導取向，探討如何從「建構主義」的角度建立有效的學校輔導模式。