



The Australian Journal of **INDIGENOUS EDUCATION**

This article was originally published in printed form. The journal began in 1973 and was titled *The Aboriginal Child at School*. In 1996 the journal was transformed to an internationally peer-reviewed publication and renamed *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*.

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COMMUNITY EDUCATION COUNSELLORS

R. Clark

In every conceivable comparison, the Aborigines and Islanders...stand in stark contrast to the general Australian society, and also to the other 'ethnic' groups...They probably have the highest birthrate, the highest death rate, the worst health and housing, and the lowest educational, occupational, economic, social and legal status of any identifiable section of the Australian population.
(National Population Inquiry, Vol.II, 1975, p.455)

The status of Aborigines described above has been considered to be the result of a cycle of causation whereby poor educational standards lead to low-paying occupations resulting in poor housing, poor health and feelings of helplessness and defeat which lead again to poor educational advancement. More recently it has been recognized that the institutions of the dominant white Australian culture play a very important part in perpetuating this cycle and the education system is no exception (McConnochie, 1973). Thus, if the status of Aborigines is to be improved and the cycle broken, institutional changes must occur.

One attempt at bringing about positive change within the education system is the employment of Aboriginal counsellors to work with school personnel, including guidance officers. While guidance officers are in a unique position to positively influence the personal, educational and vocational development of students, the cross-cultural counselling situation poses many problems for guidance officers. These include the tendency for minority groups not to utilize such specialist services, accepting different world views, appropriateness of techniques and tests and establishment of rapport between counsellor and counsellee (Sue, 1977).

The employment of Aboriginal counsellors was one of the means of facilitating cross-cultural counselling adopted by the Department of Education in 1975 when the first Aboriginal counsellors (designated community education counsellors) were trained to work with a guidance officer in a research project to develop guidance services for Aboriginal families. (See Clark, Clark and Damm, 1980 for a detailed account of this project).

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The premise on which such a strategy is based is that members of a minority group bring unique communication skills to the counselling situation and consequently, minority group students are more likely to identify with and relate to such counsellors and seek their assistance.

Lenise Schloss, formerly a community education counsellor (CEC) at Inala and now training as a secondary teacher, explains it clearly, "*I know what it is like to be black.*"

Because of this common background the CEC's are in a better position to make constructive criticism and have it accepted -
Lenise -

If a white authority figure or professional criticised the student the family would take it as a slight against themselves and the way they had reared their child.

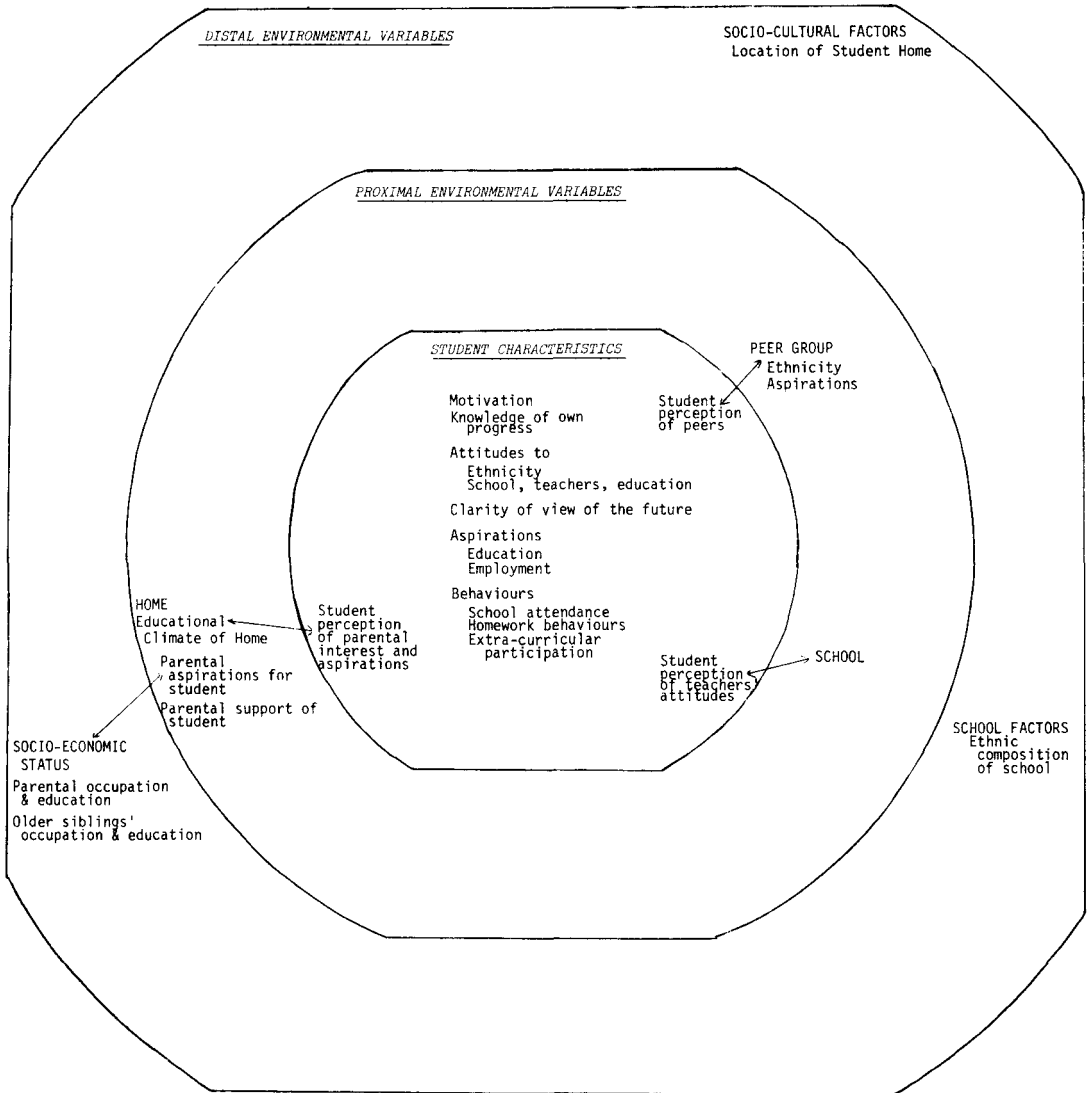
This is not meant to imply that the counsellors automatically have empathy with all Aborigines and Islanders. As with any community there is a wide range of personalities and backgrounds.

The aim underlying the employment of CECs is ultimately an increase in the number of Aboriginal students successfully completing secondary schooling. An awareness of the factors influencing success at school has provided the direction for the work of the counsellors. Figure 1 indicates quite clearly that school success is multiply determined and consequently that working exclusively with the Aboriginal student in the school situation, as usually occurs, is at best a futile exercise, and at worst may damage the self concept of the Aboriginal child.

The role of the CEC has developed since 1975 and while it varies according to the particular needs of individual schools and communities, the role statement below reflects an understanding of the important role of the family and broader community in the education of Aboriginal youth. The counsellor may -

- . provide pastoral care support for Aboriginal and Islander primary and secondary children within the school and community;
- . liaise regularly between school staff, parents and children;
- . assist teachers in interpreting pupil behaviour and in developing relationships with the children;
- . increase parent understanding of the educational process and of their role in the education of children at all levels;

FIGURE 1 - HOME, FAMILY AND STUDENT VARIABLES ASSOCIATED WITH STUDENTS' ACADEMIC SUCCESS



- . encourage and arrange parent visits to school and teacher visits to the community;
- . assist with out-of-school activities such as homework groups and guidance camps;
- . assist with Aboriginal Studies programs within the school for all students and with special programs for Aboriginal and Islander students;
- . refer to and liaise with other agencies where appropriate (e.g. health workers, Commonwealth education officers) in consultation with the principal;
- . assist in the implementation of career education programs involving Aboriginal and Islander students;
- . assist students in the transition from school to school, from school to work and from school to further education;
- . provide a link between the school and Community and the Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Consultative Committee.

The following sections will outline in more detail how counsellors work with students, the school and its staff, parents, and also how they operate in the wider community.

STUDENTS

The emphasis in working with students is on encouraging them to develop greater confidence in themselves as Aborigines and Islanders and to believe that they are in control of their own lives and their future. The neglect of the school system in the past to recognize students ethnic identity has only served to reinforce the feelings of helplessness referred to earlier.

The Aboriginal counsellor is uniquely placed, through an effective pastoral care program, to rekindle belief in and knowledge and understanding about the student's cultural heritage. The importance of this counselling approach is indicated by the research of Buriel and Saenz (1980) who found that higher achieving students were more frequently bi-cultural. Counsellors reflect this sense of identity to their students through the programs they conduct and their own attitudes towards their ethnicity. This is evident in this statement from Patricia Daanen (Townsville), *"It's more than a job to me. I'm helping my own people."*

Val Wright (Mackay) indicated the importance of encouragement with students whose most frequent experience at school is failure, and the knowledge necessary to provide such encouragement:

For one to be able to encourage the Aboriginal/Islander student, one must have the desire to understand cultural difference, to give encouragement effectively and be aware of the values and beliefs of the Aboriginal/Islander community. This can only be achieved by being aware of the total situation, home environment, community attitudes and the students' personal interests.

Working with students extends beyond the confines of the school. Most counsellors are organizing or being involved in camps which bring together Aboriginal and Islander students with similar interests and needs. Such programs enable greater focus on Aboriginal identity than possible within the normal school context.

The counsellors also assist students with tutoring if additional help is required. Such programs are difficult to organize and maintain as Val Alberts (Charters Towers) indicates:

I arranged tutoring for some students. But talk about frustrating! This didn't turn out very successful at all. The time that I spent chasing up kids over the next few weeks to attend their tutoring classes. Although the tutors were most willing at the beginning they soon became frustrated with the students. I realize it is quite important to have a tutoring system operating at the secondary level but I also see a vital need at the primary school. The Aboriginal kids need basic help at the primary school and they never pick it up once they get to high school. One parent took advantage of a tutor to tutor her son at primary school even though she had to pay herself. So it was encouraging for a parent to see the need of tutoring at an early stage.

Vocational aspirations and expectations are important factors in student motivation. For Aboriginal students issues such as high unemployment and employer discrimination can lead to low aspirations or a mismatch between aspirations and expectations with consequent effect on school attendance and performance. The task is not easy for the CEC in this situation as Patricia Daanen indicates:

Mum was shouting at Georgina (age 10 years), "If you don't go to school you won't be able to get a job." And Georgina was coming back - "doesn't matter if you do go to school you still won't get a job."

One technique available is to expose students to Aborigines and Islanders who have succeeded in school and work so as to help them become aware of the range of alternatives available to them. The Aboriginal counsellors have access to career materials which can be used to widen student and parent horizons and encourage career decision making. This role extends to accompanying students on work observation visits to places where Aborigines are employed in a variety of occupations.

The following career guidance program was developed by Lenise Schloss for use with students at Inala High School:

Career Guidance Program for Grades 8 - 10

Grade 8

- * Discuss with guidance officer each student's measured ability (Gr. 7 test battery) and primary school achievement.
- * Discuss with students their hobbies and interests and the range of occupations that fit these interests.
- * Involve parents where possible in these discussions and during home visits.
- * Encourage the child during the year to reach his educational potential. Thinking about future occupations can be used to help him define his personal aims for education.
- * Assist the parents and student to choose a Grade 9 course in accord with this aim.

Grade 9

- * Continue to foster the child's career interests by providing career materials, viewing videotapes and arranging work experience with Aborigines.
- * Encourage students to maintain hobbies that are particularly relevant.
- * Encourage students to study and complete homework assignments.

Grade 10

- * Arrange work observation and work experience for students.
- * Role play interviews.
- * Assist with writing job application forms.
- * Arrange a talk with the C.E.S.
- * Discuss with students ways of coping with periods of unemployment.
- * Encourage parents to assist their children in the move from school to work.

Once the child has left school, the counsellor continues to be involved by ensuring that contact is made with vocational officers from the Department of Employment and Industrial Relations and that the student is aware of further education provisions for which he or she is eligible.

SCHOOL

Because of the attrition rate of Aboriginal students, CEC's are frequently placed in crisis situation with students, school staff and parents. The foundations for underachievement generally are laid early in the child's schooling but as Val Alberts notes, teachers often do not recognize the signs and act upon them:

The staff meeting with primary school teachers of Grades 1, 2 and 3 was very disappointing. Some teachers were saying that they had no problems which they thought was quite good even though the Aboriginal students were low achievers. Also the teachers felt slighted when suggestions were made to them on ways in which they could help the student in some small way.

Seven years of low achievement in primary school often results in conflict between school and student. Val Alberts again:

An Aboriginal student was suspended from the high school. Suspensions seem to have occurred a lot throughout the year. The Aboriginal students seem to be more openly defiant toward the teachers than white kids. A thought has crossed my mind over the past few months that some of the teachers are definitely prejudiced. Some of the

teachers will accept misbehaviour from the white kids but when an Aboriginal does the same thing the teacher reacts immediately by sending the kid to the office. I don't think they want black kids to get on the same level as white kids do. I think some of the black kids sense this so they are fighting to get the same recognition on an equal level. For some of the black kids I know it would be an open clash to trying to live in both cultures. To some of the kids that were on suspension it proved to be effective but in some cases it didn't. Before the end of the year I will see Bob (the principal) and check out the number of black kids suspended against white kids.

To overcome the communication and misunderstanding problems that can exist between teachers and students, Aboriginal counsellors meet both formally and informally with teachers. As well as working with the guidance officer and teachers to resolve problems relating to Aboriginal students, the counsellor provides teachers with information about the local area, the way of life of Aboriginal families, and their attitudes. In this way counsellors assist student/teacher relationships.

Lenise Schloss:

Coming to Inala for a lot of teachers is a shock because they are middle class, they are secure, they don't know what it is like to go home and not have a meal at night. It is very hard for them to adapt because they have never gone through this sort of situation - you just get a feeling that some teachers just can't comprehend what goes on in a child's life. The kid might be type-cast as a behaviour problem where the child may just be hungry, hasn't had a decent night's sleep for weeks. Relating to a teacher about that can be very difficult but you have just got to be patient.

It is most useful for counsellors to attend the staff meetings. As well as allowing them to obtain at first hand information relevant for students, e.g. excursions, exam times, and increasing their understanding of the functioning of the school, acceptance at these meetings results in the counsellor being perceived as a member of the school staff with a greater degree of professional status.

THE TEACHERS' ROLE

Teachers, counsellors and guidance officers are all members of the educational team, each with a particular background of study, life experiences, personal skills and abilities which, when combined with those of other team members, makes for a potentially very effective team effort. This team should exist as such, whether or not regular meetings are held. It is all too easy for some to see only themselves in the decision-making role with the counsellor allowed to do no more than to carry out their directions. Success of the program therefore depends partly on the support and understanding of teachers.

The perceptive teacher will recognize the attributes contributing to the counsellor's effectiveness and will build upon these. In this way a relationship of trust and respect can develop. Time must be allocated for meetings with the counsellor for purposes of reviewing activities and planning further ventures; various activities of the counsellor will require co-ordination with classroom activities; on-going training of counsellors will need to be organized and supervised and teachers should share this responsibility with the guidance officer.

Effective utilization of the CEC by teachers may result from the following:

- a) Teachers need to provide full accounts for counsellors of particular students' reactions/behaviours in the classroom when requesting aid with regard to these students. Such background information is indispensable.
- b) Counsellors should become involved with particular students when potentially difficult situations begin to become obvious, rather than being brought in when it is too late.
- c) Teachers should aim to get to know the counsellor and encourage a reciprocal aim. Co-operation in seeking answers to issues makes the issue far easier to handle.
- d) Counsellors may be deployed as resource people in certain subjects (most notably the social sciences) and the role of the teacher here becomes one of clarifying for the counsellor the parameters of her/his involvement.

PARENTS

Secondary education is for the Aboriginal parents 'a whole new ball game, they don't really understand what high school is'. As a consequence, the counsellors spend time explaining the teacher's assessment sheets and the school's report system, explaining the code that is a record of school performance and generally emphasising the need and desirability of the child's doing well at school. To do this the counsellors explain the high school's organization, the courses they will follow, the different subjects and preparation for a school day. In general the parents think that they are unable to offer support because they are not aware of the nature of support that is appropriate until the counsellors point it out. Lenise Schloss:

One family realised they couldn't help their child - there was no resource book, not even a magazine in that home, nothing. They requested me to help both of them to help their child. So I spent a weekend while the father was at home. I went to the shops with them on Saturday morning and bought exercise books...writing down the assignment, date due and name etc. That's a basic thing which this child had not picked up by Grade 8. It is really basic support skills that most parents need. Some of them may know them but they are unaware and it is an awareness - it's changing attitudes too.

It is often necessary to help parents make their first contact with the school as very rarely have they sufficient confidence to go up on their own. Consequently the major commitment of the counsellors is to do informal home visits to the Aboriginal and Islander parents.

For some parents, support may be necessary to ensure decisions requiring assertive behaviour are acted upon. Val Alberts:

After I had sent the letters to various people and departments about the lack of pre-school education for Aboriginal children, I think some people became quite concerned about it. What resulted was an opening at the government pre-school on a special entry basis for an Aboriginal child. So I decided to pick out the brightest Aboriginal child out of the playgroup and let him be tested. I felt he would benefit the most from the professional training from such an established

environment. He would also be able to survive the social interaction from being involved with the majority of white children, as he was the only black child in the group.

It was also a major step for the parent, as she was concerned and worried for her son going to an all white pre-school. I had to reassure her that I thought he would benefit a great deal. Later there were a few setbacks, the parent couldn't afford the taxi fares as they lived on the other side of town. I made enquiries if there was somebody who lived close by to the family who may be able to give the boy a lift. It turned out the white people next door, her little girl, went to the same pre-school. I asked the Aboriginal parent would she like to ask her neighbour if her son could go with her. She said she would ask. Several weeks went by and the pre-school teacher said the Aboriginal boy had not been coming. I checked out to see what the reason was and the parent said she did not have the confidence to ask her neighbour. I went next door and told the situation to the lady who readily agreed to take the boy.

The next step for this parent would be for Val to encourage her to adopt increasingly assertive behaviours into her own style of interacting. The goal of moving families towards self reliance, however, can be both difficult and time consuming.

EDUCATION AND WELFARE

Because the counsellors obtain intimate knowledge of the families with whom they are in contact and often develop a close personal relationship they have found it impossible to dissociate the educational and welfare elements of their support work. Lenise found that:

...many families I go into have welfare or social problems that are always brought up as a topic of conversation anyway.

Lenise possessed a sound knowledge of community agencies by virtue of her long residency in Inala. By working with the guidance staff on the project she was able to extend her knowledge in the area of educational resources available to Aboriginal families. This knowledge was further extended by discussions with professionals from various agencies from the area.

The extent to which the Aboriginal counsellors become involved in the area of welfare varies with the needs of each family. In cases where problems of housing, finance or health present real barriers to the child's educational progress the counsellors attempt to assist that family, either by directing them to particular agencies or by making the necessary arrangements with the agencies directly on behalf of the family.

STATUS, SELECTION AND TRAINING OF COUNSELLORS

Status : As should be evident from the above discussion, the CEC functions in difficult, often hostile, work environments. Their clients include students alienated from and failing in the education system, parents who have had little education themselves and who have throughout their lives been subject to the whims of the institutions of the dominant culture, and teachers who have had little training or may have little inclination to transcend the social and cultural differences existing between themselves, their students and the CECs. These factors have led one principal of a high school to note that there is need for the CECs to exercise effective leadership which requires not only appropriate knowledge and insight but also confidence that comes from professional acceptance.

People in professional occupations, including teachers, can be fairly intolerant of workers who have not had the opportunity to undertake tertiary study. This can place a heavy burden on the CEC as Patricia Daanen indicates:

I feel I am not on an equal footing and I am wondering whether they are being patronising or whether they are genuinely concerned about the particular child.

A further factor inhibiting their acceptability within schools has been their conditions of employment. Initially the only avenue of employment was through the teacher aide provision. As well as being only a casual employment award it carries with it overtones that the CECs should fulfil similar functions to other teacher aides within the school. Generally, however, schools have been most co-operative in permitting the implementation of the role described above. During 1980 a counsellor was appointed under a different award which carries a salary of approximately \$11,000/year with normal public service entitlements and conditions. These include a 36¼ hour week, with 4 weeks annual leave, sick leave, and long service leave. A further six were appointed to this award in January 1981 and more appointments are likely in the next financial year.

Finally, the more effective the selection procedure and training, the better the outcomes of the program for both school and counsellor.

Selection : In general, applicants for Community Education Counsellors are selected on the basis of their acceptance by, and involvement with, the local Aboriginal community; their understanding of the needs of that community, and their potential or demonstrated ability to function effectively within the school environment with children and adults.

The involvement of the Aboriginal community in the selection process of community education counsellors to serve their area is considered highly desirable. A comprehensive policy of consultation with the Aboriginal community in Queensland about educational matters has seen the formation of a State Consultative Committee reporting to the Director-General (QATSIACC) and local committees in areas of significant population densities to guide community initiatives. If established, a local committee should be involved in the selection process. Where no such committee exists, local advisors should be appointed by QATSIACC. This should ensure adequate community participation in the selection process. Failure to listen to community opinion may result in the selection of an individual well able to communicate with professional school staff but lacking the trust of families and the ability to communicate effectively with members of their own community.

Training : Training for the counsellors has been an ongoing process as the nature of their role has been clarified and their relative strengths and weaknesses have become evident. The majority of the training in the area of counselling skills has comprised on-the-job training as they work with guidance officers in their respective skills. Short, one-week pre-service programs have been conducted at the Inala Family Education Centre and these are supplemented by two one-week seminars a year which are attended by all the CECs across the state. Christine Williams (Inala) notes the value of sharing ideas at these seminars:

The seminars give me the opportunity to hear different approaches to problem areas, also new programs being carried out by other counsellors. I feel, by attending, I come away with more self confidence, especially from learning there are other Aboriginal and Islander counsellors experiencing the work and emotional problems I have. This can only help me have a better understanding of my work and my people.

Val Wright stressed the opportunity for greater appreciation of issues facing different communities:

The counsellors become more aware of the frustrations that some students and parents have in the school situations and therefore become better equipped to help in their own local areas. Counsellor training programs also encourage social interaction between the rural and urban people interested in the same field, that is improving the education standard of the Aboriginal and Islander communities.

From 1981 it is intended to supplement this program with two shorter (two or three days) regional seminars a year in Townsville and Brisbane, together with an ongoing correspondence program. Because of the nature of the work mature people are required. These people normally already have family commitments thus more extensive withdrawal programs do not seem practical. The preferred method of training, unlikely in the near future, is an associate diploma course offered through the External Studies Department of a College of Advanced Education. Training currently embraces the following areas:

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|----|-------------------------|--|
| A. | Education system | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - school organization - curriculum - role of the CEC |
| B. | Ethnicity and education | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - history of Aboriginal education - cultural factors affecting performance of Aboriginal students - traditional and contemporary Aboriginal/Islander culture - nature of prejudice |
| C. | Community education | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - role of parents in the education process - home/school liaison techniques - organizing educational and recreational programs - assisting the alienated parent |
| D. | Counselling techniques | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - communication skills (reflective listening, problem solving, etc.) - assertive training - study skills - group facilitation - support services - crisis counselling |

- E. Career education
 - further education provisions
 - structure of the workforce
 - career guidance strategies (exposure to Aboriginal models, employability skills, etc.)
- F. Education psychology
 - physical growth and development
 - personality development especially identity
 - role of peer group
 - language
 - intelligence and its assessment
 - motivation and learning
 - parent-child relationship

Finally, a journal has been established, the *Community Education Counsellor*, which provides an additional forum in which to share knowledge and skills.

DEPLOYMENT

Following the successful outcome of an evaluation of the role of the CEC (Clark, Clark and Damm, 1980), counsellors have been stationed in several centres across the state. They are currently based in Brisbane, Maryborough, Rockhampton, Mackay, Townsville, Charters Towers, Mt Isa and Cairns.

There are approximately 4,000 Aboriginal high school students in urban areas receiving secondary grants and there is probably double that number of primary students. A major expansion of the counselling service is necessary if an effective comprehensive service is to be provided across the state. In addition, there are approximately 900 secondary students and 3,000 primary students in isolated communities that currently receive no, or very little, guidance service. At least 11 of these communities have student populations exceeding 250 and would benefit from a CEC service.

Providing funding remains available, the future of the CEC program must be seen as bright. The incumbent counsellors have worked hard and successfully at establishing their credibility and effectiveness. It is up to the support people (teachers, guidance officers and other departmental officers) to ensure they receive the assistance required.

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