

The Northern Ireland story

A personal reflection by Kathy Bell on the advent of widespread school counselling in Northern Ireland

*'Go confidently in the direction of your dreams.
Live the life you have imagined.'*

(Henry David Thoreau, American writer,
1817-1862)

For over 30 years, I have had the privilege of doing exactly what Thoreau advocated: I have been involved in establishing services that have at their core the emotional health and wellbeing of children and young people. This has contributed to the new reality that is counselling available in every post-primary school in Northern Ireland.

School is the place where children spend over half their waking hours, so it is important that they can access services in the same place.

Children often come to school with the weight of the world upon their shoulders. I'm sure I'm not alone – as a professional child protection social worker, counsellor, supervisor and manager – in being able to bring to mind the faces of many such children and young people who have crossed my path over the years.

Their successful negotiation of school life depends on many things. Coming through the school doors does not mean leaving behind links to the rest of their world and they will return to that world at the end of the school day – often a place where emotional resilience is unheard of, where no one talks about anxiety, friendships, doing well in exams or the big issues of self-harm or death by suicide. So for some children, school can be the only place in their life where there is routine, order and someone who shows them care and interest. Having accessible counselling in schools is not an added extra but a must.

Many individuals and organisations, in addition to me, have painstakingly worked away to convince local and central government of the role that independent school counselling can play in increasing the life chances of our young people. So what is the Northern Ireland story?

The story now

At the start of September 2009, the Independent Counselling Service for Schools (ICSS) entered its second core-funded period of counselling in schools. Simply put, all those

attending post-primary schools in Northern Ireland will have access to an independent experienced trained counsellor in school each week at a determined day and time.

The ICSS is provided under contractual arrangements by organisations that have undergone a public tendering process. It will be delivered to a very specific set of standards and follow an operational protocol that distinguishes the ICSS as a core part of the provision of emotional health and wellbeing within the school environs.

The challenges remain enormous. Within Northern Ireland, we are a community still emerging from 30 years of conflict into a post-conflict society – something that makes our story unique. Trans-generational trauma is becoming more and more obvious in our school communities; and we have many ethnic groupings from across Europe coming to live in our society. School counselling, if it is to have success, must take cognisance of a school's ethos and the community in which it is placed. Key

to success is individual counsellors who have understanding of youth culture, the reality of life in the 21st century and how their particular school works.



Trans-generational trauma is becoming more and more obvious in our school communities

In June 2009, Northern Ireland's Education Training Inspectorate (ETI) stated:

'The provision of counselling provides a much needed level of additional pastoral support and advocacy for those young people whose needs are not met fully by the school's resources or expertise and are best addressed by a professionally qualified counsellor, independent of school.'

That is part of the ICSS story. But in case it seems that the ICSS just appeared one morning in the swirling mist of a new day, let me assure you that nothing could be further from the truth.

How did we get here?

Getting to this juncture in ICSS's story has been – and will continue to be – a process not an event. Pastoral support in schools has always been central to school ethos and service provision within Northern Ireland, as it has across the UK. In the 1970s and 1980s, pastoral staff – sometimes referred to as home-school liaison – sought to provide the link between school and home. Some schools developed form tutors or year heads to oversee pupils.

For the last three decades there have been various models of school counselling across Northern Ireland, with a raft of both internal and external funding provision. Some schools chose to use teachers who had completed guidance or counselling courses. They then gave dedicated time within the school day to pupils seeking support. Others used existing school budgets to employ an independent, trained counsellor to work specifically within their school ethos and community.

Using a teacher, no matter how pastorally minded or equipped as a counsellor, at times still meant their being perceived as part of the system. That brought with it challenges and dilemmas, which we have tried to learn from.

All systems sought to provide a holistic response to the education of those passing through the doors of our schools – difficult at the best of times, but even more so when seen against the background of the Province's conflict.

During the 1990s, various children's charities, both local and nationally based, began to lobby the Government in relation to the need for school-based services, funded from central government. By the late 1990s, local and national organisations, such as the NSPCC, Contact Youth, New Life and others, began to pilot school-based counselling across Northern Ireland.

In 2000, the NSPCC in Northern Ireland, in partnership with the Department of Education (DE), the Education and Library Board (ELB) and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS), entered into an agreement to pilot Independent Counselling Support in Schools

via what became known locally as the Northern Ireland NSPCC School Team. This team, with a diverse skills base, was to provide counselling and wider therapeutic interventions within schools.

I was appointed to manage the NI School Team and set up the school counselling service. From a place of challenge and opportunity, we developed independent counselling across three of the five ELBs, reaching into all of the educational sectors within NI. Simultaneously, other community-based organisations continued to pioneer school-based counselling, often being funded by small, time-limited grants.

Evaluating and further funding

While services were being delivered, they were also being evaluated as various research projects were taking place²⁻⁴. In 2003 a scoping study of school counselling carried out by the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) highlighted 'the escalating complexity of personal problems and issues being experienced by children and schools in Northern Ireland'⁵.

At this point, the DE allocated funds from the Executive Programme Fund (EPF) directly to the ELBs for a three-year period, specifically for the purpose of providing counselling support for pupils in post-primary schools.

The boards chose to use this money in a variety of ways as best fitted the purposes of their young people.


In 2005, The ETI carried out a further scoping study⁶, which highlighted areas for improvement. These included:

- lack of consistency in services to schools and models of counselling used
- differences in counsellors' experiences with young people
- the variety of qualifications.

The report was clear that:

*'It has now become widely accepted within education circles that counselling support in schools has resulted in a range of positive outcomes for children and young people. Consequently, sustained access to such positive and beneficial services should be made available as a matter of priority for all pupils within Northern Ireland.'*⁶

As a result of all the work, research and commitment of many within specifically the educational and counselling communities of Northern Ireland since 2006, all post-primary school pupils now have access to independent school counselling, and September 2009 sees the service continuing to be core funded, with new providers contractually appointed to work within post-primary schools.



As society changes, so too must the fundamental support services to our children and young people

What next?

The DE views school counselling as part of the ongoing Pupil Emotional Health and Wellbeing programme (PEHAW) within our schools. It is now considering how best to introduce school counselling within the primary and special sectors and ensure that practice is of the highest standards. It is essential for a child-centred counselling service to work in partnership with the school community, other policies and procedures such as the child protection policy and the anti-bullying policy. All school counsellors will continue to receive child protection training from the educational child protection trainers.

Much continues to change in the post-conflict society that is Northern Ireland, but the ICSS will continue to provide counselling in schools. As society changes, so too must the fundamental support services to our children and young people. As regional coordinator for the ICSS, having worked with the Department of Education since 2006, I will continue to serve in this capacity for as long as it is appropriate to do so. As John F Kennedy said, 'Anything worth having takes time, enthusiasm and commitment!' Or, in the words of Bob the Builder: 'Can we fix it? Yes we can!' ■

Kathy Bell has worked with children and young people for many years. She is a qualified social worker, counsellor and supervisor. Kathy has contributed to both local, national and international conferences on subjects as diverse as working with survivors of sexual abuse, giving young people choices and safeguarding for school counsellors. Email Kathy.Bell@deni.gov.uk

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Scottish diary

The Scottish Government aims to have a counsellor in every school by 2012. Anna Hamilton casts her eye around the current provision of counselling services for children and young people in Scotland

Looking around Scotland to see what is available for children and young people in terms of access to counselling, I knew I would be in familiar territory, having set up a young people's counselling service as part of the adult counselling service I managed within a mental health charity in Perth.

I have now sought out information from the Scottish group of Children and Young People's Counselling Services, which was recently convened by BACP, contacted colleagues I had met through BACP and COSCA – The Professional Body for Counselling and Psychotherapy in Scotland – and trawled the internet to try to piece together a picture of provision across Scotland.

What I have begun to find out is the *diversity* of provision, and that there are three distinct strands, which echo adult provision of counselling and psychotherapy in Scotland. There are services fully funded by the statutory sector – that is, education, NHS, and social services; services provided through the third sector – forming a wide range of targeted services funded in various ways and using both paid and unpaid workers; and independent counsellors working in schools and in private practice.

However, there is no *equality* of provision, and while young people in Glasgow, Renfrewshire and Lanarkshire are increasingly likely to have a counsellor in their school, those living in other areas will find that access to a counselling service is a bit of a lottery. This also means that those services enjoying support from the statutory authorities are more able to influence thinking around how best to provide young people's counselling services. They may also find it easier to engage in debate with, and to network with, other professionals working with young people.

As far as I understand it, a lot of the school-based services have been launched specifically to provide a service within education, while other services have developed from existing adult ones. The latter route is often

made possible after successful bids to various funders from the statutory, private and charitable sectors. Of course, the focus of the work and the target of the service will be dictated by the funders and can often be time limited.

Education authorities are providing accommodation for their pupils to be seen on school premises. Other agencies have their own accommodation or have rooms in youth clubs, sexual health clinics, or drug and alcohol services. And some national children's charities have employed counsellors as part of their range of services.



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