

Agony or ecstasy

Are there obstacles preventing effective practice in schools? Is the experience of the school counsellor different according to whether they are integrated within the system or differentiated from it? Janet Edwards conducted a small-scale study to investigate the current state of play

There can sometimes be a cloak of mystery surrounding the role of counsellor and never more so than in schools, where the therapeutic world meets the educational. Is there a titanic clash, or do the two worlds sit comfortably together with the child held and nurtured between them? Are promised changes beginning to manifest themselves in schools or is the situation stagnant?

In summer 2008, I interviewed eight counsellors in an attempt to address these questions and learn about the barriers to effective practice. The road to good practice is quite well documented. There is advice on what should be happening, but what *prevents* good practice seemed a more interesting topic – finding out what gets in the way of doing a 'perfect' job. The objectives of the study were to reveal the nature of work being carried out in schools and what it was like to be the person responsible for carrying out these duties. This article contains excerpts from my findings.

Background

All eight participants were counsellors at secondary schools. Four were full-time counsellors and the fifth participant worked for four days. These five were employed directly by the school. The remaining three were employed by two external agencies and their hours ranged from two hours a day to one day per week. For simplicity's sake, I will refer to these participants as full-timers (4), part-timer (1) and agency workers (3). There were six females and two males.

It is worth reiterating how difficult it was to find these counsellors. From a total of 30 schools contacted, 11 were identified as having some form of school counsellor role and eight participants were eventually interviewed. Many staff at the end of the telephone did not understand who counsellors were and what they did, or whether there was actually somebody carrying out this work in school. Learning mentors were cited in many cases as the suitable alternative.

Although participants had all identified themselves as counsellors, some of their job titles did not reflect the role. This was usually the case where they had been working in the school already and had created the role for themselves in response to the evident need. It was difficult to assess whether some workloads were heavier than others, as session length and types varied, but most counsellors were under some pressure to fit in as many clients as possible and were probably close to or exceeding the healthy recommended

Orkney Youth Counselling

Orkney Youth Counselling is a branch of Orkney Alcohol Counselling and Advisory Service (OACAS), meeting the need within the community for prevention and building resilience. OACAS is a BACP member, COSCA recognised, government and charity funded.

To prosper in an island environment, the people of Orkney have developed a culture of stoicism and proud self-reliance. In a community where nothing is private, speaking in confidence does not come naturally, so through the generations feelings are often buried. Heavy drinking is culturally accepted so it is natural to use alcohol to ease the pain of trauma. Consequently, many are set on the path of developing harmful behaviours at a young age.

Through various therapeutic approaches, young clients have an opportunity to explore alternative ways of coping with their emotions; they often self-refer and re-engage with new issues. Appointments are made at our offices in Kirkwall or outreach is arranged at the secondary school or surgeries.

The positive results of our outreach work, dedication, and support of the guidance staff has formed the foundation of our new counselling in schools project. A flexible approach to maintaining contact with clients in more remote places is essential. For more information, contact: Renate Andrews, Youth Counselling Coordinator, Orkney Youth Counselling, OACAS. Visit: www.oacas.org.uk

Relationships Scotland, which has a mediation service for couples who are separating, employs counsellors to work with children and young people who are affected by the breakdown of their parents' relationship. They are accepting referrals from both primary and secondary school children.

Further north in Orkney, the drug and alcohol service has a dedicated young persons' service (see panel above) and in Aberdeen the VSA (Voluntary Service Aberdeen) has a counsellor in one school as well as a service for 'looked after' children and those affected by relationship breakdown.

There is a marked lack of school-based provision once you leave the central belt of Scotland. But I understand that the Scottish Government has indicated a desire to have a counsellor in every school by 2012. If this does happen, then the profile of counselling as a treatment of choice will continue to rise and the need for other services that may be more focused on specific issues will still exist.

I may unintentionally have missed a service offering counselling to young people, and if you are aware of one, do please write a letter to the editor and tell us about it. ■

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limits. The agency workers seemed slightly less pressured. This may have been due to a negotiated workload agreed with the school, but there was even an exception to that, where one agency worker had increased her workload to take account of a cut in funding (and therefore hours). All the work carried out, including that of the agencies, was funded by the school. Two agencies had been previously funded by grants but these had been cut and the school had had to take over funding. This showed that these schools were willing to make an investment in a valuable service (a step which proves difficult for so many others) but spending on this service obviously varied greatly over the different schools.

The integration between the counsellor and the school structures was examined using Bond's¹ illustration of a distinction between an 'integrated' model of counselling in education, in which the counsellor is an integral member of the school team with a primary ethical responsibility to the organisation; and a 'differentiated' model of counselling in education, in which the counsellor is essentially distinct from other members of the school staff and has a primary responsibility to his or her clients.

Qualifications

There was a range of achievements, from no qualifications at all to diploma level. Nobody had yet gained any specific external qualifications to work with young people. The barriers to further qualifications seemed to be due to a mixture of factors, including lack of funding, time to complete them, a regular supply of in-house courses and a lack of suitable external courses.

Roles and responsibilities

All participants were the sole counsellors in each school but generally all felt that they were part of a team. The most common team members were the learning mentor and the attendance officer. Most counsellors managed their own service and even when they had a fixed number of sessions planned for young people, they were able to continue for longer if deemed necessary. In some cases, it was not unusual to work with a young person for a few years.

The role of the counsellor seemed quite clear to pupils and staff. One full-timer expressed a wish to keep the service low key to prevent further referrals and pressure of work. The child protection issue routes were also quite clear. The pressure of work seemed to be heaviest on the counsellors with more working hours, with the exception of the two-hours agency worker who had to pack one pupil in every 20 minutes. She found that her clients could cope with this length of session and found the standard 50 minutes far too long. The scores for the lightest workload came from the two male participants.

Environment

Counsellors happiest with their working environment were those who had their own office in school in a quiet part of the building (all full-timers). The unhappiest was a full-timer who shared an office with other people, had nowhere specific in which to counsel and was constantly trying to find a suitable space. There was an awareness of the school's struggle for space, with some counsellors having to fight for the right to an appropriate room. Other concerns were interruptions, distractions, noise levels, inappropriate set-up and furniture, and lack of privacy and confidentiality. From eyewitness accounts and descriptions, it seems that no room was completely appropriate. The need for a comfortable, private, confidential and discrete location has been raised as an essential aspect of a counselling service by young people² and in these cases it seemed almost impossible to provide such a place in practice.

Relationships

There was a variety of job titles for the managers of the counsellors and a range of comments regarding the relationship, from 'very good' to 'not very supportive'. The more negative comments were linked to lack of time to spare for a good working relationship and lack of understanding of the counselling role. The full-timers had mainly good relationships with other school staff. Two out of three agency workers struggled somewhat with their staff relationships, describing them as 'cordial' and 'reasonable'. The part-timer felt that she didn't fit into the category of teacher or support staff and didn't feel valued by the head. Some full-timers mentioned the initial resistance of staff to counselling, followed by acceptance when the process was seen to be working. The length of time in a role seemed to be commensurate with the degree of cooperation and lack of resistance from staff.

Confidentiality

On the whole, confidentiality issues were not a big problem – there were only occasional queries, which were fielded accordingly and staff seemed to learn about boundaries as time passed. The part-timer and agency workers seemed to have most difficulties, finding it hard at times to hold boundaries when faced with queries from staff. An agency worker reflected that there did seem to be a different understanding of confidentiality between counselling and admin staff with regard to mentioning names in public. There was some experience of feeling challenged in how to maintain confidentiality without appearing obstructive. This illustrates the difference between an integrated and differentiated model of counselling. The differentiated-model workers are distinct from other members of staff, have a primary ethical responsibility to the clients and have less comfortable relationships than the integral members of the school team.

Support

Half the counsellors felt 'neutral' about the degree of support they received within school. This was due to several factors: the lack of time available to them from management (due to stress and overwork), lack of knowledge of counselling, inappropriate line management and no offer of support. But the agency workers seemed to have excellent external support facilities available to them. They gave more examples of general support, having formal networks and informal contacts, and they had most contact with peers and in-house supervision opportunities. The full-timers suffered mostly from lack of external support. None of them had any contact with other counsellors and only one had regular clinical supervision. The two least-qualified counsellors had no supervision at all, but this did not appear to be an issue for them. The counsellors were disappointed but unsurprised at the level of support, accepting it as part of school life. The strength of the differentiated model shines through here: all agency workers felt very happy with their impressive support structures.

CAMHS was mentioned as an informal contact in five out of eight schools although, apart from one exception, in a distant referral/advice capacity. One counsellor was desperate for more than just Tier 4 support (services such as day units and highly specialist inpatient and outpatient teams). It seems the CAMHS influence is only very light in these schools at present, despite them being in areas of deprivation. Only one counsellor mentioned the head as a source of support. As an aside, three counsellors mentioned that their salary was poor (one part-timer, one full-timer and one agency worker). Comments were that it did not reflect their professional status and the extra time and effort they put into the role. This was a subject not raised by the questionnaire but was obviously a very relevant factor in feeling unsupported and shows that neither an in-house nor an imported role brings greater financial reward.

Counsellors suggested many ways in which they were able to keep emotionally healthy. The top 'method' was family, followed equally by friends, peers, supervision and the ability to switch off. This was mainly driven by what was available to each counsellor. In other words, agency workers cited supervision and peers as their methods and full-timers cited family.

Monitoring and evaluation

There was some evidence of monitoring and evaluation. The best examples were with the agencies, probably linked to funding requirements. One agency kept simple statistics, the other used YP CORE (Clinical Outcomes for Routine Evaluation – Young Person's version). They also used client feedback sheets and a once-yearly feedback sheet for teachers who had referred pupils. Apart from this, there were

three counsellors using basic client feedback sheets. One full-timer had abandoned evaluation due to lack of time and another didn't feel it appropriate to ask young people to fill out forms when they were obviously distressed.

Counselling themes (see Table 1)

'Family and parents' was the most recurrent theme when counselling young people. Self-harm was next, followed in joint third place by bereavement/loss, anxiety/depression and peer relationships. Anger was in joint fourth place along with bullying, school, sexual abuse and eating disorders. Anger was a common theme – teachers tended to refer the most disruptive pupils – but was not the underlying issue once counselling started. There was a sense that young people had a lot of issues to cope with.

Table 1

Top 3 recurrent themes when working with young people

1	Family/parents
2	Self-harm
3	Bereavement/loss
	Anxiety/depression
	Peer relationships

Working life

The frustrations of working life centred around resources ('it all comes down to money') and parents and teachers. There was not enough time to spend with young people and do all that was required for the role. Parents and teachers failed to acknowledge that the child was trying to change, and parents undermined any progress once the child returned home, or refused to believe there was a problem in the first place. Other frustrations mentioned were young people missing appointments or not taking responsibility and seeking further help. A few counsellors expressed the need for further help with complex cases. On more than one occasion, it seemed that the time spent reflecting on their role either made them realise how lucky they were or how much was lacking.

An easier working life would be provided by more resources: money to spend on more counselling services, better pastoral care, and some extra time to plan work and spend with young people. Better organisation, structure and support would be appreciated, as would networking opportunities with other counsellors, having a good link person within school and a more appropriate working space. The need for more male role models in a supportive capacity and a better quality of sex education was shared.



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Counsellor qualities (see Table 2)

The top essential personal quality required to be a school counsellor was deemed to be a sense of humour, followed by patience. In joint third position were: being non-judgmental, availability, listening skills, understanding and honesty. The importance of an adult being available to listen to young people was stressed. A whole host of other qualities were suggested, illustrating a wide range of skills required. Some of these were clearly about relationships with school and the tactics necessary to survive in such an organisation – such as the ability to promote the service, to be diplomatic, to work independently and at the same time see oneself as part of a large organisation and a member of a team.

Table 2

Top 3 essential personal qualities required

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|---|--------------------------------------|
| 1 | Sense of humour |
| 2 | Patience |
| 3 | Being non-judgmental |
| | Availability/giving time |
| | Listening skills |
| | Understanding/empathy |
| | Telling it like it is/being truthful |

Vision of the future

The future of mental health for young people was viewed as quite bleak by most counsellors. Although one person acknowledged that the subject was less taboo now and so seemed more prevalent, the general consensus was that mental health problems were increasing and that there were so many issues for young people to deal with that resulted in stress. Lack of resources was clearly a huge problem – long waiting lists for CAMHS, the pressure on existing services, the need for expansion, and schools 'cutting corners' and not recognising the difference counselling can make.

There were positive comments – a remark about how open young people were about accessing the service in school, demonstrating a change in attitude to mental health issues and the relaxed ethos of the school regarding these services. It seemed that there was a general acceptance and lack of stigma attached to counselling for the young people accessing most of these services. An agency worker thought there was recognition in Government of how important mental health issues in young people were and there was an understanding that putting resources in now will prevent problems in adult mental health services later. He thought resources would continue to be put into mental health services for young people and had seen change already – for the first time, his organisation was likely to get significant funding from CAMHS.

There was an overwhelming concern and depth of feeling for young people from participants, and for most, there was definitely no cavalry on the horizon in the form of CAMHS or extra funding for mental health difficulties.

Final thoughts

The system within which the counsellor works affects them greatly. The role of a sole counsellor integrated into a school can be a difficult one. They are always at the mercy of the school, having heavy workloads with little experience of support or understanding of the role. They may be the only person there who understands mental health issues and it is a lonely road to tread. A sturdy back-up system is required and it seems so much healthier to be part of an organisation that can fit seamlessly into the school set up. While the integrated model brings benefits of being one of the school staff, being trusted and having good relationships with staff, the support structure seems poor.

Within a differentiated model, distinct from other staff with a primary responsibility to clients, there are excellent support facilities. For the sake of healthy counselling relationships, the differentiated model seems to work best in these cases. The counsellor can be part of a supportive team of workers within a healthy school and belong to an organisation that provides supervision, peer support and personal development opportunities and pays salaries that reward the skills and experience required for the role.

It seems that not only is counselling in schools today a rarity, it is a struggle, no matter how the structure is organised. There is much good work going on but many factors can prevent so much more valuable work being done. Obstacles such as lack of time, money, support, expertise, acceptance, understanding, structure and an appropriate environment conspire to make a school counsellor's life quite challenging. ■

Janet Edwards is a freelance counsellor who could write volumes about her own experiences of counselling in schools. She'd love to hear your comments, stories and current challenges. Contact her at goodtalkto1@aol.com.

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