

MAKING THE CASE FOR MORE COUNSELLORS IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS

Two recent studies investigating the work of secondary school counsellors shed light on the challenging role counsellors are playing in their schools, and the effectiveness of their work. The studies also highlight the need to address the often stressful and excessive workloads they are carrying.

The first study¹ surveyed the kinds of problems that students took to counselling. Data from 11 schools across the country involving 25 counsellors, 1,596 students and over 4,600 counselling appointments, indicated the “sheer breadth of problems” students take to counselling.

The study also found that counsellors saw students for an average of 2.5 sessions and that 72% of all students had fewer than four sessions. In other words, their work with students was brief. Even so, 30% of students wanting to see a counsellor had to wait three or more school days for an appointment.

The top five problem-types were: family issues, anxiety, school issues, peer friendships, and depression. This data indicates that counsellors must be prepared to deal with a wide and challenging range of presenting problems--there is often no outside service to which to refer difficult cases.

The second study² is New Zealand’s first to report on the effectiveness of school counselling. The purpose of the study, which was co-funded by the New Zealand Association of Counsellors and the Ministry of Education, was to collect counselling outcome data that would help inform discussions between NZAC and the MoE about the staffing level of counsellors in secondary schools.

Surprisingly, there have been virtually no studies evaluating counselling effectiveness, even though counsellors have been a respected part of New Zealand secondary schools since their formal introduction in the 1960s. Significantly, their roles have expanded over the years to providing mental health services to students challenged by such issues as household poverty, family dysfunction, bullying, drug use and suicidal behaviour (Education Review Office, 2013; UNICEF New Zealand, 2017).

The study was carried out in 2019 and involved 30 counsellors in a national sample of 16 schools. Data was based on 490 completed counselling cases. The Outcome Rating Scale (ORS), an internationally recognised self-report measure, was used to collect pre-, during, and post-counselling well-being scores from students. The *gain score*—the change in the ORS from 1st session to last—was used to calculate effectiveness.

Results: The study analysed counselling effectiveness in a number of ways, using both inferential statistics and clinical indicators of significance. No matter the approach, counselling was found to be effective.

¹ Hughes, C., Barr, A., & Graham, J. (2019). School counselling conversations: Clients and their concerns. *New Zealand Journal of Counselling*, 39(1), 40-70.

² Manthei, R., Tuck, B., Crocket, A., Gardiner, B., Agee, M., & Blanchard, N. (2020). *Evaluating the Effectiveness of Counselling in Schools*. Report to the New Zealand Association of Counsellors and the Ministry of Education



- 70% of the students were females, (this is similar to the 64% females in the Hughes et al study). *[Note: when data from two independent studies coincide, it suggests the data are a good estimate of the actual proportions in NZ schools.]*
- 63% were Pākeha, 15% were Māori and 22% represented 'other' ethnicities.
- 82% of the students were in years 9, 10, 11 and 12 (the same as the 83% in Hughes et al).
- Counselling tended to be brief--an average of four sessions per student (vs 2.5 in Hughes et al).
- Although boys had significantly higher first session and last session ORS scores than girls, both groups had the same average gain score.
- On average, all ethnic groups (Pākeha, Māori, Pasifika, Indian, Asian) made significant gains in ORS scores after counselling.
- Taken as a whole, students who received counselling changed positively and significantly over time. The effect size (used to determine the clinically relevant size of the change in ORS scores) was .87, which is considered "large" and was similar to or greater than what has been found in most studies overseas.

Data from approximately 150 counselling cases indicated that students brought to counselling over 30 types of problems, including self-destructive behaviours like suicide attempts and substance abuse; relationship problems with families and friends; classroom and learning problems; career issues and psychological problems such as phobias, anxiety and depression. The five most common problems were the same as the five in the Hughes et al study.

Conclusions: The positive findings from study two are even more notable given the high levels of stress reported by many of the counsellors and the very low staffing levels in schools compared with those overseas. For example, in every participating school, the ratio of counsellors to students (1:668) far exceeds the American School Counsellor Association's recommended 1:250, and the NZAC's recommended 1:400.

If a school is understaffed or its community is subjected to traumatic, outside events such as natural disasters (e.g. the Christchurch earthquake) or acts of violence like Christchurch experienced with the terrorist massacre in March, 2019, the work of counsellors will increase and the stress associated with that work will be exacerbated. Currently, the disruptions to work and family life due to the Covid-19 pandemic can also be expected to exacerbate workload issues for school counsellors as schools resume functioning.

Both studies indicate the broad range of problems that every counsellor must be able to recognise and respond to, whether that means treatment or referral to an outside specialist. They do not have the option of screening out certain problems or focusing on a few issues to the exclusion of others. They are, of necessity, generalists who must deal with all student requests.

One could ask 'How much more could be accomplished by school counsellors if a more favourable staffing ratio was employed?' More staffing would enable counsellors to work more effectively, experience less job-stress and burnout, and, for students, the waiting time to see a counsellor would be reduced.



Nga Kete
Nga Kete o te Matauranga
(Baskets of Knowledge)