

SCHOOL COUNSELLORS' CONTRIBUTION TO THE KEY COMPETENCIES OF THE NEW ZEALAND SCHOOL CURRICULUM

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This paper summarises the main contribution School Counsellors make in developing the five key competencies of the New Zealand Curriculum in the students they counsel. The material presented arose from a workshop led by Colin Hughes with a group of school counsellors from the Eastern Bay of Plenty. It was then organised and summarised by Colin Hughes and Tracey Hennessy, both counsellors at Trident High School in Whakatane.

The key competencies: Managing self,
Participating and contributing,
Using language, symbols and texts,
Thinking,
Relating to others -

have always been an integral part of the school counsellor's work, but have not always been expressed and recognised as such by schools and educational authorities. In large part this has been because different academic histories, theories, practices and language between the two professions, teaching and counselling, have often masked those things that are similar.

However with the rise of pupil centred pedagogies, and the attention given to relationship formation as a key determinant of learning success, the language used by educationalists to describe the teaching process and some of its methods has moved closer to that used by counsellors. For example to describe, as the new curriculum does, "teaching as inquiry" [1] is not too far from the stance of 'respectful curiosity' something many counsellors would own as a central element in the counselling process.

The new Curriculum, formed around the five key competencies and eleven key values, aims at developing in our students "full and satisfying lives, confident, connected, actively involved and life long learners." [2] In New Zealand, the school counselling room as much as the classroom is a place where these key competencies and values are discovered, taught, explored and practised with the same overall aim equally valued.

Furthermore, as we look to the future, educationalists who talk about new directions and paradigms come remarkably close to describing the core values, concerns, and even processes that are typically part of the client counsellor relationship. Perhaps some of the "future" is already present and most clearly practised in the school counsellor's office.

David Hood in his address to the Tertiary Educational Summit in April 2009 "A New paradigm for Secondary Education and Challenges for the Tertiary Sector" quotes from Senge et al in their book "*Presence – Human Purpose and the Field of the Future*" [2008] that 'connectivity' is the key to coping successfully with the world of the future.

“All learning integrates thinking and doing. All learning is about how we interact in the world and the types of capacities that develop from our interactions. What differs is the depth of the awareness and the consequent source of action. If awareness never reaches beyond superficial events and current circumstances, actions will be reactions. If, on the other hand, we penetrate more deeply to see the larger wholes that generate “what is” and our own connection to this wholeness, the source and effectiveness of our activities can change dramatically.”

Counsellors typically express similar core ideas. For example picking up on the idea that “all learning integrates thinking and doing Cognitive behaviour Therapy has developed and tested both theory and practice about thinking and doing to effect deep change in clients who have become stuck in behaviours they want to be free from. Likewise there are a variety of client centered therapies that specifically help clients attain awareness that reaches beyond the current circumstances so subsequent actions are self controlled, ethical and freeing because of the insight obtained.

Hood goes on to quote from the New Basics Project in Queensland the Curriculum, which is “ focussed on providing opportunities for students to understand themselves and others, and the world in which they live, and will live their lives, consists of four simple questions:

Who am I and where am I going?

How do I make sense of and communicate with the world?

What are my rights and responsibilities in communities, cultures and economies?

How do I describe, analyse and shape the world around me?”

All these questions are typically explored in the counselling room as students bring their own curriculum of problems and issues which then become the learning goals they set for themselves or co-construct with the counsellor. Thus we have a guided learning experience which is tested out in the everyday life of the student and subsequently modified and refined.

Counselling and teaching are distinctively different, with the counsellor giving particular attention to students’ emotional stuckness and pain. In the context of the key competencies however they are complementary in purpose. School counsellors must thus be alert to any perception which would sideline the counsellor’s role from the educational process. In the current debate, about whether school counsellors should be required to have teacher registration, Chris Hooker’s call,[in his article “School Counsellors and Teachers Registration” in *Counselling Today* September 09] “ to maintain the position of school counsellors as an integral part of the professional staff in New Zealand secondary schools” is vital if the partnership between counsellor function and teaching function under the umbrella of the new curriculum is to be recognised, maintained and extended. It is this partnership between teacher and counsellor in the service of our pupils that expresses perhaps more clearly than any other school partnership the holistic and humanitarian underpinnings of New Zealand secondary education.

Below is a list of ways school counsellors routinely make contributions to the delivery of the key competencies in the students they work with.

RELATING TO OTHERS

Students develop and demonstrate this competency through the counselling process and pastoral programmes by:

- Reflecting on the nature of their relationships, particularly those which are problematic.
- Understanding how they affect others by their words and actions.
- Reinforcing their resilience to enable connection with others.
- Taking responsibility to make changes by trialling new ways of relating.
- Participating in programmes (e.g. Peer Support Leadership Training) which require attention to others' points of view and experiences, and identifying the value of others' roles within a group.
- Facilitating a small group (Peer Support) by creating an emotionally safe environment within which the younger students can relate.
- Empathising with and supporting others (Peer Mentors) while necessarily reflecting on the process they are leading.
- Mediating in peer conflict or bullying situations.

PARTICIPATING AND CONTRIBUTING

Students develop and demonstrate this competency through the counselling process and pastoral programmes by:

- Identifying obstacles to their inclusion and enjoyment of belonging to a group.
- Learning social skills to enhance participation e.g. assertive communication, respectful listening, and cultural awareness.
- Developing resiliency and motivation to be engaged with school life.
- Reflecting on how to transfer skills used in participating in one group to a new community.
- Exploring through discussion the existing communities to which the student belongs. (Ethnic, spiritual etc.) Understanding how these are actual and potential internal and external resources.
- Contributing to programmes (Peer Support etc.)
- Reflecting on and practising leadership.

USING LANGUAGE, SYMBOLS AND TEXTS

Students learn, develop, and demonstrate this competency through the counselling process and pastoral programmes by:

- Using the white board to co-construct with the counsellor, timelines, scales, genograms, and diagrams that describe, analyse and map the effects of problems.
- Using paper, crayons, pens etc to draw, write and talk about issues the student wishes to gain insight on. E.g. the Interactive Drawing Therapy intervention.
- Using three dimensional symbols such as puppets, and sand trays to express concepts and feelings and deepen understanding.
- By being assisted to develop richer meanings by use of metaphor, and descriptive language to increase critical thinking.
- Use of stories and therapeutic questions to develop self awareness and self reflection.
- Providing opportunities for letter writing, songs, poems, and music to express feelings and ideas to others.
- The awarding of certificates and other appropriate symbols to celebrate achievement.
- Using role play to access deeper meanings.
- Using journaling, enabling students to externalise their experience.
- Co-constructing with the student a preferred future, by making them aware of how language affects peoples understanding and responses.
- By being taught specific language forms such as “I” statements.
- Use of card sorts [images, words symbols, and colours] to help students clarify and express feelings and ideas.
- Using specifically designed computer programmes to promote understanding of themselves.
- Use of language to construct a guided fantasy that the student can adopt in order to access the needed emotional state.

MANAGING SELF

Students learn, develop, and demonstrate this competency through the counselling process and pastoral programmes by:

- Recognising levels of resourcefulness and resiliency they possess.
- Discovering new motivations and ways to access those strengths.
- Setting personal goals to create meaningful life plans.
- Developing strategies for over coming problems such as phobias and addictions.
- Processing traumatic incidents in order to establish better personal agency.
- Creating new meanings around their sense of self that lead to greater mental health.
- Learning social skills that will assist them to better manage issues they have identified.
- Participating in pastoral programmes that promote and reinforce self management, e.g. Peer Support, Travellers, Dare, social skills groups.

THINKING

Students learn, develop and demonstrate this competency through the counselling process and pastoral programmes process by:

- By being curious about and interrogating the problems they bring to counselling to form deeper understandings, constructing new knowledge as a basis for solving problems.
- Reflecting on their strengths and values as a resource.
- Thinking about their feelings and intuitions and the influence they are having on the issue at hand.
- Thinking about their thinking by challenging assumptions and perceptions about self, others and the environment so as to create greater space for effective action.
- Analysing and creating plans for action.
- Learning and practising decision making skills.
- Participating in programmes such as Peer Support and Peer Mentoring where students reflect on their own personal experience, develop new understandings about leadership and other relational knowledge, and act on the basis of that knowledge.

The above list is by no means exhaustive, but it is illustrative of the many and varied ways school counsellors routinely help the adolescent incorporate these key competencies into daily life in and outside the classroom. That contribution, by the very nature of the counsellor's role, typically intersects with times of great vulnerability and great potential for growth for the adolescent. This role is thus both profoundly therapeutic and educational and requires skills in both areas. Perhaps this was in the mind of those who originally required school counsellors to be trained in both professions. Whether to insist that school counsellors be trained teachers as well as counsellors or whether there is some other way to acknowledge the educational dimension of the school counsellor's role is a topic of much discussion at present. Less debatable in my view is that counselling therapy is by its very nature educative and in the school setting that therapy needs to be informed and guided by the key competencies and values of the New Zealand curriculum. The days of seeing the school counsellor as some kind of peripheral add-on to the central thrust of the school is hopefully over as we give expression to a more seamless curriculum under a unified set of values and competencies within a system that still creates room for schools to express and honour the character of their own communities.

[1] The New Zealand Curriculum 2007. Page 35

[2] The New Zealand Curriculum 2007 Page 8