

Counselling children in Years 1-8: Scoping primary school counselling in Aotearoa New Zealand

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NZARE Conference 2021 – Monday 15 November

KO TE TANGATA
FOR THE PEOPLE



- Part of study leave July-Dec 2021
- This study explores examples of where and how counselling has been offered in schools for primary-aged children. It documents that experience and argues for expansion of counselling services in primary schools.

Aim – why?



- Counselling is effective in supporting student wellbeing and have a positive effects on student outcomes
- Counselling (available in secondary schools) is not common in primary schools; usually provided through community organisation contracts
- In July 2020 (nb. effects of Covid-19) NZ Government announced funding for counselling in a small number of selected primary schools, using community organisations
- This study captures the experiences of counselling services provided in some schools; some are self-funded

Method - how?



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- Literature review
- Document review
- Interviews with counsellors, school managers, community organisation staff
- Transcripts for analysis



- Counselling with primary aged children (5-13)
 - Various modalities (incl. play; sand tray)
 - Engagement with caregivers/family
 - Group work
 - Counselling young children in schools
- Counselling in (secondary) schools (13-18)
 - Local and international validation
 - High demand for counselling in secondary schools
 - Recent publications noting need for increased counsellor – student ratio (currently 1:400 in NZ)

Document review



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- Policy documents requested from MoE; responded to as OIA request
- Received various ministry and cabinet documents
- Secondary schools receive guidance staffing entitlement – primary schools do not

Locations - where?



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- Waitaha Canterbury, Tauranga Moana, Waikato
- Planned kanohi-ki-te-kanohi, but only for one of the interviews (the others by zoom)
- Consultation/interviews with MoE, Mana Ake, Presbyterian Support, 3 full primary schools, one Area School, one Intermediate school

Participants - who?



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| Name(F/M) | Organisation | Identifier | Decile | Position | Funding |
|------------------|--------------|-------------------|--------|-------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Hayley (F) | Full primary | South Primary | 10 | LSC, SENCo | BOT funded community- |
| Josh (M) | PS1 | South Primary | 10 | MCouns student | organisation contract |
| Anna (F) | Area School | Area School | 1 | Guidance Counsellor | Employed staff, |
| Wil (F) | AS2 | Area School | 1 | Assoc Principal | teacher contract |
| Chris (F) | Full primary | New Primary | 6 | Teacher/MCouns student | Employed staff |
| Sue (F) | PS3 | New Primary | 6 | Principal | with BOT funds |
| Paul (M) | Full primary | North Primary | 1 | Previous Principal | (See below) |
| Daniel (M) | PS4 | North | 1 | Pou Tuakari /Guidance C | MoE funded with |
| Te Hau moana (M) | Full primary | Primary | 1 | New Tumuaki / Principal | extra BOT funds |
| Melissa (F) | Intermediate | East Intermediate | 5 | Principal | URF (MoE funds) (BOT in 2022) |
| James (M) | IS5 | East Interm. | 5 | MCouns student | Voluntary |
| Victoria (F) | NGO1 | Southern | | GM Social Services | Health, BOT |

Findings – what they said



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- Principals/DPs/SENCOs
- Counsellors

Area School Associate Principal - AS2 (Wil)



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- *We are only funded for the secondary kids. But our Board and principal are committed, so we just top up the funding*
- *We've seen a significant increase in self-harm in Years Six to Eight...cutting of the legs*
- *Definitely more females...some [effects] from the earthquakes...a spike with Covid*

Intermediate school principal - IS5 (Melissa)



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to be honest it's been a need that we've recognised for a number of years of the increasing... mental health needs of our emerging adolescents.

*we've been lobbying the **Ministry** for a long time ... When I say 'we,' I mean collectively intermediate school principals, but also primary school principals in terms of that mental health requirement.*

It just seems to get bigger and bigger. And the onus on teachers to respond to mental health issues just seems to get increasingly consuming...

Intermediate school principal – IS5 (Melissa)



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I've been in education for 25 years and kids are becoming more and more and more complex in terms of their needs.

*And to think that the **Ministry** doesn't fund us to support kids in that way [counselling] ... It's mindboggling actually and hugely disappointing.*

And it's hugely stressful for us as school leaders to think about... You know, we're here primarily to teach kids and to deliver the curriculum. But you know, kids have to be happy and healthy in order to be on board with those things.

*So it is a really critical area of need. And you know, I just implore the **Ministry** to find some way of being able to fund that sort of support for schools, particularly at our age group*

Counsellor – Intermediate school – IS5 (James)



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- *students cutting – self-harm, anxiety, depression, relationship difficulties, suicidal thoughts, suicide plans. Eating difficulties. Living with disabilities, an illness. So quite a wide range [of issues for children aged 11-13]*
- *anxiety and depression have been really prevalent. So has cutting. Cutting's been quite a big one – or self-harm ... cutting, and suicidal thoughts. That's been – it was a lot more than I initially thought.*

Primary school SENCo/LSC - PS1 (Hayley)



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- *[Counselling] It's Board funded...we pay \$ X and they [the NGO counsellor] can do up to 10 students [counselling sessions per week]*
- *If they were here as a member of staff, you're going to have them as part of your professional team, so you can bounce ideas off them, you can work collaboratively*
- *If it would cost us more to have someone on staff, then I'd rather contract to an agency because I want more for my money.*

Primary school manager - PS3 (Sue)



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- *We had an influx of students [at the end of 2020], so staffing was higher than normal [for 2021]...so next year [the teacher/counsellor] won't be able to be released to the [same] extent*
- *There's a lot around anxiety. Christchurch children have had some huge challenges [earthquakes, shootings]. ...there was heavy rains and flooding – huge numbers were absent*
- *I do think that we are probably not the only school who could really do with this kind of support.*

Counsellor – Primary school – PS3 (Chris)



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- *there are friendship concerns, anger, anxiety, whānau concerns, bullying, some health concerns as well*
- *the teachers they yeah... I think they, they appreciate the role being in the school because I'm onsite, part of the staff. I'm seen by the kids all the time*
- *so being a person who is onsite, and part of the school staff, I can do that... whereas you know, counsellors from [an NGO] come in and they have their session with the child and then they leave...*

Counsellor – primary school – PS4



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We've got to shift from speaking about getting counsellors into primary schools as a good idea.

We've got to get away from that passive language.

We've got to become quite determined and assertive in saying it where people need to listen to us. This is imperative.

*This is **really, really** important.*

We've got to stop saying, 'Oh this would be a lovely idea.' We should have counsellors in primary schools now'. Because these young people are experiencing things that cannot wait until they get to high school.

Findings - so what?



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- Funding should be more accessible
- The value of counsellors with primary children
- The need for counsellors in schools Years 1-8
- Preference for counsellors to be on staff
- Counsellors from community organisations do add to learning support for students

Findings - 2



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- Creative and organic approaches developed by individual schools
- Development of pastoral hubs and health teams - Hauora services (counsellors with social workers, and SENCOs, LSCs)

Recommendations – next?



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- A network/professional group for counsellors in schools with children in Years 1-8 – regionally? nationally?
- Further research about the needs of primary aged children and ‘issues’ brought to counselling
- Specific education for counsellors about working in schools?
- That primary schools receive guidance staffing entitlement?

Counsellor as nurturer...



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***Poipoia te kakano
Kia puawai***

***Nurture the seed
And it will blossom***

Paul Flanagan, PhD



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