

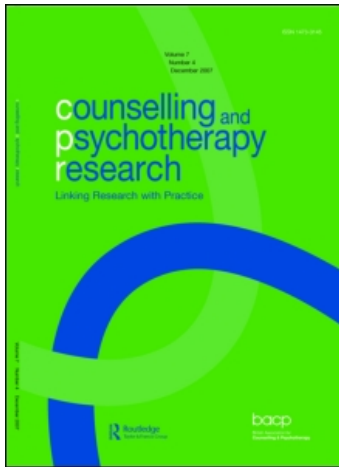
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School counselling in Wales: Recommendations for good practice

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Abstract

Aims: This paper presents the context, methodologies and findings of a research project commissioned by the Welsh Assembly Government to evaluate school counselling and services available to children and young people in the UK and to make recommendations for future service development in Wales. **Method:** The study adopted three research methods: desk research (a literature review), a quantitative survey, and qualitative fieldwork. The survey included a sample of primary and secondary schools in Wales, as well as local authorities. Fieldwork included interviews with teachers, counsellors, parents, and children. **Findings:** Evidence-based recommendations for counselling service provision in schools in Wales were developed, which now inform the Welsh Assembly Government's (WAG) National Strategy for counselling in schools in Wales (2008).

Keywords: *School counselling, policy, strategy, evidence-based, Welsh Assembly Government*

Introduction

The research reported in this paper was commissioned by the Welsh Assembly Government (WAG) following a recommendation by the Clywch Inquiry (WAG, 2004) that WAG devise a national strategy for the provision of counselling services for children and young people in education, along with training and support for teachers in their pastoral role. The research team was given the brief to assess whether current models of counselling services in the UK are robust, flexible and adaptable enough to apply more widely throughout Wales to fit in with new planning and joint working arrangements put in place to protect children (Children Act, DFES, 2004). This paper presents the context, methodologies and findings of the research,¹ focusing on the question: Are current frameworks for the provision of counselling services in the UK suitable for use more widely across Wales? A further focus is on the ten recommendations for good practice in service provision developed from the findings.

Method

The research took place over six months in 2007, and was undertaken by a research team including academics, counsellors and teachers. Three strands of research were undertaken: desk research, survey research and fieldwork.

The desk research involved a scoping exercise to identify, collate, review and analyse models of counselling in use in schools in Wales and the rest of the

UK. The literature reviewed included grey literature such as in-house service evaluations, supplemented by relevant documentation gathered from counsellors and psychotherapists who responded to a call for information through the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) journal, *Therapy Today*. In addition, journal articles and research reports were identified through systematic searching of academic databases.

The second strand of research involved a survey, which aimed to establish how counselling services currently operating in Wales were planned, managed and evaluated. The survey sample included a full sample of 227 secondary schools; a stratified (10%) sample of 157 primary schools; a random (25%) sample of 12 special schools, a random (25%) sample of 15 pupil referral units (n = estimated 60 total for 2007); and a population sample of 22 Local Authorities (LAs). The sample addressed the variables of rural/urban and Welsh medium/English medium schools across Wales. A total of 445 hard copy questionnaires were posted in English and Welsh language media and the response rate was 28% (n = 123). Completed questionnaires were collated, coded and analysed, using SPSS for Windows software package. Qualitative responses were grouped into emergent themes, using a constant comparative method of analysis.

The third and final strand of the research included stakeholder interviews, in the form of fieldwork interviews and distance interviews (telephone and email information gathering). The stakeholder interviews were opportunistic in their participant recruitment

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processes, and aimed to enrich the information gathered from the desk and survey research. The fieldwork team conducted face-to-face interviews with adults ($n=33$) and pupils ($n=58$) in schools and with services, including head teachers, deputy heads, pastoral heads, school counsellors, children and young people (years 7,8,9,10,12), police liaison officers, pupil guidance managers, parents, youth workers, school health nurses and charitable trust workers/counsellors.

Findings

The research process was iterative, with each strand informing the other.

Range of models

Synthesis of desk research and survey data identified 12 distinct models of service provision in operation across the UK (see Table 1).

Table 1. Range of models identified.

-
1. Counselling as part of a multi-agency team
 2. School-based healthcare staff
 3. Teaching staff
 4. In-house peer support
 5. Centralised/peripatetic local authority provision
 6. Centralised/in-house local authority provision
 7. Singleton practitioner model
 8. In-school provision by external agency
 9. Out of school provision by external agency
 10. Cluster model
 11. Management only model
 12. Vetted/Pool model
-

Components

Data analysis of desk, fieldwork and survey research led to the identification of a range of 40 practice and service delivery components; their presence or absence depending to a large extent on the model of counselling used and the local context in which counselling was delivered. These components were grouped into categories: funding; employer-related; context; accountability; counsellor-related and client-related (see Table 2).

Ten recommendations: The evidence

Ten recommendations were developed from the three strands of research. These are presented here, along with the source of the evidence upon which they are based:

(1) School counselling services should have sustainable funding

Survey data indicated that almost half of schools funded their counselling service from within the school budget, with a further third having LA funding.

There were high levels of dissatisfaction with these funding arrangements, with six out of ten schools reporting that they were 'dissatisfied' or 'very dissatisfied' with funding arrangements. Suggestions for improving this situation varied, but included a range of preferences, in particular, for LA funding and for direct funding by WAG, both ring-fenced for this purpose. All senior staff in schools raised the issue of sustainable funding as a concern for counselling provision in schools.

(2) Services should employ professionally qualified counsellors who have experience of working with young people, who access appropriate clinical supervision with experienced supervisors, and who take part in regular, relevant continuing professional development

Documentary evidence identified professionally qualified counsellors as essential. Survey data indicated that a third of schools required a Diploma in Counselling as the minimum level of qualification, but with a further quarter of schools indicating some

Table 2. Practice and service delivery components.

-
1. Funding source
 2. Sustainability of funding
 3. Employer
 4. Cost effectiveness/value for money
 5. Setting – primary/secondary/cluster
 6. Integrated into school/peripatetic
 7. On school site/off site
 8. Policies and procedures
 9. Adherence to guidance and legislation
 10. Risk assessment
 11. Accountability
 12. Insurance
 13. Terms and conditions of employment
 14. Complaints procedure
 15. Professional membership
 16. Training and qualifications of counsellor
 17. Experience of counsellor
 18. Personal qualities
 19. Supervision
 20. CRB check
 21. Continuing professional development
 22. Job description, other functions in school
 23. Staff awareness of service
 24. Parental awareness and permissions if necessary
 25. Publicity and promotion of service
 26. Non stigmatising
 27. Full time/part time
 28. Availability during school holidays
 29. Designated and appropriate room
 30. Theoretical orientation
 31. Referral systems – referred with consent, self referral, open referral
 32. Open ended/fixed number of sessions, and session length
 33. Appropriate available resources
 34. Individual/group/both
 35. Confidentiality and appropriate information sharing
 36. Safeguarding
 37. Record keeping
 38. Monitoring
 39. Evaluation (qualitative and quantitative)
 40. Reporting arrangements
-

uncertainty about necessary qualifications. However, almost half the schools indicated that counsellors should have prior experience of counselling in a school, with a further fifth indicating a preference for prior experience of actually teaching in a school.

Clinical supervision was not addressed directly by the survey, but was picked up by one respondent as an issue to be noted. Fieldwork carried out with young people, school staff and stakeholders identified the need for qualified counsellors and for counsellors to be trained in working with young people and children. Some young people also said that counsellors needed degrees, experience and relevant training. In terms of counselling in primary schools some senior staff raised concerns that even if counsellors had experience of working with adolescents this wouldn't necessarily mean that they could work competently with younger primary aged children. They noted how approaches to counselling might need to differ to accommodate different developmental needs. Some stakeholders raised concerns as to where all these well-trained counsellors would be found.

Other concerns raised by stakeholders focused on how the infrastructure for training competent school counsellors would be developed and maintained, and how supervision would be funded and provided. Professional development was identified as a need for both counsellors and staff. Ongoing training in a range of areas was seen as essential by some staff as was access to supervisors with experience of working with children and young people.

(3) Deliver accessible counselling in an appropriately private but safe setting within the school vicinity

Survey evidence indicated that three quarters of schools reported providing a dedicated room for counselling. Levels of satisfaction with these arrangements for provision of a dedicated room for counselling were reported as being high (60%). When asked in interviews about important features of a counselling service young people often made reference to components of a private and safe setting.

These responses included the need for a concealed entrance, a more private and confidential location inside school, a sound proof room 'down the corridor', and a nicely furnished room, with a comfortable chair. Some young people noted that they wouldn't want everyone knowing that they were going to see a counsellor and thus the location of the counselling room needs to avoid being in easy public view. Another stakeholder raised the issue of access and visibility.

(4) Be seen as non-stigmatising by the school community and a normal part of school provision, which is integrated into the school community

Desk research indicated that counselling should be seen as non-stigmatising by the school community and a normal part of school provision, integrated into

the school community. Survey data indicated a wide range of routes of access to counselling within school, including referral by staff, parent or pupil, with the vast majority (88%) of respondents expressing satisfaction with these arrangements.

In terms of qualitative responses from the survey, there was a wide range of opinions expressed as to the role of counselling within the school, ranging from its value as an extension of its acknowledged pastoral role, to concerns that counselling deflects school priorities away from its central educational task. Interviews with senior staff produced data showed that they wanted to ensure that the counsellor integrated well into the school community. Staff commented on the need for counsellors to understand the values and priorities of the school and indicated that teachers would benefit from related training to help support counselling in schools (for example, identifying psychological problems, managing referrals and maintaining appropriate boundaries with the counsellor).

Staff also commented that any counselling provision would need to complement rather than replace other psychological well-being initiatives in place in schools and work alongside them. Additionally, staff believed that such emotional health initiatives should not replace counselling. Young people said that they would need to know and meet any counsellors, and that counselling should be discussed in school lessons so they can understand and learn more about what counselling is.

(5) The service is evaluated and monitored by individuals or an agency (in or out of school) with experience in this specialised area of work

Survey data indicated that almost two thirds of schools confirmed that the counselling service was being evaluated, largely including 'soft' measures such as feedback from pupils, teachers, parents and counsellors, and, more rarely, 'hard' measures such as statistics of take-up of the service and outcome measures. Satisfaction levels with these arrangements were mixed and somewhat inconclusive. Fieldwork indicated that monitoring and evaluation was undertaken by some counselling services. However, it was clear that counsellors and managers of services need guidance on how to evaluate services.

(6) Pay due regard to current legislation and guidance, and offer confidentiality within usual ethical and safeguarding limits

Survey data indicated that a range of personal information was disclosed to others by counsellors, including, variously, child protection concerns, the name of the pupil requesting or receiving counselling (the data does not provide information on whether this is with or without the child's consent) and much more rarely the number of sessions received or outcomes of the counselling itself. There were high

levels of satisfaction expressed (86%) with these arrangements.

In fieldwork interviews schools said that any counselling service would work within the child protection guidelines. Schools reported that they would expect counsellors to work alongside their designated child protection teachers, but also some hoped that counsellors would have access to more specialist advice from outside of the school. Staff seemed to have a good understanding of confidentiality (and its limits) with regard to counselling.

All students interviewed thought that confidentiality was crucial if they were to be able to trust their counsellor, but equally some pupils interviewed wanted the counsellor to share information with relevant parties (parents, staff, etc) if they thought someone was in danger or at risk of significant harm.

(7) Respond flexibly to local needs in respect of diversity (e.g. language) and practicality (e.g. availability during holidays)

Issues of flexibility and availability were not addressed directly by the survey, but a number of qualitative responses indicated the relevance of responding to the diverse needs of the school population, including specific areas of need, such as substance misuse or bereavement. During interviews, young people, school staff and stakeholders highlighted the need for service provision during holidays.

The need for a service for those out of school was also raised, along with the needs of young people aged 16–18. All young people were asked about language issues. Approximately half of the young people said that the service should be in the main language of school, but it should also consider offering services in Welsh. Some of the young people said it should be a bi-lingual service in English and Welsh. However, there wasn't a strong indication that all schools should offer counselling in English and Welsh, but instead that Welsh and other languages should be made available when appropriate/required.

(8) Work with and alongside other services and agencies in a collegial manner, whilst maintaining appropriate levels of confidentiality

Desk research data evidences this in good practice guidelines. Survey data indicated that almost all school counselling services made provision for referral to more specialised mental health services, such as CAMHS or Social Services Departments, and three quarters of schools were satisfied with these arrangements.

Some problems were experienced, however, in terms of the lack of feedback after a referral had been made, and the professional 'gate-keeping' for referral procedures. During fieldwork, schools described ways in which they had access to other services and agencies and how they worked alongside these. Concerns were raised, however, about how

school counsellors would have access to other relevant services and resources in supporting the work they will do in schools (e.g. CAMHS) if they were employed directly by the school.

(9) Counsellors should be members of a professional body and as such have an established ethical framework and complaints procedure

A quarter of schools indicated that professional accreditation was seen as a minimum qualification requirement for working in a school counselling service. All schools involved in the fieldwork and which had a counselling service used BACP's ethical framework and made reference to BACP's *Guidance for Good Practice in Schools* (BACP, 2006). It was evident from the fieldwork that young people did not have access to a formal complaints procedure – they only had access to teachers and the school council and some teachers were unsure if a formal complaints procedure would be appropriate for a school setting.

(10) Employ counsellors whose personal qualities will mean that they are approachable, have good listening skills and a manner that encourages a climate for safe and trusting relationships

When young people were asked during fieldwork about the five most important things they would look for in a counsellor they listed a range of skills that related to personal qualities, for example approachable, friendly, a good listener, polite, kind, and have personality.

Conclusion

This research has been instrumental in informing the Welsh Assembly Government in the development of a national strategy for counselling in schools in Wales.² The issue of counselling provision 'fit for purpose' in Wales has been addressed in terms of robustness and flexibility and the adaptability of provision to fit in with new planning and joint working arrangements put in place to protect children and young people. The recommendations for good practice are firmly evidence-based, have been developed through a rigorous research process and have powerfully and directly influenced policy and practice. There is scope to increase the impact of this research and analyse the findings in relation to theoretical and conceptual perspectives.

Biographical notes

Sue Pattison is Director for the Integrated PhD in Education and Communication at Newcastle University and has researched counselling in schools in the UK and overseas. Sue is a BACP Accredited practising therapist and supervisor with a wide experience of children and young people.

Nancy Rowland is Director of Research, Policy and Professional Practice at BACP. She works with the Research Committee on developing BACP's research strategy and with the research team on the implementation of that strategy. The key aims are to develop a research culture within BACP and to contribute to the evidence base for counselling and psychotherapy. Nancy is committed to evidence-based practice.

Kaye Richards is Research Facilitator at BACP and her role is to undertake research, promote research awareness and facilitate research into counselling and psychotherapy. Kaye also works with BACP's Counselling Children and Young People (CCYP) Division as Special Interest Lead and is a founding member of the Counselling in Schools Research Consortium (CSRC).

Karen Cromarty is BACP's Senior Lead Advisor, and has particular responsibility for children and young people. She is an accredited counsellor, and an experienced supervisor and trainer.

Peter Jenkins is Senior Lecturer in Counselling at the University of Salford, a contributor to the BACP (2006) *Good Practice Guidance for Counselling in Schools*, and co-author, with Debbie Daniels, of *Therapy with Children* (Sage, in press).

Filiz Polat is an Associate Professor and the course co-ordinator for the MEd In Inclusive Education at the University of Hong Kong. She is a member of BPS and a Chartered Psychologist and Counselling Psychologist. She has an international experience in inclusive education and school counselling.

Notes

¹ Further information is available in the full report: www.bacp.co.uk/research/school_counselling.php

² For further information see the full document available at: <http://wales.gov.uk/dcells/publications/publications/guidanceandinformation/counsellingstrategy/counsellingstrategy-e.pdf?lang=en>

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