

School Counsellors and the Key Competencies

The Difference that Makes the Difference¹

Colin Hughes, Alison Burke, Judith Graham,
Kathie Crocket, and Elmarie Kotzé

Abstract

Education leaders maintain that the contemporary *New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007) offers opportunities for lateral innovation as learning becomes a collective, whole-school endeavour. This article argues that school guidance counsellors are well positioned to weave themselves into possibilities for lateral innovation when the counselling room becomes a place where students explore, discover, develop, practise, and strengthen key competencies in the context of the concerns and difficulties that bring them to counselling. Indeed, the language of *The New Zealand Curriculum*, with its focus on values and key competencies alongside learning areas and learning for life, has much in common with the language of counselling. The structure of *The New Zealand Curriculum* in fact brings guidance counsellors to the heart of the core purpose of schools.

Keywords: school guidance counsellors, *The New Zealand Curriculum*, learning, values, key competencies

This article illustrates the counselling practice of three school guidance counsellors who have together given careful consideration to the ways in which counselling practice offers opportunities for learning that might not otherwise be available to students. Looking at practice through the lenses of the key competencies outlined in *The New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2007) the article shows how counselling actively contributes to student learning. It thus highlights the relevance of our focus on mental health and well-being to the educational purposes of the school—and to the lives of young people.

A day in the life of a school guidance counsellor: Colin's story

It was a Monday, in 2009. In period one I saw a group of three Year 10 girls. They were part of a larger group of seven girls who had been good friends since midway through Year 9. These three girls were distressed. There had been a falling out within the group and it had split into two camps. Things had been said that were hurtful. Everyone was unhappy. Attempts had been made from within the group to try to repair the damage, but without success. They didn't know what to do next. They wanted to know if I could help.

In period two I met with a Year 12 girl, hard-working, always eager to do her very best. In her last exams she had suffered panic attacks and it had badly affected her results. She had heard that I had helped some other students with anxiety issues and wondered whether I could help her too.

After interval I saw a Year 12 boy. He explained to me that he had been to a church youth camp and as a result he had done some thinking about a theft he had committed from his uncle's place some months earlier. His uncle lived in a different town. He wanted to say sorry and try to put it right with his uncle. Together we explored a number of options. In the end he decided to write his uncle a letter as a beginning. Together we constructed some ideas on the whiteboard of what he wanted to put in the letter. He asked if he could return with a draft copy of the letter for me to look at. A further appointment was made.

In period four, a Year 13 boy arrived. He reported thoughts of suicide following the break-up of a longstanding relationship. Among other things I completed a suicide ideation assessment and explored with him ways he was managing his suicidal thoughts, and together we made a plan that would support him until we could meet again the next day.

I left for lunch, feeling the weight I do when working with students with suicidal thoughts, replaying the process we had been through, and reviewing my decision-making.

I ate my lunch and caught up with a teacher with whom I needed to consult. The second half of lunchtime I was on ground duty.

I was looking forward to period five, which I had left free of appointments to catch up on some important tasks. In my usual way I had made a "to do" list. Top of the list was responding to a message left on my answerphone by a parent who sounded either angry or stressed, possibly both. I also needed to contact Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS), a task left over from the previous Friday. It was weighing on

my mind, another “must do” before I left for home. Next on the list was finalising the agenda for the Pastoral Meeting with the Deans, to go out that day. I had not completed my notes from one of the day’s sessions and that had to be done. I didn’t completely trust my recall if I left it until Tuesday. The other things could wait another day.

This final period started with a phone call to the parent. I had just put the receiver down and was about to ring CAMHS when the phone rang. It was a senior staff member, asking if I could please come over to the interview room next to her office. A student with whom I had previously been working in regard to anger issues had thrown some chairs around the office and spoken abusively to her. The boy was now curled up in a foetal position in a corner of the room. Responding to that situation took the rest of the period.

All in all, it was a busy but fairly ordinary day for a school guidance counsellor.

Next on the day’s agenda was our Monday afternoon Staff Professional Development meeting. Today’s topic, we had been informed, was the “new curriculum document” (*The New Zealand Curriculum*, MoE, 2007). I would like to say that I went with eager step. The truth is that I was thinking that I could more profitably use this time doing those tasks left undone from period five. Moreover, I judged that the topic of the meeting would hold little relevance for me.

Life is full of surprises and sometimes insights come when you least expect them. This was one of those occasions when I least expected it.

The meeting included a PowerPoint presentation. One of the first slides that was put up read like this:

Key Competencies

- Thinking
- Using language symbols and texts
- Managing self
- Relating to others
- Participating and contributing

In my mind, I began to review the client situations I had dealt with that day, relating them to the key competencies:

Friction among friends	Relating to others
Anxiety attacks	Thinking
Attempting reconciliation	Using language, symbols, texts
Suicidal thought	Managing self
Anger management	Managing self

There was not one issue that did not seem to relate to these key competencies. But as they say on the infomercials with breathless excitement, “But wait, there’s more!” Within a few minutes this slide was put up:

Through their learning experiences students will develop their ability to:

- Express their own values;
- Explore with empathy the values of others;
- Critically analyse values and actions based on them;
- Discuss disagreements that arise from differences in values and negotiate solutions;
- Make ethical decisions and act on them.

(Values reasoning, *The New Zealand Curriculum*, 2007, p. 10)

As I was reading this slide, I began to think again about the client stories I had heard that day in my room. Each story was a value-laden story. And my work with each one of them involved constructing learning experiences around one or more of those value-reasoning abilities.

By now my attention was well and truly caught. I could see that my work in school was intimately interwoven with both the key competencies and the value-reasoning abilities of the new curriculum.

School counsellors and The New Zealand Curriculum: Colin continues

I was excited by this development. I have been counselling in schools for over 30 years now, and I feel more passionate and more convinced about the importance and impact of counselling than I have ever been. The reason for that is simple. I have been a witness. I have been a witness to:

- distress and pain being relieved;
- relationships being mended;
- love being restored;
- fear banished;
- hope rekindled and courage renewed.

Even though our work is confidential and behind closed doors, others have seen it too. Firstly, our clients and their friends—who continue to come—but also teachers and parents have noticed. All this happens often enough for our role to be appreciated and valued by most of our teaching colleagues.

But still a question mark hangs over our role in the school. It is often unspoken, but there would barely be a school counsellor who has not heard it or felt it. It may be expressed in different ways at different times but the sentiment is basically the same:

- Yes, but how do you contribute to the core business of schools?
- Isn't your work at best secondary—nice, humane, but secondary to the bottom line of what schools are really about?
- Isn't it just a support function to the main task of teaching and learning rather than a front-line contributor to learning?

It's a justifiable challenge. These are legitimate questions. And they deserve serious answers. Sitting in the staff meeting that day I felt I was being given a new way to answer that challenge.

Having had time since that day to think more about *The New Zealand Curriculum*, and to discuss it with other guidance counsellors and with teaching colleagues, I would say that this curriculum document offers a rich understanding of the purposes of education. Those purposes are primarily captured in the key competencies and values that sit alongside subject areas.

For the first time, school guidance counsellors can describe the learning opportunities we provide for students through our counselling, not just in counselling terms but also in the pedagogical terms of *The New Zealand Curriculum*, in the language of teachers, school leaders and administrators. For the first time school guidance counsellors may be able to demonstrate that our role is not a secondary adjunct to the main task of schools, but that the learning that happens in the counselling room makes a direct contribution to the core business of schools as described by *The New Zealand Curriculum*.

I had some further speculative questions. For example, what if we could demonstrate and illustrate, through reflecting on and researching our own practice, that counselling work typically and routinely helps students practise, develop and grow in the use of these key competencies and core values? What impact would that have on how counsellors are perceived by staff, students and parents, and by the Ministry of Education?

What if it would open up a new dialogue with our teaching colleagues in which key competencies and core values were seen, not just through the lens of subject areas, but also through a wide-angle lens through which each key competency and each core value was seen as having important implications for mental health? Could it be possible that teachers' academic work with students and our mental health and developmental work with students through counselling might all contribute to providing learning environments where these key competencies and core values are "modelled, explored and developed" (MoE, 2007, p. 10)?

There were potential dangers to this line of inquiry. For example, it could lead not

to a strengthening of the unique role of counsellors in schools, but to a diminishing of it by redefining counsellors as no more than specialist teachers.

I was eager to talk to my counselling colleagues and gain their insights. A workshop where 16 Bay of Plenty school counsellors reflected on their practice in the light of the key competencies produced a descriptive list of typical counselling actions under the headings of each of these competencies. I wrote these findings up for wider circulation (Hughes, 2009).² A number of school counsellors have found it helpful to give this article to their principals and Boards of Trustees to illustrate the kind of connection our counselling work has in helping students develop these competencies in their own lives. In turn, the article led to the current collaborative research project involving three school guidance counsellors in the Eastern Bay of Plenty and two researchers from the University of Waikato, and that is the focus of the rest of this article.

The research project: Counsellors and key competencies

The Teaching and Learning Research Initiative is a research fund available to partnerships of practitioners (usually teachers) and researchers to investigate teaching and learning. It has provided our research group with the funding to engage in a two-year collaborative study.³ The purpose of our project is to investigate how school guidance counselling contributes to students' developing, strengthening and using key competencies, and thus how counsellors currently participate and might further participate in the implementation of *The New Zealand Curriculum*. Our central research question is expressed this way: *How do school guidance counsellors contribute to students' development and use of key competencies?*

A study with a practitioner-researcher team is well suited to participatory action research, with its collaborative "problem-posing, knowledge creation, and action-taking cycles" (Brydon-Miller & Maguire, 2009, p. 88), and its participatory ethos. Our project has been fortunate in having the strong support of all three school principals. As well, each counsellor has formally contracted with a colleague-in-support, another member of their school's staff, with whom they meet from time to time for reflection and alternative perspectives.

What follows is an overview of the four action research cycles for which we initially planned.

Cycle 1 (Term 1): General overview of what happens in the counselling room

For five weeks each of the three school guidance counsellors observed their general practice and kept a brief log in grid form of each counselling session. The log

documented each counselling session in terms of the concerns students brought, and what we believed were the dominant key competencies arising from these.

Cycle 2 (Term 2): Vignettes

Each counsellor chose three “snapshot” examples of practice they had engaged in with students within recent weeks. The whole team met and we explored these moments for the key competencies at work. We then fictionalised these examples to illustrate moments of counselling practice in which students employed and were supported to develop key competencies further, when counsellors were scaffolding student learning. By fictionalising the examples we focused on the work of the counsellor and protected student privacy. For us all, counsellor researchers and university researchers, it was a heartwarming research process as we witnessed these stories of young people, and of counselling practice, and gave this practice considered attention.

Cycle 3 (Term 3–4): Counselling stories

This is where we looked in more depth at counselling practice with particular students. Each counsellor invited one or two students to be part of the project. As researchers we documented our counselling practice in relation to the key competencies. Students’ perspectives were included: the university researchers interviewed the students about their counselling experiences, including how they believed counselling had contributed to their learning and how it had enhanced (or not) their use of the key competencies. Where appropriate we also invited the perspectives of other significant people in their lives, such as a teacher or a peer. We are currently working with the research materials from Cycles 2 and 3.

Cycle 4 (2013): Analysis and dissemination

In our final round, throughout 2013, we will continue to reflect on what our research materials show about the process, content and outcome of counselling, and how these relate to the use and learning of key competencies. As we continue to meet, we will shape the research materials into a range of formats suitable for dissemination to a variety of teaching and counselling networks. We will consult our school communities as we prepare material for dissemination.

Results

Counselling overview from Cycle 1

Data from Cycle 1 served the purpose of giving us a general overview of key competencies and learning in the counselling room. Using an overview grid we found that

while often one key competency appeared to be more dominant or foregrounded than the others in a counselling session, thus giving a particular colour to the conversation, many key competencies were in use in most sessions. We came to think that perhaps all the key competencies are inherent in any story but which of the particular competencies comes into focus, as means or as end,⁴ emerges within the context of a unique client–counsellor relationship.

By way of illustration, we all found that when working with a student around one identified concern over a series of sessions, different key competencies came into primary focus at different times. If we take the example of managing anger, in session one the counsellor might explore with the client how anger is impacting on his or her class work, relationships with friends and family, and involvement in sport—the key competency of *participating and contributing*. In session two, building on the learning, insight and motivation gained from session one, the focus might be on mindfulness strategies, or on truth coaches or affirmations, that the student can employ—the key competency of *thinking*. In session three, those strategies might be built on by learning further ways to respond to others that are appropriately assertive—the key competency of *relating to others*.

Alison, Judith and Colin have each undertaken counsellor education in different places, at different times, and among us we use a variety of modalities. During Cycle 1, we noticed that some modalities may draw out particular key competencies. For example, one of us used Interactive Drawing Therapy much more than the other two and it was this counsellor who noted the key competency of *using language symbols and text* much more than the other counsellors. This point may indicate that the therapeutic modality used by counsellors has some influence on the key competencies that emerge, an area that we will explore further as the study continues.

Cycle 2 counselling vignettes

Our focus here is on demonstrating our use of counselling vignettes. These vignettes are intended to illustrate counselling practice, and the learning and key competency use and development that are made possible within a brief interlude of counselling.

Tama and Dylan

Dylan has made an appointment to see Jeff, the school guidance counsellor. When he arrives for the session, Dylan brings his friend Tama. As Jeff invites him into the counselling room, Dylan says, “Tama is here for the same thing, sir.” Jeff invites Tama to come in too.

Jeff begins by paying attention to Dylan and Tama having come together, to make explicit any implicit intentions.⁵ In counselling terms, this invitation into *thinking* might be understood as “double listening,” and asking questions about what is “absent but implicit” (White, 2007). In the context of key competencies, it might be understood that such questions surface tacit knowledge.

Jeff: How come the two of you have come together?

Tama: Because we’re bros.

In Tama’s response, Jeff hears some knowledge about the implications of relationship, *of relating to others*, and again he invites the boys to make explicit tacit knowledge about relationship.

Jeff: What does it mean to be a bro?

Tama’s response offers a statement about the actions involved in relating as bros.

Tama: We look out for each other.

Jeff picks up on this knowledge, and invites the boys to consider its application in counselling. In effect his question asks how this knowledge will be enacted, perhaps with a further invitation into *thinking*.

Jeff: So how are you going to look out for each other in counselling?

Dylan: We want to chuck the booze, sir. You know the ad, sir, where the guy says, “Bloody idiot.” We’re not idiots.

With some relational context in place, Dylan speaks to the goals with which the boys have come to counselling, taking the conversation into the realms of *managing self*. Jeff continues to give significance to their coming together: to investigate how their joint action, as a strategy to meet the challenge of giving up drinking, might also be an expression of *managing self*.

Jeff: So how come you two decided to come together?

Tama: It’s what bros do.

Tama’s response again carries some implicit, insider knowledge about *relating to others* and *managing self*. Jeff’s response is intended to explore the context in which that knowledge has been expressed or learned.

Jeff: Do you know many bros who would do this kind of thing?

Tama: Dunno.

Dylan: Yeah, man, you told me about your uncle, you know, the one who was the league player.

Tama: Oh yeah, yeah, he gave it up.

We see here one benefit of having two young people engaged in counselling at once. In the face of Tama’s not knowing (immediately)—“Dunno”—Dylan negotiates the

meaning offered by Jeff's question. In this effective working together, he comes up with an idea located in Tama's own whānau, creating an opportunity for both the boys to join their lives to an already available story of giving up alcohol. This moment makes visible the boys' *participating and contributing* in a community that might support their hopes and plans for change. Jeff's scaffolded inquiries, and Tama and Dylan's responses, colour the conversation with many key competencies in the pursuit of the overall competency of *managing self* through "giving up the booze."

Jeff makes good use of Dylan and Tama's friendship to produce a context and actions of support so they can explore and manage their lives in the way they would prefer. Tama and Dylan experience collaborative knowledge-making in a community of inquiry and acknowledgement; teachers might call this co-construction. The boys came to counselling with shared goals, and as they make meaning of their actions as "bros" they perform their identities as young people who are taking responsibility to manage themselves, to work towards their sporting goals, and to participate in and contribute to each other's lives.

This example of a Cycle 2 vignette illustrates how, by looking through a keyhole into a short counselling moment, our study provides the materials that show how the key competencies are performed in counselling, as both means—that is, as skills such as *relating to others*—and as ends—that is, as an outcome such as *managing self*. The vignettes have offered us opportunities to foreground the learning context of the counselling room, to make the case that alongside teaching colleagues, school guidance counsellors also make a direct contribution to learning and to key competency use and development.

The counselling room as a learning context

While the view through the keyhole takes us to the position that the counselling room is a learning context, it is important to emphasise that school guidance counsellors are more than specialist teachers. We argue that there are differences between the counselling room and the classroom that shape the learning environment for Tama and Dylan, and other students, and between teachers' roles and counsellors' roles. We suggest that these are the differences that make the difference. These differences are backgrounded in the vignette above. They are worth making explicit because they have such an influence on the learning that can occur in counselling.

Firstly and fundamentally we suggest that when they meet with Jeff, Tama and Dylan are clients. They do not meet in a pupil–teacher relationship. Certainly they are

students and Jeff is a staff member, but Jeff's relationship with them ethically is also that they are clients. Their status as clients and their rights are detailed in the Code of Ethics that governs the work of Judith, Colin and Alison in their practice as school guidance counsellors. In our situations, the New Zealand Association of Counsellors' *Code of Ethics* (2002) shapes the learning environment of our counselling rooms—including in our research practice. For example, apart from very limited exceptions, a counselling client controls the degree of confidentiality. In contrast, a student does not. In counselling, this confidentiality helps shape a safe learning environment for the client where topics of personal high risk can be explored.

This safety becomes particularly important when feelings such as shame, fear, guilt, and confusion are traversed, such as in the case of Tama and Dylan when they made disclosures about alcohol abuse. Without the security afforded by confidentiality, the risk is often seen by a student/client as too great for honest and in-depth exploration. Learning is thus compromised. Disclosure to others, unless there is serious risk (Agee, 2011; Hughes, 2011), is negotiated between a counsellor and a student, with school counsellors always aware of the potential value of the inclusion of others in a student's community, at appropriately judged times.

From their professional classroom context, teachers have developed sophisticated and comprehensive ways of sharing information gained from their interactions with students: school reports, letters home, student files (both electronic and paper), meetings to discuss a student, and so on. This sharing of information is seen as both helpful to the educational process and part of being a good team player. It is thus sometimes hard for our teaching colleagues to see counsellors as good team players when we come from a culture of confidentiality rather than one of sharing client information. Both cultures—of confidentiality and of sharing—have been developed to enhance the effectiveness of the respective roles and relationships. Each serves an educational purpose.

A further difference between the counselling room and the teaching room as a site of learning is in the degree of requirement: it is voluntary for Tama and Dylan to go to counselling, but compulsory for them to attend class. There is generally no external sanction if a student does not turn up for a counselling appointment. This is not true in the teacher–student relationship where, for the most part, attendance is compulsory and punishment is given for non-attendance. In Judith, Alison and Colin's counselling practices, about 85% of clients self-refer. The volitional nature of the counselling relationship means that motivation to be involved and to keep being involved in learning through counselling is located with the client. This sets the

foundation for a very co-constructed learning environment. For Tama and Dylan, the motivation to engage in counselling arose out of a desire to manage their lives. Jeff meets their interest and together they construct the learning. The words that Tama and Dylan speak shape their purpose in coming and contribute to the construction of the learning project they engage in.

We might suggest that the client brings the relevant learning content, the curriculum, to the counsellor. It is the client's concern that becomes the focus for exploration and learning. It might be said that the client is the curriculum.

In the teacher–student relationship, keeping students attending to a set of defined subject areas, often referred to as “keeping them on task,” is a key teaching function. For the counsellor, keeping a student on task has quite a different focus. It requires the counsellor to listen closely to the client and employ a range of techniques to help them explore, in ever-increasing depth and breadth, the issue they have brought to counselling. In engaging Tama and Dylan in learning, Jeff, without exception, keyed off what they had said: he was not the source of information, but rather through skilled inquiry he facilitated their generating knowledge. Jeff unashamedly and purposefully explored the curriculum the boys had brought to counselling.

In counselling, then, learning may be seen through the lens of *The New Zealand Curriculum's* key competencies and values, but this learning is client-driven and therefore unique to each client. This situation helps shape an action-reflective learning environment. Evaluation of the learning lies primarily with the client, in ways that are still emerging in secondary school classrooms. This is in contrast to the traditional situation where the ultimate power of evaluation has typically resided with the teacher or an external authority.

We imagine Jeff, at the end of the session, saying to Tama and Dylan, “...you came saying you wanted to chuck the booze and I'm just wondering how this conversation might have helped you with that goal?” The clients decide whether the counselling has been helpful. It is they who reach a verdict in the courtroom of their everyday life as they are examined by life's circumstances on the usefulness and helpfulness of an idea, skill, or the emotional support received through counselling. It is they who co-construct with the counsellor what success means in terms that are both specific and personal.

Finally, in our exploration of the differences that make the difference, there is the matter of formal discipline. The teacher has a disciplinary role; the counsellor does not. This difference helps shape an inclusive and grace-filled learning environment for the client and the counsellor.

The counsellor is perhaps the only professional in the school who does not have a direct disciplinary role. The paradox is that this positioning of the counsellor as not powerful, in the traditional sense of discipline and punishment, can make them very powerful in terms of opening up possibilities for differently rigorous kinds of learning conversations with students. Tama and Dylan illustrate this well. They understood that their disclosure to the counsellor would not trigger punishment from the school; they were safe to disclose. Without that understanding it is doubtful whether the conversation, let alone the subsequent new behaviour, would have happened at all.

All these shapers of a counselling learning environment are valuable, not just in their own right, but also because contextually they are a contrast to other learning settings in secondary schools. Where one learning environment may not reach a student, the other might. We do not suggest that the learning environment in the counselling room is superior to the classroom, but that it is different and that that difference is valuable. That difference needs to be protected and indeed celebrated.

Implications

Our investigations of the counselling room as a site of learning, as a site of key competency use and development, takes us into both challenges and opportunities. We want to continue to articulate and demonstrate how our counselling work with students relates directly to the core mission of schools as expressed in the key competencies and values of *The New Zealand Curriculum*. We suggest that school guidance counsellors will never be fully valued as having a place in schools as long as we are seen as peripheral to the core mission of schools.

We believe that school counsellors must continue to find ways to show that our difference from teachers in our professional relationship with students is something to be valued, protected and celebrated, if for no other reason than because of the important contribution it can make to achieving a school's core mission and to students' learning for life. School guidance counsellors are providing valuable learning environments where the students are clients and those clients are the curriculum that we are working with. These are environments where students learn to think, where they learn to manage themselves in their lives; where they use language, symbols, and texts to express and make sense of what is happening in their lives; where they grow in participating and contributing to the lives of their communities; and where they further learn to relate to others. These competencies are the core business of schools, and school guidance counsellors are an integral part of that.

Endnotes

1. This article is based on a keynote presentation to the School Guidance Counsellors' conference held in Palmerston North in November 2012. It draws on a two-year research partnership between counsellors in three secondary schools in the Eastern Bay of Plenty and researchers from the Counsellor Education Programme at the University of Waikato.
2. Colin has subsequently published his reflections on the possibilities for counselling of *The New Zealand Curriculum's* emphasis on Values; see Hughes (2012).
3. See <http://www.tlri.org.nz/tlri-research/research-progress/school-sector/key-competencies-how-school-guidance-counsellors>
4. "The development of the competencies is both an end in itself (a goal) and the means by which other ends are achieved" (*The New Zealand Curriculum*, MoE, 2007, p. 12).
5. It is not unusual for more than one student to arrive at a school counsellor's office, whether expected at that time or not. Discerning the value of seeing more than one student at once and making use of the presence of a second student is the focus of an article we are preparing at present.

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