Back for the future

How do guidance counsellors work with learners returning from stand-downs to help them re-engage with school?

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Abstract

This study explores ways in which school guidance counsellors work with learners returning from a stand-down to help them re-engage with school. Literature was reviewed concerning causes and consequences of temporary disciplinary exclusion, ways in which schools manage behaviour and ameliorate the effects of exclusion, and roles which are, and could be, taken by school counsellors in this context. A qualitative methodology was used. Five experienced school counsellors were interviewed regarding their work with clients who had been stood down. The data was thematically analysed. Themes of advocacy, conflict resolution, and identity-focused therapy emerged. The importance of the counsellor working within an effective, cohesive pastoral team overarched these themes. The role of a counsellor in a pastoral team, and as both an insider and an outsider in a school, is discussed.

Keywords: guidance counsellors, school stand-downs, qualitative research, advocacy, conflict resolution, identity-focused therapy

One of my earliest clients as a school counsellor was a young man who was suffering from the effects of a suspension from school. He did not dispute that he had been fairly punished. He had behaved violently at school, and he knew that a suspension was inevitable. However, his violence had been perpetrated in response to a friend being bullied on social media, for which he believed the bullies went unchecked. This seemed deeply unjust to him. He also chafed against the conditions of his return to school: that he must conform to expectations regarding uniform, who he associated with, what he did at break time, and refraining from smoking. His history both inside and outside of school was not a straightforward one. I wondered, as I warmed to this intelligent, complex, bruised young man, how as a counsellor I could help. I also wondered about the role I could take, and

should take, that might facilitate a return to school—a role that could promote healing, resolution, and re-engagement with learning, rather than the alienation and frustration he so clearly felt.

In Aotearoa New Zealand schools, stand-downs and suspensions are the two types of temporary exclusion which are imposed as the consequence of gross misconduct, continual disobedience, or behaviour which poses a serious risk of harm. The New Zealand Ministry of Education (MoE) *Guidelines for Principals and Boards of Trustees on Stand-downs, Suspensions, Exclusions and Expulsions* (2009a) require that school principals are "flexible and fair" (p. 3) in deciding whether to stand down or suspend a learner. This means taking the context of the misbehaviour into account and treating everyone concerned with respect, balancing their "knowledge, abilities and culture" (p. 3) with the need to maintain a "safe and effective learning environment" (p. 3). Stand-downs are the less serious consequence of the two measures, with a limit of five consecutive days and a guaranteed return to school. In contrast, learners who are suspended must appear before the school's board of trustees to negotiate whether they can return, and the conditions under which they may do so.

Regardless of the reasons for the stand-down or suspension, such an event can have a significant impact on the life of a learner and can present a variety of difficulties on return to school. Stand-downs and suspensions disproportionately affect Māori, Pasifika, and learners from low socio-economic backgrounds (MoE, n.d.)—the very groups for whom the Ministry of Education seeks to address disparities in educational outcomes (MoE, 2014). In 2016, for example, Māori learners were stood down 1.8 times as often as the national average, and Pasifika learners 1.2 times as often. Learners in decile 1 or 2 schools were more than four times more likely to be stood down than those in decile 9 and 10 schools (MoE, n.d.). The importance, therefore, of adequate intervention after a stand-down cannot be understated. It can make the difference between re-engagement with school and a pathway towards serious marginalisation from education, and ultimately from full participation in society (Towl, 2012).

The Ministry of Education requires that learners are given access to appropriate guidance and counselling where practical, both before and during the stand-down or suspension process, and on their return to school (MoE, 2009a). The guidelines do not specify the amount or type of counselling, or who will provide it. Despite

the Ministry of Education (2009b) specifically requiring that counselling be offered to learners in this situation, little New Zealand research exists which explores the work of school counsellors with learners returning from a stand-down. The current study, therefore, investigates how five practising school counsellors explain their role in this process. The primary focus is on stand-downs, because learners are always entitled to return to school after a stand-down and stand-downs tend to precede suspension chronologically as well as in terms of the seriousness of the offences that prompt them (Towl, 2012). Therefore, it seems more likely that the intervention of a counsellor at this point will be helpful in preventing further disciplinary issues.

Intervention at this point is fundamentally an issue of social justice. Exclusion from school happens in a context which often arises from and perpetuates inequity and disengagement from education. Challenging its use and its outcomes is part of striving, as school counsellors and educators, for a more positive experience of school for all.

Literature review

On the surface, a stand-down is an individual response to an individual learner's behaviour. However, a body of international research (Michail, 2011; Riordan, 2006; Skiba, Shure, Middelberg, & Baker, 2012; Towl & Hemphill, 2016; Vavrus & Cole, 2002) shows that there are many characteristics of both schools and communities which have a greater influence on whether an individual is temporarily excluded than their specific behaviour. The influence of factors outside the individual is noted by the American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force (APAZTTF) (2008): "[rates] of suspension and expulsion vary widely across schools and school districts, and this variation appears to be due as much to characteristics of schools and school personnel. . .as to the behavior or attitudes of students" (p. 854). Similarly, according to the New Zealand Ministry of Education, "Stand-downs, suspensions, exclusions and expulsions are measures of a school's response to particular behaviours. What one school may choose to suspend for, another may not" (Education Counts, n.d., para. 5).

However, the detrimental effects on an individual of a stand-down are significant, even after controlling for a range of social factors in the individual's immediate family and community. For example, an Australian study showed that suspension from school in Year 10 tripled the likelihood of not completing Year

12, doubled the likelihood of not being in paid employment three years later, and increased the chance of being involved in antisocial behaviour (Hargreaves & Hemphill, 2009). New Zealand qualitative research (Towl, 2012) also indicated that, in the absence of effective intervention, an excluded child's identity as a successful member of the school community was damaged because of stand-down, and this continued to worsen on their return.

A school community also feels the negative effects of temporary exclusion as a disciplinary measure. The APAZTTF (2008), for example, concluded that higher rates of suspension and expulsion correlated with less satisfactory ratings of school climate and governance structures by staff and students, more time spent on discipline, and a decrease in schoolwide academic achievement.

The literature suggests that exclusion neither increases positive behaviour nor deters undesirable behaviour. In fact, the APAZTTF (2008) suggests that exclusion is a developmentally inappropriate tool for adolescents. However, for a variety of practical, political, and philosophical reasons (Towl, 2012), it continues to be used as a disciplinary tool in schools. Therefore, in a world where temporary exclusion is perhaps unavoidable, it is important to consider how it can be used with minimum harm, and how learners' safe and productive return to class can best be facilitated.

Research shows that for learners to return successfully from a temporary exclusion, connection to the school and the supportive relationships and systems which surround them must be repaired or established (Towl, 2012). Conversely, in situations where the school and parents blame each other for a learner's behaviour, successful re-engagement with school is unlikely. Successful reintegration encompasses rebuilding the individual's identity as part of the school as well as the satisfactory resolution of issues associated with the stand-down (Towl, 2012). International research around shame and resilience is relevant in this context. Such research suggests that shame is fundamentally an experience of disconnection (Webb, 2009), with a range of negative intra-personal and inter-personal outcomes (Cohen, Wolf, Panter, & Insko, 2011; Tangney, Stuewig, & Martinez, 2014) and that resilience comes as much from the systems of relationships within which an individual is embedded as from their individual characteristics (Pinterits, D'Cunha, & Athmann, 2013).

Restorative practice, as a way of achieving the necessary reconnection, has

been part of Aotearoa New Zealand's educational landscape for at least two decades (Adair & Dixon, 2000; Berryman & Bateman, 2008; Drewery, 2004). Strong international evidence supports its effective use (e.g., APAZTTF, 2008) and indicates its potential to respect cultural diversity and reduce ethnic and socioeconomic disparities in suspension (Anyon et al., 2014; Skiba et al., 2012).

Other literature regarding temporary exclusion explores counselling, remediation of academic gaps, and addressing other challenges in learners' lives. Combinations of these measures have shown promise, however on their own, or even in combination, they are insufficient if they fail to address a lack of belonging within the school (Dharan, Meyer, & Mincher, 2011). This reiterates the futility of a focus on remediating the individual in the absence of an understanding of their relationships and identity within the school.

While specific literature regarding how Aotearoa New Zealand counsellors' work with clients in this context is sparse, their role as adults who understand identity, relationship, shame, connection, and resilience is well documented. Two New Zealand studies (McMenamin, 2014; Winslade & Williams, 2017) and an Australian study (Truneckova & Viney, 2012) have explored in depth how school counsellors used a narrative framework (White, 2007) with clients who had been, or were close to being, temporarily excluded from school. All have a strong emphasis on rebuilding the client's identity as someone who can make the choices necessary to succeed at school, and the re-establishment of connections and relationships that have been damaged. More broadly, a search of the *New Zealand Journal of Counselling* has identified literature pertaining to school counsellors working in respect of: peer conflict and difficult behaviour (Manthei, 1999), peer mentoring and mediation (Crowe, 2006), the discourses of difficult behaviour (Penwarden, 2007), emotional literacy (Kelleher, Foggitt, & Hansen, 2011), and challenging behaviour occurring as part of grief and spiritual crisis (Bray, 2008). All these indicate a body of professionals working with the skills and knowledge needed to support learners on return from a stand-down.

Individual counselling as a response to challenging behaviour, particularly when it has led to a stand-down, is only one aspect of a wider pastoral care system. The Ministry of Education (2017, p. 35) guidelines state that, "Time invested in strengthening the culture, processes and functionality of an interdisciplinary team is also an investment in student well-being." The crucial nature of a genuinely

coordinated team has also been explored internationally (Henry, McNab, & Coker, 2005), while in Aotearoa New Zealand, Ferguson (2012) has suggested that the school counsellor is a key figure in this team, moving and mediating between the worlds of discipline, family, and outside agencies and the inner worlds of their students.

Spratt, Shucksmith, Philip, and Watson (2006) emphasised the intrinsic link of the "pastoral" role of the support team with the "discipline" system of the school. Where this link is absent or ineffective, they suggest, discipline predominates and the result is a system that "undermine[s] the mental well-being of vulnerable miscreants" (p. 17). This once more alludes to the importance of effective reintegration as an issue of social justice.

Method

Participants

The participants in this study were five school guidance counsellors working in Auckland high schools, with between four and over twenty years' counselling experience. They had all had several opportunities to work with learners who had been stood down. This was a judgement sample (Marshall, 1996) where participants were chosen for their expertise in a particular field. Participants were recruited initially through an advertisement in the newsletter of the Auckland Branch of the New Zealand Association of Counsellors (NZAC), followed by a snowballing recruitment technique, whereby participants recommend further prospective participants. Three of the counsellors described themselves as narrative therapists, while the other two described themselves as eclectic, pluralistic, and person-centred.

Ethical considerations

Approval for this project was sought from the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee and granted on March 16, 2018. The main ethical issues faced in this project concerned consent, confidentiality, and the obligation to carry out a study with demonstrable benefit for participants and others.

Participant information sheets were provided and discussed to ensure that participants were clear about what "consent" implied, particularly for their own anonymity and that of their schools. Maintaining confidentiality and protecting

the identities of participants was crucial because the community of school guidance counsellors in Auckland is reasonably small. Pseudonyms were used, and identifiable details of schools, learners, and participants were altered.

In terms of an ethical obligation to provide benefit to participants, the opportunity to reflect on their practices in a respectful and encouraging environment was a positive experience. One of the participants specifically stated that this was the case. The funding from Teach NZ to undertake my master's degree required a focus on Ministry of Education priorities (MoE, 2014), and carried an ethical onus to contribute to a conversation about improving equitable educational outcomes for Māori, Pasifika, and learners in low-decile schools.

Procedure

Data were gathered from each participant by means of a semi-structured interview, in which broad questions were asked concerning their work with learners returning from stand-down, and person-centred listening skills used to pursue the themes which arose in each interview. Interviews were held at quiet locations chosen by the participants and were between 40 and 70 minutes long. They were audio-recorded, transcribed, and then checked by the participants.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to analyse the data. After the transcripts had been read through multiple times themes began to emerge, which were then, on further reading, cross checked and colour coded. Eventually three broad themes were identified, which emphasised working within a pastoral team as an important aspect. These are identified and discussed in detail in the following section.

Results

The major themes that emerged from the interviews, reflecting the ways in which the school counsellors described their work with learners returning from a stand-down, were as follows:

1. Working as an advocate
2. Working to resolve conflict
3. Working with identity.

Advocacy

The counsellors interviewed for this study unanimously took the position of advocate for the learner, and sometimes for their whānau, during the stand-down process. In various ways they were committed to supporting their clients through an experience that was framed as potentially difficult and hostile, and tended to distance themselves from the disciplinary aspects of the process:

> *If the house leaders do a really good job with pastoral support, but also the discipline stuff, I just keep right out of that, and support the students that want to be supported.* (Raewyn)

While whänau were often mentioned, the participants in this study tended to adopt advocacy as their own role, rather than attributing it to parents. The participants suggested that often the family were either somewhat powerless, and in need of support, or they were actively unsupportive of the school's expectations. Maria and Raewyn referred to their roles in supporting the parents, which mainly involved clarifying the process, and Maria specifically aligned herself with her client rather than the parents:

> *I wouldn't wanna position myself as an ally to the family at the expense of the relationship with my student.* (Maria)

The only participant who described parents as being active in the process referred to their intervention to get their child to comply with the school's expectations because of the perceived desirability of attending that particular school. This allied these parents more closely with the school than with their offspring.

Working to resolve conflict

Resolving conflict was a theme which emerged strongly in the context of benefits and challenges of working within a school's pastoral team. When the pastoral team was functioning effectively, this allowed for a division of labour within which the counsellors could focus on advocacy and supporting their clients to make meaning of the situation, find their personal agency within the situation, and move forward. They did this, secure in the knowledge that other members of the team were establishing exactly what had happened and resolving some of the more practical issues surrounding the stand-down and return to school. This

meant that restorative conferencing was often not the primary responsibility of the counsellor:

> *I think that the deputies are very, very good at getting the full picture. So, they will know, they do a lot of investigation, so it is, it is, OK yes, it is about the incident, but they actually really get a very full picture as to why this incident occurred.* (Maria)

> *The deans will focus on credits and behaving yourself, toeing the line, and attendance and that sort of stuff. Whereas I'm much more interested in what sense they make of school and the purpose they see in schooling, sort of bigger picture ideas that they need to really understand before they get a new sense of purpose.* (Gabe)

In the pastoral teams which were described by the participants as the most effective, communication was strong, expectations about different roles were clear, and members felt that their contribution was both unique and valued. In these teams the counsellors were an integral part, both practically and philosophically, as Raewyn suggests in this comment:

> *And sometimes the developmental stuff around adolescents is that they've gotta have the boundaries, and they've gotta have the more difficult situations to have the boundaries to hold up against. And if you're not giving that, you're failing them, really, in the school situation, I think. So, it's the counsellor working in with that sort of system, which is a bit of an art.* (Raewyn)

Often, however, the pastoral teams presented practical and philosophical challenges for the participants in their expectations around conflict resolution. Slow systems and processes, and poor communication, were practical issues within some of the participants' teams which limited the counsellors' sense of being able to fulfil their potential to help their clients resolve the issues which had led to their stand-downs.

An issue raised by all five participants was that, when counselling was a mandated condition of a client's return to school, they could be expected to work without the client's consent. One participant suggested that, occasionally, compulsion was actually helpful in overcoming the stigma associated with counselling, but in general, the counsellors considered this to be both unethical and unproductive:

> *They [the school leadership] can't actually do that. They are not legally allowed to do that. Or they might think that they are, but it's placing an expectation on the counsellor that goes against our code of ethics.* (Gabe)

> *I'm happy to offer six sessions as part of him coming back into school, because this kid*
> *needs it. But not every kid is open to that. And would benefit from that.* (Maria)

Gabe also articulated an ethical tension between his role in the team and an agenda within the school, which appeared to devalue both the client and the work of the counsellor:

> *It's happened where the boss has required me to. . .list times that I've seen the person,*
> *so they can use that when they're going to expel a person from school to say, "You*
> *know, we've done everything. We've tried the counselling, it hasn't worked." Well,*
> *they're making an assumption that counselling hasn't worked. They don't really know*
> *what's happened in the counselling room. Counselling might have worked really well,*
> *but it might not have solved [the school issues]. . .* (Gabe)

He went on to observe how, at times, the counsellor's work may even challenge the predominant discourses of the school, making conflict resolution difficult for the client and the counsellor because key parts of the problem remained unseen:

> *It goes right back to how many exclusionary practices in schools are invisible and they*
> *just begin to produce themselves and so by the time the kid gets to the Dean a whole*
> *story has been created about this person that has generated a life of its own and it*
> *keeps reproducing itself too. So, by the time teachers are invited to gather evidence for*
> *whatever the Principal is intending to do, then this kid is really up against it.* (Gabe)

Maria also alluded to the need to address the school's discourses and underlying assumptions, particularly as they contributed to a culture where bullying was an acceptable part of adolescence.

Even when ethics were not at stake all the counsellors sometimes felt that their role was at odds with the main agenda of the pastoral team, undervalued, or seen as a formality. All five participants used the words "tick-box" to describe their work in this context, at least some of the time.

The expectation that the counsellor's role was to change or "fix" the client or compel them toward an action, such as apologising to someone, also met with resistance. Gabe described this expectation as "a general misunderstanding of what counselling is." The use of existing "tools" raised related problems. Two of the counsellors worked in schools where excluded learners were required to fill in a reflective booklet and discuss it with the counsellor on their return to school. Both

felt that this was restrictive and often inconsistent with their counselling practice and their client's needs or abilities. The booklet was also perceived by some clients to be punitive, which was an association the counsellors resisted.

Finally, all the counsellors in this study noted that their workload prevented them from seeing everyone who was stood down, despite being aware of the Ministry of Education's expectation that all learners in this situation should be offered counselling. This contributed to some tensions within the pastoral teams regarding the allocation of a limited resource. Maria was concerned that an emphasis on the needs of the victim left the excluded learner in a vulnerable position, with potentially unresolved issues that could lead to another stand-down, or a deterioration in their mental health. Joe conversely wondered if it was fair that the most support was given to those who had committed the direst of deeds.

Working with identity

Exploring who the learners "wanted to be," and how to shift a reputation that failed to equate to this, was addressed by all the participants as being part of the work they did with these clients. While the counsellors mentioned a wide range of modalities, the therapeutic alliance was pivotal for all, because of its potential to offer an experience of affirmation, understanding, personal agency, and empowerment. This helped the clients to move beyond blame and shame to a more complex and hopeful way of thinking about themselves and their future:

> I think what's helpful is just the counselling process and just beginning to help them to sort of make sense of what's happened, and not necessarily, that doesn't mean that the counselling's all about me drilling them about what they did to get suspended, they're in charge, so it would just be trying to empower them to figure out what they wanna do. (Joe)

Within the context of a strong therapeutic alliance, however, there was also a sense in which willingness to accept responsibility, like consent, was necessary for worthwhile counselling:

> I just think. . .it depends on whether the kids really give a shit. If a kid doesn't care [. . .] Then it's just ticking boxes. (Maria)

In fact, Raewyn likened her experience of working with learners who had not accepted responsibility for their stand-down to "bash[ing] your head against a

brick wall." All the counsellors described intense time pressure in getting "buy in" from the client, an important prerequisite for successful work with them.

In addition, the counsellors all held clients' ownership of their behaviour in tension with a nuanced view of the context in which the behaviour occurred. Raewyn, for example, identified an incident where her knowledge of context, and advocacy for a learner, averted a stand-down that would otherwise have been inevitable. In general, the participants saw counselling as helping their clients to see that the stand-down event did not define them but was something they could contextualise and move on from.

> OK yes, I [the student] stuffed up, I'm taking responsibility, but actually this doesn't define me. . .I'm a good person. (Raewyn)

Perspective-taking was spoken of in this context, both in terms of facilitating the clients' understanding of the point of view of those they had hurt, and of using the positive views of others as a vehicle for supporting a more complex and positive view of themselves.

Working with identity was most challenging where the clients' self-perception had been fused with trouble and disconnection for an extended period. In this context, the participants mentioned the impact of drug addiction, learning delay, specific learning disabilities, a history of truancy, violence, disconnection from school, diagnoses of attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder and autism spectrum disorder, and serious family dysfunction. A mismatch between the cultural and gender expectations of the client and the school or counsellor was another aspect of identity that posed a challenge to the client's benefiting from, or even accessing, counselling. However, while these clients were discussed in the context of resource-heavy interventions, all the counsellors spoke of them with a hope that their investment in them would lead to positive change.

Discussion

Insider-outsider positioning

The counsellors in this study unanimously believed that the functioning of the pastoral team, including a clear understanding of each other's roles, scope of practice, and ethical framework, was critical to the successful reintegration of learners after stand-downs. This reflected the findings of previous research (Ferguson, 2012;

Henry, McNab, & Coker, 2005; Spratt et al., 2006; To, 2006). The extent to which the participants positioned themselves as insiders or outsiders within these teams, and their schools, illuminates the unique role of school counsellors, and offers insight into how they can be most effective in their practices.

Their work with advocacy, conflict resolution, and identity, as described by the participants, was linked to and, ideally, nested within the functioning of the pastoral team. Such a team functions as an inclusive and fair system, where behaviour is considered in context and barriers to success are removed. Figure 1 is a representation of such a system at play:
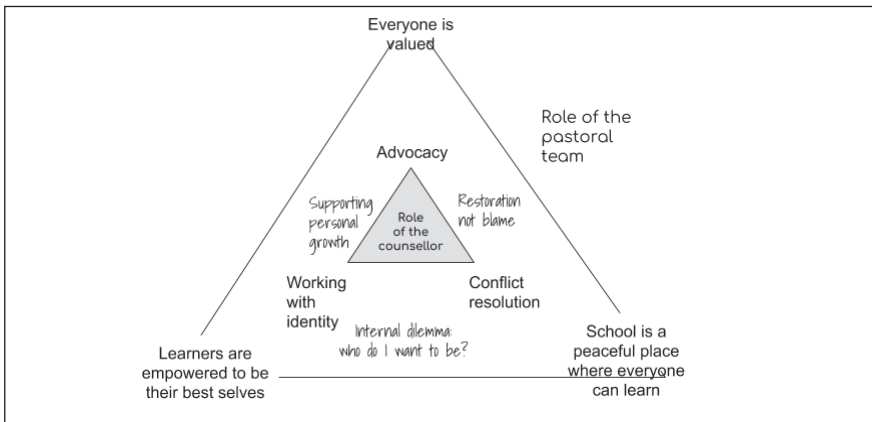

Figure 1. The ideal placement of the role of counselling within the pastoral team

However, this model in Figure 1 was not fully realised in any of the participants' schools. The five counsellors' varied perceptions of the dynamics of stand-downs, punishment, and counselling, reflected some of the philosophical tensions that can be found in the literature about the most ethical and effective ways to manage behaviour in a school (APAZTTF, 2008). This was important, because the "fit" of the counsellors within their teams, and in relation to the disciplinary machinery of their schools, appeared to influence how effective they felt in bringing about positive change for learners returning from stand-down. One participant described effective processes and well-understood relationships between the counsellor,

deans, and school leaders, in which the highly experienced counsellor took a leadership role. In this instance, there appeared to be minimal tension between the counsellor and the school leadership team. However, the other four described various levels of feeling frustrated and misunderstood. To varying degrees, they seemed to feel that their work was better represented by the diagram in Figure 2.
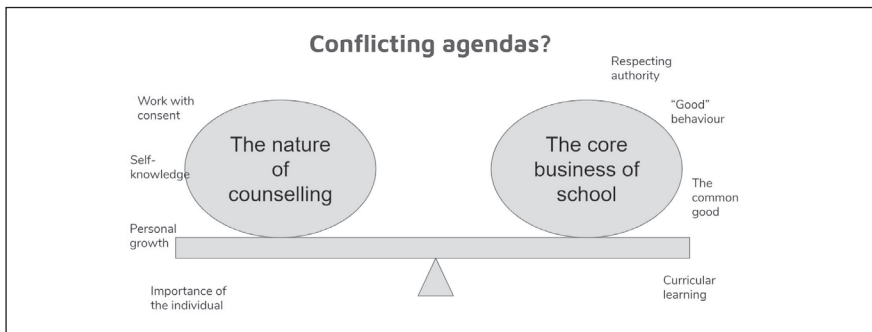

Figure 2: A conflict between counselling and the core business of school?

This tension felt by the participants between their practice and other agendas within their schools could resonate with other school counsellors, teachers, and leaders alike. However, it raises questions about why this would be so. For instance, are there incompatibilities between the nature of counselling and the core business of a school? Alternatively, is there a shared agenda with differences in some of the detail of its implementation? The ultimate question is, perhaps, how can a pastoral team work best together for the benefit of all learners, including the "naughty" ones, and contribute meaningfully to the wider agenda of social justice in education? Reflecting on these questions brings into focus the counsellor as both an "insider" and an "outsider" in the school.

This insider-outsider position appeared to arise partly from the difference in emphases described in the following extract, where the focus of the school leadership team was on external, observable, and tangible aspects of learners' behaviours, whereas the counsellor was focused more on the impact of learners' internal world and understanding:

> *The deans will focus on credits and behaving yourself, toeing the line, and attendance and that sort of stuff. Whereas I'm much more interested in what sense they make of school and the purpose they see in schooling, the bigger picture ideas that they need to really understand before they get a new sense of purpose.* (Gabe)

The counsellors were not so much interested in outward change. They discussed practical coping strategies, such as anger management, behavioural plans, and cognitive strategies as ways in which they worked with learners returning from stand-downs. Furthermore, the counsellors' strong emphasis on the need for their clients to take responsibility for their actions indicates that they did not condone a focus on the needs of the learner who had been stood down at the expense of the hauora, or wellbeing, of the school community. In fact, none of the participants substantially questioned the fairness of the stand-downs they discussed, which perhaps indicates the extent to which they identify as insiders in the school system. However, their varying levels of concern with aspects of the process, and the feeling that their work was merely "box ticking," suggest an outsider position.

A philosophical area of insider-outsider tension arose around issues of consent. The counsellors all felt that they were ethically compromised to some extent when learners were required to see them as a condition of their return to school, placing them as outsiders within the school's processes. However, willingness to attempt to engage a reluctant young person in need of their help could also be regarded as an aspect of social justice and equitable provision of services. Luke observed how expectations of gender, for example, could influence a client's inclination to consent to counselling, limiting their capacity to freely choose to receive help. Although the same could perhaps be said for some young men's inclination to read, allowing them to refuse the services of an English teacher would be unethical. This is perhaps why, despite their discomfort around the ethics of consent, all the participants were willing to try to engage with reluctant clients, taking more of an insider position in the school's agenda. Perhaps workload issues, discussed by all participants, may have made the effective allocation of this limited resource a factor in their ethical decision-making around working with those who were reluctant to consent?

In other ways, the participants took a clear insider role. One of these was in relation to parents and whānau. While support was broadly offered, encouraging the influence and agency of whānau in the stand-down process was not discussed by

the participants, perhaps because this was not one of their specific responsibilities within the team. The way in which the participants, all but one of whom were Pākehā, talked about the role of culture in their work with these clients and their whānau added a layer of complexity to their insider-outsider positioning. The role of culture and ethnicity in influencing a learner's identity, and therefore how best to approach their re-engagement with school after an incident of misbehaviour, has been explored at depth in Aotearoa New Zealand practice-based literature about restorative practice and Positive Behaviour for Learning commonly known as PB4L (Berryman & Bateman, 2008; MoE, 2015). Being Māori or Pasifika was mentioned by the participants in this study as a complicating factor in successful counselling. While there was no hint of blame or superiority in the way that the counsellors talked about their clients, they expressed the need to adapt their practice to accommodate them. This suggests that they were consciously moving away from an insider position within their schools to be better able to support clients who were outside the school's "normal." Shame was also described by two of the participants as a culturally positioned barrier to engagement with both clients and whānau. Thus, the participants in this case aligned themselves with the "culture" of the school while simultaneously challenging it. Counsellors' complex insider-outsider roles in schools position them effectively to critique culturally driven assumptions around ethnicity, gender, what is considered "normal," and the status quo.

All this perhaps suggests that the agendas of counselling and the school at large are not mutually exclusive, and perhaps points to the need for counsellors and other school leaders to better understand their perceptions of each other's roles. Clearly, when working in a school, counsellors find themselves balancing the needs of their clients with the expectations of their employers, the needs of the individual with the school community. Towl's (2012) discussion of why principals choose to stand down or suspend, against the background of considerable international data suggesting that temporary exclusion has few benefits and many negative consequences, suggests that this is an issue with implications for other members of the staff too.

A review of the NZAC *Code of Ethics* (2016) and *The New Zealand Curriculum* (MoE, 2006) allows for exploration of a possible conflict of interest between counsellors and the schools in which they work. The "core values of counselling"

(NZAC, 2016, p. 3) establish a context which promotes human dignity, partnership, autonomy, responsible caring, personal integrity, and social justice. These values provide a context where individual clients' needs are acknowledged and addressed within their wider community. This finds significant resonance in *The New Zealand Curriculum* (MoE, 2006) which sets out the purpose and nature of schools in Aotearoa New Zealand. The first part of *The New Zealand Curriculum* (pp. 8-13) articulates a vision for young people in Aotearoa New Zealand schools which includes: developing a positive identity, being resilient, learning to relate well to others, valuing diversity, equity, integrity, and respect for themselves and others, and making ethical decisions. This suggests little fundamental conflict between being a counsellor guided by the NZAC *Code of Ethics* (2016) and working in a school adhering to *The New Zealand Curriculum* (MoE, 2006), as both strive for growth and learning in the broadest sense, within just and equitable communities.

Perhaps the tension between the internal and external, the individual and the school at large, is less of a fundamental philosophical difference than a difference in emphasis on how limited time and resources should be allocated. In a utopian environment of unlimited time and money, perhaps the needs of a troubled and troublesome individual would not conflict with a peaceful and productive school environment. In the real world, there is a need for flexibility, tolerance, and consideration of a range of views, qualities which were demonstrated by all the participants in this study. Perhaps this is most realistically represented by Figure 3.
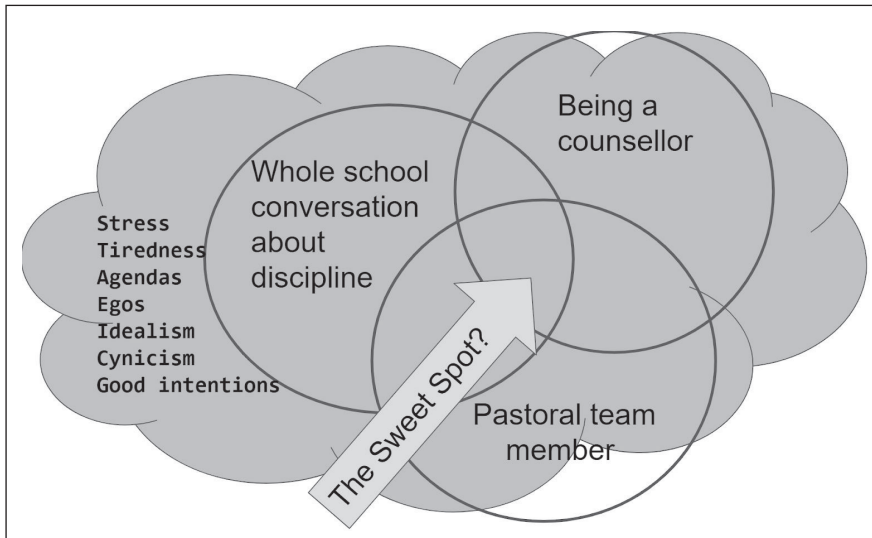
Stress
Tiredness
Agendas
Egos
Idealism
Cynicism
Good intentions

Whole school conversation about discipline

Being a counsellor

The Sweet Spot?

Pastoral team member

Figure 3. The "sweet spot:" A possible balance of counselling with other aspects of the pastoral team

The complexity of counsellors' positions between insider and outsider is a challenge which allows them a complex view of their clients and their schools. A school counsellor has the opportunity and the obligation to work with deep understanding of the interaction of responsibility, blame, and shame within the school, the pastoral team, the client, and their whānau. The goal is a positive engagement with school, under the pressures of time and the expectations of a range of stakeholders. Guidance counsellors are committed to the interests of their client and to the NZAC *Code of Ethics* (2016) but are employed by their schools and are responsible to parents. As outsiders, they can speak for their marginalised clients, but as insiders they have access to the power to make a significant contribution to bringing about change. The complexity of this context is a formidable challenge, to which all the counsellors in this study enthusiastically rose.

Implications for practice

The combined experience of the passionate and dedicated counsellors who were

participants in this study makes a considerable contribution to our understanding of what counsellors do to support learners returning from a stand-down. The following summarises this:

- Counsellors are advocates, for their clients, and for fairness in general.
- Counsellors are a voice for understanding and empowerment of both those who hurt others and those who are hurt, in the events surrounding a stand-down.
- Counsellors recognise that change within the individual and the environment are both important aspects of resolving the conflicts which lead to stand-downs.
- Counsellors are guided by the NZAC *Code of Ethics* (2016), and *The New Zealand Curriculum* (MoE, 2006) to balance the individual needs of clients and the wider needs of the school community.
- Counsellors work to be visible, collegial team members.
- Counsellors are client centred, with a future focus emphasising an identity which works for their clients.

This study also indicates that there may be a place for professional development opportunities for counsellors and school leaders to work proactively in their schools to develop the relationships, processes, and resources that support effective outcomes of counselling and learning. This study also suggests that school counsellors' workloads prevent them from fulfilling the Ministry of Education's expectation that all learners who are stood down will be offered counselling. This would seem to warrant urgent attention at the level of national educational policy and funding.

Limitations

This study was limited, to the extent that five participants provide only a very small window on a large and complex situation. Speaking with learners who have returned to school after a stand-down would add an important dimension to the findings of this study, particularly as the perceptions of counsellors and clients regarding what is helpful can be divergent (Lambert, 2007). The perspectives of their peers, parents, and teachers might broaden and further add to our understanding. A quantitative or mixed-method investigation involving a much larger number of counsellors would provide a more comprehensive overview of how (and when) counsellors work with clients in this context. Further research

regarding the functioning of effective pastoral teams in Aotearoa New Zealand schools is also indicated.

Conclusion

Counsellors do not work on isolated islands in schools, at least not when they are optimally effective. It is evident that counselling has a significant place in a school vision which aspires to support the hauora or wellbeing of both "bullies" and the "bullied," "good" kids and "bad" kids, the "troubled" and the "in trouble." It is also evident that a counsellor has unique skills and perspectives to offer regarding a just and peaceful way of thinking about adolescents, discipline, and school. How well their contribution is understood and valued by their clients, the pastoral team, and the wider school staff and leaders has a significant impact on the effectiveness of counselling in helping learners returning from stand-downs to re-engage with school. Counselling makes a difference to a school, and the school makes a difference to counselling. It is clear, though, that for social justice and equitable educational outcomes to prevail, teamwork is required, within schools and beyond, to move past the marginalising effects of exclusionary punishment and embrace restorative change.

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