

School Counsellors, Values Learning, and *The New Zealand Curriculum*

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Abstract

The writer reports on a professional development workshop with a group of 16 school counsellors, which explored how their counselling work with students related to values learning. They found that counselling with students frequently, even typically, involves helping the students to develop the value thinking abilities outlined in *The New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007). The wide variety of therapeutic approaches that counsellors employ is illustrated. The distribution of power in the counsellor–client relationship is also explored, along with its effects for the learning environment in the counselling room. This study will be useful to school counsellors, teachers, and school leaders who are interested in ways in which the counselling room is a location for values learning, and how the distinctiveness of that learning environment can be protected and enhanced.

Keywords: *New Zealand Curriculum*, values, learning, school counsellors, adolescents, counselling

Values in *The New Zealand Curriculum*

Values education is given a high priority in *The New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2007), with a clear and stated expectation that it be part of a student’s learning experience at school. *The New Zealand Curriculum* (the *Curriculum*) outlines a number of important values that are to be “encouraged, modelled and explored” (p. 10). In all, eight are listed, prefaced with the comment that “the list is neither exhaustive nor exclusive” (p. 10). A working definition of values is offered: “deeply-held beliefs about what is important or desirable. They are expressed in ways that people think and act” (p. 10). Also outlined are eight principles that are arguably

a kind of value and that are to “lay the foundation of curriculum decision-making” (p. 9). The document states that it is expected that students will learn about their own values and different kinds of values, such as “moral, social, cultural, aesthetic and economic,” and that they will “explore New Zealand cultural values as well as those from other groups and cultures” (p. 10).

In addition, students are to develop certain abilities. The *Curriculum* lists these as the 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.* (MoE, 2007, p. 10)

This article focuses on the relationship between counselling in a school setting and the *Curriculum* mandate to develop the abilities listed above with the students who are school counsellors’ clients. Hughes (2009) illustrated the many ways in which school counsellors contribute to student learning around the five Key Competencies, another central aspect of the *Curriculum*.¹ This article illustrates the ways in which counselling and the role of counsellors can make a distinct and significant contribution to student learning. It seeks to further illustrate that contribution by exploring with a group of school counsellors how their work with students might relate to the ongoing development of their clients’ abilities around values. All the counsellors who took part have consented to the publication of the outcome of these discussions.

Counsellor workshops

In exploring the relationship between counselling in schools and the development of students’ abilities in relation to values, I invited all Eastern Bay of Plenty school counsellors to take part in an interactive professional development workshop that I designed for this purpose. Sixteen school counsellors chose to take part in two parallel workshops.

Each workshop began with a short introduction to the five abilities relating to values, as outlined in the *Curriculum*. I proposed that the problems that students brought to our counselling rooms were value-laden accounts of their experience. I offered the counsellors a series of fictional scenarios typical of the presenting problems that school counsellors encounter.²

The task of the counsellors, in small self-selected groups of two or three participants, was to look at each scenario in the light of one of the five abilities listed above. Counsellors were to reflect on their practice, detail what counselling approaches they might use to help students with the presenting problem, and reflect on how that work might encourage, model, explore, and develop these abilities with the students.

Group discussions were recorded and summarised by the participants on workshop sheets. I represent these below, commenting on theoretical constructs to illustrate approaches to counselling and abilities relating to values.

Results

1. Helping students to express their own values

Scenario

Max, a year-11 student, comes to see the counsellor because he feels so bored at school. He has been getting into trouble at both home and school for his lack of progress, his failure to stay focused in class, and distracting others. He blames his teachers for his being bored. "It's their fault, not mine. If they weren't so boring, I wouldn't be getting into so much trouble."

Counsellors suggested that Max had some blaming beliefs/values that were self-limiting. They expressed the view that as long as he believed it was the teachers' fault that he was bored, he was stuck in his boredom, as he had little power to alter their teaching. Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy in particular proposes that blaming beliefs are self-destructive (Dryden & DiGiuseppe, 1990).

Some counsellors also noted that the value Max placed on boredom seemed to be totally negative. A new framework that allowed enquiry to proceed in ways that were non-blaming and that explored how Max could use boredom productively was needed if he was to find a way forward to a more successful school and life experience.

Counsellors started by empathetically acknowledging Max's boredom. There was agreement that this stage of counselling would not be rushed. Max would need to know that the depth of feeling he had expressed about his problem was understood and respected before he could begin the journey of exploring and challenging his beliefs/values and find others that served him better. The skill of the counsellor in listening empathetically, and accurately reflecting back to Max his beliefs and values regarding his problem, was illustrated by counsellors using Hermansson's (1998) eclectic counselling model known as ARPI (attend, respond, personalise and initiate). This approach takes the client's opening statement and reflects it back to the client with ever-

increasing depth and direction, starting with a counsellor's simple acknowledgement of the client's feelings.

Research shows that the quality of relationship between counsellor and client is the most critical factor for successful counselling outcomes, whatever the counselling modality (see Cooper & McLeod, 2011; Duncan, Miller, Wampold, & Hubble, 2010; Manthei, 2012). Empathy is one of the core elements that contribute to that quality (Bohart & Greenberg, 1997). For the client to know that the counsellor has heard and understood what they are really feeling is an important step in establishing that empathy.

These counsellors next moved to a more complete statement that included *why* Max was feeling the way he was. "You feel it's unfair because you're being blamed for distracting others in class when it's really the teacher's fault that you're bored, not yours." Here, Max's feelings are put into the context he has given in describing the problem. The counsellor's tone of voice would be inquiring, seeking confirmation from the client whether or not the statement was accurate. With the counsellor's help, some of Max's strongly held beliefs have been expressed (the first values-related ability) and they have been expressed in a way that lays a helpful platform for further analysis as well as creating the potential for client action.

Continuing to follow the ARPI model, these counsellors would move to a statement that places the feeling in the context of both what the client *can't do*, and what he wants to be *able* to do. This begins to shift the focus away from others, to a more personalised framing of the problem. "You feel frustrated because you don't know how to deal to boredom without getting into trouble, but if there is a way of doing it, you would be interested."

The power of being deeply listened to can open pathways of profound change if that listening can be captured in words that accurately express the heart of what the client is saying. To be really heard on an issue of importance is an experience of both great relief and hopefulness, and hopefulness promotes change (Weingarten, 2010). There is also something powerfully progressive about taking something that is an internal experience, such as boredom, and putting it in the space between people, as happens when clients find words that accurately express their feelings, beliefs, and values. This is a kind of externalising (White, 2007) and can at times be so powerful that this alone can be enough of a catalyst for self-reflection and change.

Counselling conversations often move into helping students to then "**critically analyse their values and the actions based on them**" (the third *Curriculum* ability). As

the *Curriculum* implies, actions are influenced by beliefs. The connection, however, between beliefs and actions is not always obvious and can operate in a kind of subterranean way. Further, beliefs and values have their birth and gain sustenance in social contexts (Winslade & Monk, 1999). That connection, too, is sometimes far from clear, and young people as well as adults may find themselves unable to think outside the box of the meaning their particular context has supplied them with.

Exploring how our values and beliefs are influenced by the environment around us, how those values affect our actions, and discovering alternative viewpoints can be both liberating and powerful. Such explorations give young people access to understandings that open up new landscapes of reflection that can then show themselves in fresh and liberating actions.

From a different perspective, counsellors trained in narrative approaches (White, 2007) used this scenario to ask questions that would help Max review his location in a storyline where he saw himself as a victim upon whom teachers inflicted boredom. Monk put it this way:

A counsellor using a narrative approach wants to deconstruct the problem that is presented. He or she asks questions that give the client an opportunity to explore various dimensions of the situation. This helps reveal the unstated cultural assumptions that contribute to the original construction of the problem. (Monk, 1997, p.8)

The counsellor's questions position boredom as the problem to be addressed, not the teacher or the client. This situates the problem as outside the client and acting on the client. Externalising conversation avoids blaming a client and client resistance by separating the problem from the person and giving it a name, while at the same time inviting the client to take responsibility to act on the problem.

The counsellor explores with Max the effects that boredom has on him, including its impact on how he feels about himself and his sense of identity, and how the problem affects on his school ambitions and on other important people in his life. The questions may also explore the tricks the problem uses to get control in Max's life. Inquiry may be about the persuasive ways the problem argues its case to get mastery over Max, and the various allies the problem has that it calls on to assist it gain control—for example, anger. The counsellor's stance here is that of an “investigative reporter” (White, 2005).

The following is an abbreviated list of narrative-style questions provided by counsellors in the workshop:

- Max, can we take a few minutes to explore this boredom thing, because it sure sounds like Boredom has been causing you no end of trouble?
- When at school, is Boredom attacking you all the time, some of the time, or most of the time?
- So when you get an attack of the boredoms, what do you do? What else do you do?
- How successful are these strategies at solving the Boredom troubles?
- Do these strategies have any bad side effects? What are they?
- If Boredom continues to have its way, what do you predict might be different in, say, six months' time?
- Do you see Boredom more as a friend or more as an enemy?
- Who is more in charge, you or Boredom?

Students respond well to externalised conversations, finding it a new way that is non-blaming and genuinely explorative in which they can talk about what is happening to them. Questions now begin to focus on **exceptions** to the dominant story of boredom calling the shots, focusing on those times when the problem has **not** been completely successful in getting its own way. “Despite appearances to the contrary, problems are never totally successful in their ambitions for people’s lives and relationships” (White, 2005, p. 3).

Possible questions included:

- Max, has there ever been a time that you have done something that has kept Boredom pretty much at bay, so that it hasn’t had these bad side effects?
- How come you were able to beat Boredom on that occasion? Are there any other occasions that come to mind?
- What do you think are Boredom’s weaknesses?

The uncovering of exceptions to the dominant problem-saturated story offers the client hope and encouragement that these exceptions might provide the beginnings of a new story, and a different way for Max to view himself. The following questions also give Max an opportunity to do that.

- Let’s think about it. What quality do you think you brought to that victory? What was it about you as a person that allowed it to be possible for you to do that?
- What would you say that says about you?

Questions like these mine Max's experience, highlighting alternative storylines that had been hiding unnoticed in the shadow of the dominant story. These questions aim to give preference to a narrative that, although perhaps weak at this point, can be strengthened and adopted as the client's preferred story. Winslade and Monk (1999) made this comment:

Just as the problem story has had a beginning a long way back in a client's life, so does the alternative story. It is important to detail the history of every relevant competency and ability. Hidden talents do not emerge out of nowhere into the counselling room. Careful questioning about early experiences of these capabilities strengthens the base from which to build a new sense of direction. (p. 13)

An appreciative audience to Max's new directions is now deliberately sought. It is important that the new and emerging narrative, although authored in the counselling room, is anchored in the client's world beyond the counselling room. The following questions, which emerged from the workshop, illustrate that.

- What if we let your teachers know that you're trying new ways to overcome Boredom that allow you to keep focused on your work? Do you think they would be interested?
- What if we met, say, twice a week to review how your fight to loosen Boredom's grip is going? This is not always going to be an easy battle. Boredom has been used to having its own way for some time now and will not be pleased when you start standing up to it and showing new strength. Do you think that might be helpful?

Max embarks on a process, with the counsellor's help, in which he is enabled to externalise the problem, name it, look at ways the problem has interacted with him and he with the problem, and examine ways in which his environment supports or otherwise the problem. The questions highlight those times when his responses have not fitted the dominant problem-saturated story but where the beginnings of an alternative story of hope have emerged. This alternative story is grounded in Max's own lived history and then researched further, and an audience of support is created. As the new story is strengthened, different values and beliefs become infused into a new narrative around boredom and its alternatives—a narrative that works more successfully for Max.

It seemed clear to the counsellors in the workshop that this kind of work with students, which is common practice for them, provided young people with the chance to express their values and critically analyse them and the actions based on them (abilities one and three in the *Curriculum* list).

2. Helping students to explore with empathy the values of others

Scenario

Joanne, a year-13 girl, comes to see the counsellor. She is upset because Abby, her best friend, has become pregnant and has decided to keep the baby. Joanne feels strongly that Abby's decision to keep the baby is the wrong one, that she is "throwing her life away." She has argued strongly with Abby, who has decided that, for her, abortion is wrong. Joanne is frustrated that Abby is "so blind as to how this is going to mess up her life." Both were planning to go to university next year and now she feels Abby will never get the education or have the wonderful future she could have had.

Joanne's anger at Abby's "stubbornness" makes it difficult for her to be supportive, something she feels guilty about because "Abby has been there for me in the past." Joanne hopes that counselling will "sort myself out and help me feel less angry towards Abby and understand her more."

Relationship difficulties between pupils form a big part of a school counsellor's work, and not infrequently those difficulties arise from sharply differing values and beliefs. Exploring with empathy the values of others is frequently a part of resolving those difficulties.

Counsellors working on this scenario saw the concerns here as involving more than helping Joanne explore with empathy the values of her friend. There was also a strong sense of loss and grief lying behind Joanne's stated anger at her friend. Going to university together, which they had planned, talked, and dreamed about for most of the year, was no longer going to happen, and the desire Joanne expressed to the counsellor to sort herself out and feel less angry towards her friend is likely to involve counselling for grief as much as helping her explore with empathy the values of her friend. Understanding herself was important if she was going to be able to understand her friend.

Empathy is more than just a cognitive process of accepting certain facts. At some level, it involves identifying with the person, a sense of compassion without losing contact with your own identity (Bohart & Greenberg, 1997; Hermansson, 1998). Empathy does not require that one agrees with the other person's viewpoint but it does require sensitivity toward and understanding of how the other person may be feeling.

Some counsellors talked of ways in which they would offer to facilitate a meeting between the two friends if that was something both of them wanted. The purpose and goals of such a meeting would be established with both parties in separate interviews and

the role of the counsellor clearly explained. This role would be to facilitate the friends' really hearing each other safely and respectfully. Some of the ways the counsellor might do that would be illustrated to Joanne and Abby so that they understood more clearly how the counsellor would facilitate this relationship counselling.

The counselling session would begin by reiterating the understandings that had been arrived at in the prior meeting to see if those understandings still held good for both parties. The counsellor would then explore the history of their friendship and what made it so special for them. Difficulties they may have faced in the past that strained their relationship and how they had overcome them may also be covered, on the basis of a solutions-to-problems approach (Manthei, 1997). Putting the present relationship problem within the bigger context of their relationship history could be a way for them to reconnect with the joys and strengths of the relationship, bringing to them a larger perspective that they could draw on at this difficult time.

Each would then be asked to make a statement about what they felt, and why, regarding their present relationship difficulties, and the counsellor would ask the other person what she heard. This may happen a number of times in the course of the counselling, and the accumulated effect of each girl's deeply and accurately listening to the other and knowing they had been heard would strengthen the sense of being understood and respected.

This relationship counselling process is a powerful way for students to explore with empathy the values of others. The end goal is not to bring about a unified point of view but to allow each person to hear with empathy what the other person is saying, so that each of them knows she has been heard and understood. It is in that context that friendship has the best chance of survival, as an outcome if you like, of the exploring with empathy that Joanne and Abby have practised here.

3. Discuss disagreements that arise from differences in values and negotiate solutions

Scenario

Jaz, a year-11 girl, came to see the counsellor: "Mum and I are having these huge arguments about whether I can go out to a party at my girlfriend's place next weekend." Jaz desperately wants to attend and she wants to know how she can talk her mother into allowing her to go.

For teenagers, learning to negotiate boundaries with parents is an important skill. Those who have not developed these skills may be more likely to resort to high-risk actions

such as sneaking out at night. When caught, the resulting loss of trust between parent and teenager results in the imposition of further parental restrictions and increased unhappiness.

Less extreme, but more frequent, are huge arguments such as Jaz reported. These can involve yelling, swearing, damaging property, sulking, emotional blackmail and the like. The end result is increased stress and unhappiness in the home for everyone. It is not surprising, therefore, that teaching students how to advocate respectfully for their point of view, and to negotiate and compromise, is a common and much requested task for school counsellors. The skills and understandings students develop when working with a counsellor on any such situation will generalise into their other relationships and assist the development of their abilities to negotiate differences and resolve relational conflict.

The following problem-solving approach, detailed on the workshop worksheets, has many variations, but all seek to teach a method of negotiation while at the same time modelling it in the client–counsellor relationship.

1. Establish a clear counselling contract. The counsellors wanted to talk to the student about what they could and could not do in this situation. They wanted to make clear to the student that they couldn't guarantee the result the client wanted, which was for Jaz's mum to allow her to go to the party, because that was a parent's decision to make. What they could do was to teach Jaz some negotiating skills that were respectful and could greatly reduce the chances of getting into unproductive arguments while increasing the chances of achieving an acceptable compromise. Would Jaz still be interested?

2. As a foundational step, time would be spent understanding the situation from Jaz's point of view, listening to and drawing out Jaz's own feelings: acknowledging her sense of desperation, her fear about being the only one of her group not able to attend, her anger at her parents, and her frustration at not knowing how to communicate with them so that they would listen to her. Jaz would soon be invited to think about her mother's feelings and point of view, and would be more likely to take up this invitation if the counsellor had listened to, respected, and understood her feelings and reasons. It is this empathetic listening with its skilled reflecting that will help Jaz to understand herself better. This process also models for Jaz something that she will be asked to do—to listen to her parents in a way that ensures they know they have been heard.

3. The invitation to look at a parental point of view, beliefs and values is put to Jaz on quite a pragmatic basis of asking how she can possibly negotiate successfully with

her parents if she doesn't understand where they are coming from, and how her parents can be truly free to listen to her point of view if they are not confident that Jaz has really heard them. Furthermore, for negotiation to succeed there must be a clear and common understanding by both parties of the problem to be solved, and moreover, the problem needs to be framed in such a way that it *can* be solved. The counsellors stressed that taking her parents' concerns seriously does not mean that Jaz agrees with them, but it does mean that she hears their point of view and acknowledges that it is a serious issue for them. All the way through this process, the counsellor is modelling the kind of problem-solving behaviour that the student is encouraged to adopt, making the process explicit and transparent as they go along.

A list is then made of all the objections Jaz has heard her parents give for refusing permission to attend the party.

4. The counsellor then asks Jaz to think about what feelings her parents may have that drive these objections. Teenagers usually come up with words like worried, anxious, fearful, and protective. The counsellor suggests that for the negotiation to succeed, not only do the objections the parents have given need to be addressed, but also the fears that drive them.

5. Jaz is then invited to come up with as many solutions as possible to her parents' concerns, using a brainstorming technique in which no answer is too "way out." This can be a fun stage where some crazy ideas are put forward and a few laughs shared. The counsellor can be involved in co-constructing this list, and if Jaz has a support person then he or she can be pulled into the process too. Her best friend, who is holding the party, might be part of the process at this point.

6. The possible solutions are now worked through carefully, with some discarded, others accepted, and others modified until Jaz has a set of solutions that, as best she can tell, respectfully seeks to address her parents' concerns.

7. A conversation plan is now drawn up that acknowledges parental concerns and fears and seeks to put forward solutions that may address those concerns. Alternatively, a letter is co-constructed along a similar pattern with the counsellor, but written by Jaz to her parents. Letters have a number of advantages as a precursor to a conversation:

- a) The young person can take time to formulate exactly what she or he wants to say.
- b) It avoids conversations getting off track and bogged down in arguments before the message has even been delivered.
- c) It gives the parents time to think about a response rather than having an immediate reaction.

- d) It signals to the parents a new and more mature approach by the teenager.
- e) The parent then has the choice of writing a reply or having a conversation.

While many teenagers respond warmly to the idea of a letter, some find the idea of writing to a parent such an alien idea that they feel more comfortable planning a conversation.

8. Following the conversation or letter to the parent, the student meets with the counsellor again to reflect on how it went and any learnings gained.

It is possible, however, although certainly not typical, for the student to use such knowledge to act unethically, using this process to build trust with a parent so as to make deception easier. The example of this provided in the workshop was a teenager who had agreed during the negotiations to make prearranged regular phone calls to her mother—aimed at reassuring her that her daughter was at the party and all was well—but who decided to leave the party with a group of boys in a car while at the same time making the calls reassuring her mother that she was at the party. This brings us to consider the final ability relating to values: **to make ethical decisions and act on them.**

The counsellors, in discussing this issue, agreed that however dismayed they may have been, their role was to explore the client's decision with her in a non-judgemental way, and to hold it up to her scrutiny. Other people in the client's life may quite properly take up roles of delivering judgement and punishing, but this is not the distinctive role of a counsellor.

The practitioners suggested a number of counselling frameworks for exploring with the client her experience of deceiving her parents. Some suggested Gestalt “two-chair” work (Meier & Boivin, 2011) to create a conversation between two parts of the teenager: the part that wanted to honour the agreement she had come to with her parents, and the part of her that wanted to accept the boys' invitation to go off with them in the car for an hour or two. Other counsellors preferred approaches that explored the impact of her choices on the wider context of her family and friendships, co-constructing with her on the whiteboard the effect of each decision on these relationships. Helping the client to map out the impact of her decisions on others is an effective way of bringing other voices to the table, voices that add a richness and complexity that may have been overlooked. Doing so with Jaz would contribute to developing her sense of accountability to other significant people in her life.

Some counsellors thought they might use Interactive Drawing Therapy (Withers, 2009), for example asking the client to draw two objects or animals, one representing how she would see herself after making the decision not to break the agreement

reached with her parents and the other representing her view of herself if or when she made the opposite decision. Words and drawings are added and additional sheets used as the client explores and makes meaning for herself around this decision point.

Discussion

The workshops identified a rich variety of therapeutic approaches that counsellors would employ in addressing the issues students brought to counselling, creating values-learning opportunities for them. Counsellors agreed that most situations that clients brought to counselling were values-saturated. The counselling response to these student scenarios encouraged, modelled, explored, and developed the abilities listed in the *Curriculum*. It was not that the counsellors set out to teach these values or abilities. However, the abilities may be most authentically learned as a by-product of a student-centred counselling process.

Underlying all the examples described above is a body of theory that guides the practice of counsellors, a code of ethics, and a unique role within the organisation of schools that is widely recognised. Together, these have a powerful influence on the way in which the counselling relationship is structured. Importantly, these factors come together to help define and regulate how power is distributed in the counsellor–client relationship.

The power between counsellor and client is typically different from that between teacher and student. Even the terms themselves, “client” and “pupil,” carry with them very different connotations of how power is shared in the relationship. For teachers, maintaining a strong and often reinforced power differential between themselves and their pupils, sometimes referred to as “classroom management techniques,” is seen as a crucial part of their role. In the counsellor–client relationship, considerable effort goes into directly negotiating power in the relationship. This is done in a number of ways.

First, the client, apart from exceptional circumstances, is given absolute power over what happens to the information that is shared. This culture of confidentiality (see Hughes, 2011) creates an internal landscape of safety that is more likely to encourage a student to share information and to explore, question, and challenge accepted values, both the student’s and society’s. This safety is particularly important when talking about feelings of shame, guilt, and confusion, when a client has violated her or his own values, or has strong feelings when their own values have been violated by another. Confidentiality is also important when questioning and examining discourses, for example of sexual identity, that form the background from which individual values

are formed. Such questioning can be perceived as carrying real risk of disapproval from important and powerful people in the student's life. Without the security accorded by confidentiality, the risk is often seen by a client as too great for honest and in-depth exploration.

Another difference in the school context is the voluntary nature of the counselling activity. The majority of school students see the counsellor because they elect to, not because they are required to by some authority figure. (In the school where I work, the figure for self-referral is about 85%.) Likewise, there is usually no external sanction if the student does not turn up for an appointment. This is not generally the situation for the teacher–pupil relationship—attendance is not voluntary and missed classes or late arrival may be punished. The volitional nature of the counselling relationship means that the motivation to be involved in, and to continue being involved in, learning through counselling is located with the client, not in any external system. This helps set the foundation for a highly co-constructed learning environment.

Another way in which power is distributed differently is that the client brings the curriculum. The young person's concern becomes the focus of exploration and learning. In the teacher–pupil relationship, the curriculum is chosen for them in most cases, and generally what the student wishes to talk about is subordinate to the topic at hand. Helping students keep on task—that is, attending to a subject area that is largely externally determined—is seen as a key teaching task. For the counsellor, keeping the client on task has a different kind of focus, requiring the counsellor to listen closely to the client's responses and employ a range of techniques to help them explore at ever-increasing depth or breadth the issue they have brought to counselling. The curriculum is to follow the client. The learning that occurs in counselling, then, seen through the lens of the *Curriculum*, is client-driven, and this gives the learning environment in the counselling room a different and important flavour.

Likewise, the power of evaluating the learning lies primarily with the client. The client reaches a verdict in the courtroom of everyday life, as she or he is examined by life's circumstances on the usefulness and helpfulness of an idea, or perspective, and the emotional support received through counselling. This claim does not mean, however, that counsellors are uninvolved in the evaluative process. Counsellors will prompt evaluative conversations at the end of a counselling session by asking questions such as:

- “Out of all the things that we talked about today, did anything stand out to you as being important or helpful for you?”

- “How will you know if things are different for you as a result of this counselling?”

In subsequent sessions, counsellors will also often lead conversations that help clients to notice changes they have made in relation to the problem, encourage client curiosity about those changes, and help them to learn from them. The scaffolding of such evaluative conversations is based on the lived experience of the client’s relationship to the issue at hand, not some external criteria. The exception to that is when the counsellor is involved in some formal diagnostic evaluation with the client, or when the counsellor must take responsibility in a situation where there is a risk of serious harm (Agee, 2011).

In the school environment, the only professional who does not have a direct disciplinary role is the counsellor. This separation of counselling from the disciplining of students has been recognised right from the inception of counselling in schools (Department of Education, 1971). The paradox is that this positioning of the counsellor as not-powerful, in terms of having a disciplinary role, opens up the possibility for different kinds of learning conversations with students that can have powerful effects in their lives.

Guarding the distinctiveness of the counsellor’s role in a school is important and should not be compromised by requiring counsellors to adopt roles that set their power relationship with students at variance with their counselling role, as can sometimes occur in playground policing and classroom management. Just as “key competencies are not just for young people—students, teachers, leaders, parents, community members are all both teachers and learners” (MoE, 2010), the distinctiveness of the counsellor’s role gives a school, its students, teachers, and members of the wider school community options for learning for life that might not otherwise be available.

Conclusion

When invited to examine their work in the light of the five values-related abilities listed in *The New Zealand Curriculum*, school counsellors illustrated the ways in which counselling was associated strongly with encouraging, modelling, exploring, and developing these abilities with students. Hughes’s (2009) study suggested a similarly strong connection between counselling and the development of key competencies in students. Together, these two pieces of work indicate that the counselling room, not just the classroom, is a location for student learning in terms of the *Curriculum*. If the broader canvas of defining learning success in terms of the key competencies and values underlying the *Curriculum* is used as the measure, then the contribution that

counsellors make to student learning can be seen as a central aspect of the core business of a school.

I also suggest that the way in which power is positioned in the counsellor–student relationship offers students a learning environment that differs from the classroom environment, and this difference has important implications and value for student learning. Given the current pressures within schools, this difference, if not articulated, understood, and protected, is at risk of erosion and the value of the counselling room as a learning environment diminished. The connection between school counselling and student learning in terms of the *Curriculum* is therefore a significant area for further investigation through more formalised research.

Endnotes

- 1 The author is currently a member of a Teaching and Learning Research Initiative-funded study of school guidance counselling and the Key Competencies. See <http://www.tlri.org.nz/tlri-research/research-progress>. The workshop that is the focus of this article contributed to the development of the TLRI project.
- 2 These examples were constructed on the basis of my counselling experience.

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