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Guidance and Counselling in New Zealand Secondary Schools
Exploring the Issues

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Abstract

Guidance and counselling have been part of New Zealand secondary schools for over forty years. Initially the role of guidance counsellor was well-defined and deemed to be a specialist middle management position requiring appropriate training and support. Guidance counsellors provided a counselling service and were seen as leaders of guidance programmes and activities. Policy changes over the years have resulted in less emphasis and support for guidance in secondary schools, with a reduction of guidance and counselling time. These changes have impacted on the role and work of the guidance counsellor and on the effectiveness of guidance programmes. This article outlines the changes to guidance and counselling work within New Zealand schools, identifies the current issues being faced, and highlights the need for an external agency such as the Ministry of Education to establish national guidelines and standards for this work.

Introduction

Each school day, in most New Zealand secondary schools, guidance counsellors help and support adolescents who are experiencing a range of difficulties that impact upon their emotional and mental well-being. This work includes counselling, consultation, guidance leadership and management of guidance programmes, networking with and referral to outside agencies, and other support roles. In addition guidance counsellors, like teaching staff, are expected to contribute to co-curricular activities. Currently guidance counsellors stand alone in their schools; there is no external educational authority that sets standards for or oversees the work they do. There are no avenues available to them within the education system to access guidance and support or to receive recognition for their work. Each secondary school decides on its own how it will manage the provision of guidance and counselling.

Guidance counsellors have been working in New Zealand secondary schools since the 1960s. Their role in schools was initially well-defined and supported by the Department of Education, with the requirement that training be undertaken to take

on this specialist position. A move to self-managing schools at the end of the 1980s removed any centralised role in the appointment, training and support of guidance counsellors, while the Ministerial Reference Group removed guidance as a specifically resourced area in schools (Webb, 1997). This was followed in the 1990s by the removal of the tagging of guidance counsellor positions. These changes resulted in a reduction of guidance and counselling time in schools, with more variation in the guidance counsellor role. The appointment and management of school guidance counsellors became the responsibility of the Board of Trustees of each school. Today in some schools the word guidance has been removed from their title so that they are known as school counsellors. There are no official definitions to explain the difference between a guidance counsellor and a school counsellor.

The Education Act 1989 requires principals to ensure students get good guidance and counselling (section 77), however there is no definition of what this involves and no stipulation that the guidance counsellor should be the one to provide this. Schools are also required by the National Administration Guidelines (NAG) to provide safe physical and emotional environments (NAG 5) which includes protection from any form of discrimination, victimisation and sexual harassment (Human Rights Act 1993).

An Education Evaluation Report by the New Zealand Education Review Office (ERO) in 1994 reported that schools had identified a number of factors associated with the emotional environment of a school; these included a positive atmosphere, warm and settled tone, safe emotional environment, nurturing and caring attitudes, warm relationships between staff and students, good systems of student support, comprehensive counselling and guidance systems, and a commitment to promote the welfare of the students. A later ERO definition states 'providing a safe emotional environment involves supporting students, valuing differences and promoting positive attitudes and values' (ERO, 2000, p. 18).

Guidance counsellors can play a significant role in helping schools meet their legal requirements and in achieving a safe emotional environment. Webb (1999) argues the case for counselling children in schools and states that such counselling can be preventative and developmental as well as remedial and specialist. However, schools are no longer legally required to employ guidance counsellors, although most do. The role and management of the guidance counsellor is determined by a number of factors including the school's perception and understanding of guidance, counselling and the guidance counsellor role. Many, but not all, schools do show a high degree of understanding and appreciation of the role of the guidance counsellor. The role undertaken in the school may also be influenced by the training or lack of training, experience and

understanding of the role by the appointed guidance counsellor. There is a need for national guidelines and standards for the guidance counsellor role.

To work in schools, guidance counsellors, like teachers, are required to have a current practising certificate, which is obtained through registration with the New Zealand Teachers Council. The registration documentation and criteria to be met are those specified for teachers and include teacher training. For the registration process a guidance counsellor is classed as a 'teacher' not as a counsellor. So, currently in schools, guidance counsellors are registered as teachers. There is no recognition of the guidance and counselling work that guidance counsellors undertake in schools. This seems to be contradictory to the fact that the Ministry of Education provides funding each year for the training of a number of school guidance counsellors. This training can only be accessed by people who hold guidance counsellor positions in schools. Therefore it would seem that the Ministry of Education recognises the value of having school guidance counsellors, yet it provides no support beyond funding for training.

The New Zealand Association of Counsellors (NZAC), with over 2500 members, is the professional body that represents counselling in New Zealand. NZAC advocates for and on behalf of school counsellors but only has jurisdiction over those counsellors who are members. Over the past ten years NZAC representatives have met regularly with stakeholders involved with education and children, working to address school guidance counsellor issues and concerns. The association developed a School Guidance Counsellor Appointment Kit, and for many years has sent this kit out to all secondary schools advertising guidance counsellor positions (NZAC, 2003). Brochures on school counselling have also been produced and sent to schools.

Currently 301 secondary school guidance counsellors are members of NZAC. Being a member requires guidance counsellors to abide by the NZAC Code of Ethics, and have regular supervision and ongoing professional development (NZAC, 2002). Each NZAC branch throughout New Zealand holds regular meetings and provides opportunities for professional development. National NZAC conferences are held biannually. School guidance counsellors, both members of NZAC and non-members, also network and meet regularly for support and professional development. In 2003 and 2005 guidance counsellors organised their own national conference. These conferences focus solely on the work of the school counsellor, providing opportunities for professional development, networking and support. A survey of school guidance counsellors undertaken in 2004 by the New Zealand Post Primary Teachers Association (PPTA), the secondary teachers union, showed that 66% of the 256 respondents were members of NZAC. What do the 85 guidance counsellors (34%) in this survey who are not members of NZAC base their practice on?

Many guidance counsellors are sole practitioners in schools. They are also involved in guidance networks, guidance programmes, management teams and other school committees such as health, outdoor education, curriculum and professional development. Working in an education setting in a role quite different to that of the teaching staff has its own issues, especially around being a sole worker, the nature of counselling and confidentiality, the invisibility of a lot of the work done and the perceived workload of the school guidance counsellor.

Hughes (1996) wrote about the colonisation of the school counsellor role and gradual marginalisation of the counselling service, claiming school counsellors may experience feelings of invisibility, unimportance and powerlessness, and feel devalued within the dominant teaching culture in the school. There is increased credibility, less stress and more reward given to school counsellors who are teaching subjects or undertaking other roles that are not guidance related. Yet for the students a guidance counsellor who also teaches may be less likely to be accessed for counselling support.

All these factors, along with the absence of any government department having responsibility for the school guidance counsellor role, have led to guidance counsellors feeling unsupported and misunderstood. The last question in the 2004 PPTA survey asked what specific services PPTA could provide to guidance counsellors that it is not currently providing. Fifty percent of the 145 respondents asked for the PPTA to advocate to Boards of Trustees, principals, teachers and government about the need for counsellors in schools, with some of the comments conveying a picture of guidance counsellors under huge pressure in their schools.

There is a need for the constant education of the whole school community and beyond about the role of the school guidance counsellor, the counselling process, its validity in an educational setting and its value and significance in assisting today's adolescents with the many challenges and issues they may face. These challenges and issues can be barriers to their learning. There is a need for an external educational authority to advocate on behalf of guidance counsellors, and for guidance and counselling in schools.

Workload issues

Along with the reduction of guidance time and guidance counsellor allocation in schools, teaching staff have also been experiencing ongoing changes in their work. These changes include new national qualifications and assessment of students; changes in teacher appraisal, and increased competition between schools for enrolments. Teacher workloads have increased, meaning teachers are less available to

undertake guidance and pastoral care roles and frequently leaving or referring this work to the guidance counsellor. The counsellor may be seen as being readily available if they are not timetabled to teach.

In 1997, Manthei carried out research on the work of school counsellors in New Zealand (Manthei, 1999a, b). This research showed that the time spent on counselling had remained about the same as had been reported in research done five years earlier, however there was an increase in the amount of non-guidance administration work and in crisis work. Many counsellors observed that the need for guidance and counselling had increased, that they were working longer hours to get everything done and that the role had become more difficult.

Factors contributing to the job being more difficult included social and economic factors, the results of which were often beyond the counsellors' or their clients' control. These factors included poverty, increasing numbers of disturbed young people, increasing violence and lack or reduction of availability and/or quality outside services or resources to call upon. School factors included reduced staffing, less time for counselling, and a negative and non-supportive atmosphere for guidance work. Alongside these factors was the claim that the job had grown larger, with more complex counselling cases, yet the school counsellors were also being diverted from guidance work into other areas such as teaching and administration. This finding is supported by the 2004 PPTA survey, where 41% of the respondents had teaching responsibilities as well as their guidance counsellor work. In Manthei's 1997 survey about half of the counsellors were less satisfied with their job than they had been five years earlier (Manthei, 1999a). Guidance counsellors have to negotiate their role and responsibilities with their school; there are no national requirements to follow.

The Manthei research findings identified the most serious or difficult problems dealt with by school counsellors as family problems, depression, suicide attempts, sexual abuse, drug abuse and bullying. The most frequent problems encountered were career decisions, family problems, educational problems, peer conflict and disruptive behaviour (Manthei, 1999b).

In 2003 the initial findings of the Youth 2000 national youth health and well-being survey were released (Adolescent Health Research Group, 2003). This was New Zealand's first nationally representative youth health survey, and was undertaken to gain comprehensive population-based data on youth health problems, concerns and risk factors, as well as identifying protective and resiliency factors in the lives of youth that promote health and well-being.

It was found that 80% of the students surveyed felt healthy, did not engage in multiple risky behaviours and reported positive connections to families, schools and

peers. Health services were identified as not meeting the needs of youth, with about half of the students surveyed having not sought assistance from health services when they needed to due to a wide range of perceived barriers.

The findings also identified that there are a concerning number of youth whose healthy development is at risk, with a significant number who ride in cars with potentially intoxicated drivers, grow up in unsafe environments and experience emotional health problems. Twelve percent of New Zealand youth are involved in multiple health risk behaviour such as binge drinking, regular cigarette smoking, being in a car with a drunk driver or being sexually active.

The students reported high levels of suicidal thoughts, suicidal attempts and depressive symptoms, with 34% of girls and 20% of the boys at age 15 contemplating suicide, and 14% of the girls and 6% of the boys having attempted suicide in the previous 12 months (Adolescent Health Research Group, 2003). These findings did not include the most at-risk students such as truants or early school leavers as they would not have been in school to participate in the survey.

The protective factors identified by the Youth 2000 survey involved youth being connected with others. Positive connections with parents, family and school were the most important protective factors, with parents playing an important role in the lives of young people into and throughout the teenage years. Forty percent of students wanted more time with at least one parent. Schools were identified as places that could play a major role in identifying and helping the significant numbers of youth with mental health, drug and alcohol misuse, and violence/bullying concerns. Attending school and feeling safe at school are also important for healthy development.

The Youth 2000 survey findings support those of the school counsellor survey (Manthei, 1999a, b) in terms of the issues adolescents are presenting in counselling, the numbers of young people affected and the increased complexity of some of the cases. It is not surprising that school counsellors consider themselves to be struggling with an increasing workload.

At school guidance counsellor meetings in Dunedin the group has been sharing ideas on the work they do in their schools and how they manage some of the current issues. The questions being discussed are: How do you manage students when one student is in crisis but you already have student(s) booked in? How do you decide when to refer to outside agencies? What do you do about students who miss appointments? How do students get to see you? What responsibilities do you have outside of providing counselling? How do you manage the workload and follow-ups? How often do you have supervision, and who pays? When do you do administration work? What kind of notes do you take? How do you store them?

There is a constant need to prioritise within the counselling service in terms of the urgency of the students' presenting issues, while at the same time working to maintain positive and trusting relationships with all the students who seek counselling. There are no national guidelines and standards for school guidance counsellor work.

Workload issues are an ongoing concern for guidance counsellors, and one rather sobering question that could be asked is 'How safe is the practice of an overstretched school guidance counsellor?'

Guidance programmes

Pastoral care networks and guidance programmes such as Peer Support have been running in New Zealand schools for many years. These programmes aim to provide support, advice and guidance to students, and are preventative in their approach. Guidance counsellors frequently play major roles in the management of these guidance programmes in terms of organisation, training, monitoring, evaluation, support and supervision of the students. With the reduction in time allocated to guidance activities in schools, along with teachers undertaking less pastoral care, the guidance counsellor may have a major responsibility for these programmes with little support.

In a report by Cox (2002) on pastoral care programmes in 190 New Zealand secondary schools, most schools did have pastoral care programmes to guide students. These use many levels of staff, with the most common level involving teachers being used as form teachers or tutors. Ninety-two percent of the schools used a combination of senior management, form/class teachers and guidance counsellors. Other people who were actively involved in pastoral care programmes in many schools were deans, head of department special needs, resource teachers of learning and behaviour (RTLB), local church pastors, chaplains, matrons, health nurses, tutor group leaders, whanau tutors/leaders, student support workers, Te Atakura-trained teachers, English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) teachers, youth workers, mentors, social workers, boarding house staff and peer support students. Most of the school staff involved in pastoral care programmes received in-house training from guidance counsellors and senior management or had professional development for their specific role.

Volunteer mentor programmes are relatively new in New Zealand, with 35.2% of schools in the Cox (2002) survey running such a programme. These schools mostly used outside providers for the training and selection of mentors. Schools run a variety of peer support programmes; the most common are peer support, peer mentor, yellow ribbon, peer mediation, peer support buddies programme and peer sexuality.

These programmes train senior students in specific skills and activities so they can lead sessions with junior students, provide specific services across the school such as mediation, or be available for students to talk to.

Cox (2002) claimed there are some outstanding pastoral care programmes in place in many New Zealand secondary schools, but their effectiveness is limited by inadequate staffing, insufficient funding, the demands of the National Certificate in Educational Achievement (NCEA), lack of time allocated for pastoral care programmes to operate effectively within the curriculum framework and a shortage of mentors in many communities who are prepared to volunteer their time.

For these programmes to be effective Cox identified a number of key requirements, including full commitment from the principal and school management team and an understanding by all teaching staff of the purpose, outcomes and value of these programmes in the creation of a positive atmosphere in the school and in the personal development of the students. Teaching staff should receive ongoing training in some of the programme skills such as conflict resolution, more effective communication skills, and identifying resilient qualities in their students. The teachers can then be role models in the use of these skills in their daily interaction with students, both in the classroom and when taking extracurricular activities. Teachers and students involved in these programmes need to receive appropriate training, support and supervision, with more than one teacher with time allocated being involved in the programme, and where possible including programmes in the school curriculum.

Cox's (2002) findings reflect the impact that the reduction of guidance time in secondary schools has had on guidance programmes. The key requirements identified to make guidance programmes more effective are very similar to those needed in schools for guidance counsellors to be more effective and to carry out their role appropriately; that is, full school commitment with more time allocation, and a better understanding and valuing of the work the guidance counsellor does.

Guidance counsellors have also been involved in preventative guidance programmes initiated from outside the school to deal with specific youth issues. Many guidance counsellors became Regional Facilitators for the Young People at Risk of Suicide, a Ministry of Education initiative which ran throughout New Zealand (Ministry of Education and National Health Committee, 1997). This initiative was in response to the high rate of youth suicide.

In Dunedin, local school counsellors have been working alongside people from community agencies within the Safer Schools Safer Communities (SSSC) group to help address bullying and harassment in schools. Since its inception in 1997 the group has held meetings and facilitated forums and workshops for staff and students from

local schools. In 1999 and 2003 a number of schools signed a Safer Schools Safer Communities charter (Dixon et al., 2005). The success of these initiatives in each school is very dependent upon the value the school places on the issues, and the time and commitment made to the programme.

Guidance counsellors may also be the school liaison and support person for Project K, which provides 13- to 15-year-olds with the opportunity to realise their full potential through programmes that build self-confidence, teach valuable life skills and promote good health and education. Founded in 1995 by mountaineer Graeme Dingle and lawyer Jo-Anne Wilkinson, this 14-month programme has three stages: a wilderness adventure; a community challenge, and 12 months of mentoring, with most of the programme happening outside the school (Project K Trust, 2004).

Conclusion

The changes in education policy since the 1980s have resulted in less emphasis on and a reduction in the guidance and counselling provision in New Zealand secondary schools. The effectiveness of guidance programmes has been compromised, with the work of school guidance counsellors going on mostly unnoticed, often with little acknowledgement or recognition of its value. It seems strange that a person trained in guidance and counselling, frequently at the expense of the Ministry of Education, may then, in schools, be required to undertake a number of non-guidance and non-counselling roles such as teaching. This is even more curious when there are a significant number of youth in New Zealand secondary schools who are experiencing mental health and well-being issues and who may well benefit from guidance programmes and the work of the guidance counsellor.

The results of the guidance counsellor surveys reported on in this article portray a service provision in schools which is overstretched and under pressure. There is no support, advice or guidance available from an external authority such as the Ministry of Education. There is no external agency for guidance counsellors to take their concerns to, or where they may be addressed. Each guidance counsellor has to negotiate his or her role and responsibilities, and any issue or concern, with his or her individual school. The question has to be asked: what would be different for the school guidance counsellors, the students and the schools they work in if there was an external authority, an authority that understood guidance and counselling, its value in schools, and was therefore able to create national guidelines and standards for this work?

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