

An Intermediate School Team’s Collaborative Working Relationships: Reflections from a School Counsellor, Senior Leader, Senco and Teacher

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Abstract

This article presents a reflective discussion of the complex space of school counsellor–teacher collaboration, in response to a gap in New Zealand-based literature and research on this topic. It draws on perspectives from literature and the authors’ experiences as an intermediate school counsellor, senior leader, special education needs coordinator, and teacher. This complexity is primarily seen to be a result of paradigmatic and ethical dissimilarities between teaching and counselling. The authors contend that this complexity requires serious consideration and can be navigated by negotiating middle grounds in response to student needs, developing role clarity, working in ways that enable each party to be creative whilst remaining grounded within their own role and associated ethical and paradigmatic responsibilities, and on-going reflective conversations to strengthen collaboration.

Keywords

intermediate school counselling, teacher–counsellor collaborations, school counselling ethics

This article focuses on the collaborative working relationships developed between a school counsellor and the authors in our roles as an intermediate school teacher, a senior leader, and a special education needs co-ordinator (SENCo). The ideas discussed in this article stem from reflective conversations between the authors as well as the first author's doctoral research based on school counsellor–teacher collaborations.¹ This article is also a response to the lack of literature and research in this area, and it aims to initiate conversations on the complexities of intermediate school counsellor–teacher collaboration and how these might be negotiated.

The authors comprise a collaborative team based at an intermediate school in Auckland, New Zealand. This team consists of a school counsellor and three teachers. The first author² is a qualified counsellor who worked part time at the school while completing her doctoral studies. She had a background in education, learning support, and human development prior to entering the field of counselling. The second author³ has 22 years of teaching experience and has been a senior leader at the school for several years, including in a pastoral care leader role. The third author has 27 years of teaching experience and has been the SENCo for over five years. The fourth author has nearly five years of teaching experience and has worked in classes with large proportions of students with high learning and socio-emotional needs.

We begin this article by making a case for teacher–counsellor collaborations in intermediate school settings, bringing to light the nature of collaborative interactions, identifying some of the complexities of this space and finally sharing some of our insights on how these complexities are negotiated. While this is a reflective piece, we have drawn upon literature, research, and grey papers to present a critical discussion.⁴

Making a Case for Teacher–Counsellor Collaboration

Our school team's shared objective of benefiting students has been extremely favourable for creating safety in our working relationships. This enables us to engage in reflective conversations to strengthen and better understand the value of our collaborative efforts. In this section, we build a case for teacher–counsellor collaborations by considering the current scenario of mental health issues in children and young people, the context of intermediate school counselling in New Zealand, a developmental perspective on working with young students in an intermediate school setting, and the benefits of collaboration.

Mental Health Issues in Children and Young People

Evidence points towards a decline in child and adolescent mental health, particularly in New Zealand. While there is arguably extensive research examining myriad factors contributing to mental health issues in young people, there are also several sources of evidence, including research, grey papers, and news articles, pointing to the urgent need for, and substantial lack of, mental health support for children and young people.

According to a recent UNICEF report (2020), New Zealand ranked second highest of 41 countries for our adolescent suicide rate, behind only Lithuania (UNICEF, 2020). Several New Zealand-based news articles have reported significant wait times for young people seeking mental health support and indicated the potential risks of this (Cardwell, 2021; Cooke, 2021; Witton, 2022). This situation has been further exacerbated by the ongoing impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns, including work overload and under-resourcing of staff within specialist youth agencies.

In our practice experience, referrals to respective specialist agencies are often met with wait times lasting several months, if picked up at all. Consistent with this, newspaper headlines stated that there were over 5000 self-harm related hospitalisations of young people aged between 10 and 24 years in the year preceding September 2021 (Spence, 2022). The lower end of this age range indicates the young age from which children are struggling with mental health difficulties.

The substantial decline in youth mental health points to an urgent need for support and interventions. However, access to mental health support services is substantially impacted by contextual aspects of intermediate school counselling, particularly funding and limited resourcing.

The Context

In New Zealand, intermediate schools typically include years 7–8. Since the following discussion makes reference to other schooling levels (as this is relevant to discussing the context), it is important to clarify school types in New Zealand. Primary schools may include years 0–8 (“full” primary) or years 0–6 (“contributing” primary). An intermediate school would usually receive students from a “contributing” primary school for years 7–8. Secondary schools generally include years 9–13, and some may include years 7–13 (“composite high school”) (Ministry of Education, 2022a).

Therefore, intermediate schools form a kind of transitory phase in the lives of young students moving from “contributing” primary schools to secondary schools.

Funding is a central issue impacting intermediate school counselling services in New Zealand. Until September 2021, there was no funding for counselling services below secondary school level. Prior to this, and in many cases even now, several primary and intermediate schools took to contracting counsellors from limited alternative funding sources in response to the emerging high needs of their students. Only recently, the Ministry of Education promised funding for counselling services at primary and intermediate schools in select regions of New Zealand through the Counselling in Schools Initiative (Ministry of Education, 2022b).

This lack of resourcing makes for quite limited availability of the counselling service in schools. Secondary schools in New Zealand are funded for counselling services and still have average ratios of one counsellor supporting 668 students, as opposed to NZAC's recommended 1:400 ratio (Manthei et al., 2020) as well as waitlists of up to seven days (Counselling Aotearoa News, 2019). Needless to say, counsellors working at underfunded schools like primary and intermediate schools struggle with similar workloads. Likewise, teachers are also overloaded with several responsibilities in their roles that often go beyond classroom engagement, with little release time to address all of these responsibilities. In fact, primary school teachers reported the stress of needing to address high socio-emotional needs in their young students, without appropriate training or time to attend to these high needs (Pūaotanga Independent Review Panel, 2021).

Our own experiences echo these perspectives. The first author worked with 60–80 students on average in her school counselling role, limited to only two days a week. This forced the need for a waitlist and constant prioritising to address students with higher needs “*in time*”, thereby making it impossible to address all student needs as they arose. Likewise, the remaining authors reflected on time pressures within their roles and their impact on collaboration with the school counsellor as only a small part of their wider role. This was particularly significant for the second author, as collaborating with the counsellor was only one part of her pastoral care responsibilities, which were only a portion of her senior leadership role. The fourth author similarly reflected upon the limited space for collaboration in her busy schedule as a classroom teacher, with little release time and work to carry home on a regular basis.

She commented on the challenges of matching times within different schedules. All four of us recalled email and phone call communication beyond school hours, including on weekends.

These pragmatic aspects of workload and time constraints have significant implications for the Counselling in Schools Initiative. Through this initiative, the Ministry of Education has allocated \$44 million over four years for primary and intermediate schools as well as some secondary schools in select regions to contract approved counsellors from the community (Ministry of Education, 2022b). One of the issues in this initiative is the lack of clarity about role expectations. Secondary school counsellors are expected to liaise and collaborate with teachers, senior leaders, parents, and external professionals (Ministry of Education, 2017; NZAC, 2015). It would seem remiss to not prioritise this for younger students at primary and intermediate school levels, given the abundance of research and literature emphasising the benefit of collaborative wrap-around support for children and young people's developmental and counselling outcomes (e.g. see Bronfenbrenner, 1979; 1986; 2005; Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994; Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2002; Janson et al., 2008; Kourkoutas & Giovazolias, 2015; Li & Julian, 2012; Ministry of Education, 2017). Equally, it seems that the workload and time pressures impacting teachers' collaboration with embedded school counsellors detailed above would be even more problematic for collaboration with external professionals as per the Counselling in Schools Initiative.

Developmental Transitions

In a sense, the intermediate school level (years 7–8) is a two-year transition between childhood, at primary school, and adolescence and youth, at secondary school or college. This transitive phase thus inherently presents young students with several changes, through various shifts in their environments along with developmental shifts within themselves. Moreover, young students may present at intermediate school at varying stages of their physical maturation process and, in turn, their cognitive development (Oetzel & Scherer, 2003).

Additionally, in alignment with theorists such as Erikson (1968), recent research supports the idea that in early adolescence, young people's brains are wired towards seeking social engagement and approval (Jetha & Segalowitz, 2012; Luciana, 2009; Steinberg, 2009; Steinberg & Sheffield Morris, 2001). They tend to prioritise friendships and approval from social groups. Equally, they are still

learning to engage with and manage inevitable ups and downs or ebbs and flows in relationships. This is inescapably further complicated by influences from social media and the COVID-19 pandemic-related lockdowns.

These developmental transitions can present challenges for counselling processes, including collaborative goal setting (Shirk et al., 2011). As an example, we reflected on our awareness that young students were often focused on goals that aligned with positive social engagement and approval from their peers. This tended to contrast with our adult tendency to consider wider developmental and whole-life perspectives that we believed would be more “beneficial” for them. Two key issues arise from this contrast between the goals or objectives of young students and adult counsellors and teachers. First is the potential power dynamics that might operate, since adults tend to dominate decision-making. And second is that each adult in a young person's life likely has their own ideas about “beneficial” counselling goals based on their own standpoint and understanding of the young person. This evidences a strong need for collaboration and a balance of power in relationships and counselling processes with young people.

Li and Julian (2012) proposed that the relationship is the “key ingredient” in positive outcomes for young people across intervention settings, including counselling and teaching. This relationship is characterised by attachment, reciprocity, balance of power, and progressive complexity. Li and Julian draw on the works of seminal developmental theorists like Urie Bronfenbrenner and Lev Vygotsky to explain the value of a balance of power through collaboration and “scaffolding” for client–counsellor as well as student–teacher relationships. The first author of the current article believes that this notion is valuable for strengthening developmentally informed therapeutic relationships with young clients as well as other aspects of the counselling process, including potential external collaboration with teachers or other adult professionals.

Providing Wrap-Around Support

Bronfenbrenner writes extensively about the bi-directional influence between a young person and their environment, including, in particular, significant people in their life. These may be parents, teachers, friends, and/or other individuals close to them (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; 1986; 2005). From a very pragmatic standpoint, each of these individuals has their own unique understanding of young people and their needs. Given the tensions of time and workload pressures as well as the two-year time limitation of an intermediate school, it makes sense to reflectively develop

collaborative systems in order to better support students in the transitional space of intermediate school by making more efficacious use of this time.

A closer look at the landscape of international research and literature highlights the impact of collaboration between people from different settings on a young person's development. While some research draws on Bronfenbrenner's work to point out the importance of collaboration around a young person to benefit their developmental processes (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2002; Li & Julian, 2012; McIntosh et al., 2008), others discuss the value of an ecological model for school counselling (Crowell et al., 2015; McMahon et al., 2014). More commonly, several international publications examined experiences and impacts of collaboration between counsellors and teachers (Atici, 2014; Baker et al., 2009; Cholewa et al., 2016; Ekornes, 2015; Hayden et al., 2018; Zalaquett & Chatters, 2012) as well as between counsellors and school senior leaders (Atici, 2014; Bodenhorn, 2006; Kimber & Campbell, 2014; Lehr et al., 2007).

Since there is a dearth of research on this topic in the New Zealand context, the literature cited above includes research from a wide range of other countries. Despite the cultural, contextual and counsellor role differences in these studies, each of them speaks to the positive benefits of collaboration, including that it strengthens and facilitates communication and support systems for the young person (Armstrong, 2014; Baker et al., 2009; Cholewa et al., 2016; Cromarty & Richards, 2009; Daniels & Jenkins, 2010; Hayden et al., 2018; Kourkoutas & Giovaziolas, 2015; NZAC, 2015; Peacock, 2014), promotes overall development (Bryan & Holcomb-McCoy, 2011), strengthens responses to and prevents bullying (Banks et al., 2020), and aids problem solving (Kaul & Wilson, 2020; Lairio & Nissilä, 2002). We also believe that teacher–counsellor collaboration has the potential to progress preventative and early interventions for young people experiencing distressing or traumatic situations or even presenting with difficulties that may require specialist intervention.

What Collaboration Looks Like

Drawing on some literature and limited research, we elaborate the nature of collaborative interactions between teachers and counsellors. In some cases, these interactions may include a specific student's presence and in others they might be in a more consultative capacity.

Three-Way Meetings/Communication (Student, Teacher, Counsellor)

On a practical level, interaction often occurs in relation to keeping a teacher informed when their student is at counselling. At intermediate school level this is important since students must be safely accounted for when they are not in class. Therefore, some level of communication with the young client's teacher is necessary and already exists. In the first author's experience as school counsellor, this has also often proven beneficial as a gradual process of developing a tailored wrap-around, support system through collaboration with the young client.

When a client does begin to see the school counsellor, they are made aware of key aspects from the counsellor's ethical code, which includes client confidentiality and its limits (NZAC, 2020). Therefore, communication with any individual external to the primary therapeutic relationship between the counsellor and their client can be quite a tricky space for school counsellors to navigate. A key foundation for this is client collaboration. Collaboratively working with the client to bring a teacher into the *cone of silence* is a suitable means of empowering the student's voice in their process and upholding the counselling ethical code (Armstrong, 2014).

After gaining the young client's consent, counsellors and teachers can work collaboratively to support young students in a range of ways. Teachers can often be included in the process of developing students' strategies for self-regulation within their environment (Armstrong, 2014). During collaborative meetings, often with the student present (Armstrong, 2014), coping strategies can be designed with both student and teacher perspectives to identify those most efficient for that client within their classroom setting, as well as to establish expectations and the responsible use of boundary strategies. This kind of three-way collaborative process has the potential to empower the student's voice as well as gain access to their teacher's valuable insights for their counselling journey. Therefore, the teacher can be instrumental in supporting the student to put their coping strategies into action when they see the need arise (Armstrong, 2014). This process can be valuable in "scaffolding" the student towards developing independent self-regulation skills in the long run.

Such three-way meetings can also be a useful way to facilitate communication or mediate the relationship between a student and their teacher (Cholewa et al., 2016; Cromarty & Richards, 2009; NZAC, 2015; Peacock, 2014). Some publications outline a similar process in the school counsellor's advocacy role (Ministry of Education, 2017; NZAC, 2015; 2020), which might involve the counsellor standing up for their young client in front of the school board, or in front of senior

leadership in case of stand downs (McNaughton, 2019; Ministry of Education, 2017; NZAC, 2015). Alternatively, it might involve a more collaborative conversation or consultation with a staff member to build their awareness about student needs (Atici, 2014; Baker et al., 2009; Bostic & Rouch, 1999; Peacock, 2014).

School Counsellor Consultation

School counsellors may be consulted for several reasons in response to individual student needs, specific classroom situations, or wider school issues including traumatic incidents. In some ways each of these require their own dedicated, detailed discussions, highlighting key issues as well as recommendations for addressing them. For reasons of scope, we describe some of the key aspects relating to the focus of this article briefly.

Consultation For Individual Student Needs

Teachers may often consult with school counsellors regarding individual student needs. Where a strong relationship has been developed between a teacher and their student, sometimes teachers might even find themselves engaging in “incidental counselling” (Karan & Colbert, 2006), wherein students might seek support from their teacher. Importantly, this requires a set of knowledge and skills for suitably responding to emerging student needs (Karan & Colbert, 2006). These can often be beyond the scope of teachers’ training and practice due to the increasing socio-emotional and mental health needs presenting in children and young people today (Pūaotanga Independent Review Panel, 2021). Recommendations from publications for addressing these issues largely include referring the student to a counsellor and advocating for more counselling presence in schools (Education Review Office (ERO), 2013; Ministry of Education, 2017). While this perspective is not being disputed in our article, there is something to be said about responding to student needs within that moment with their teacher.

We reflected on such conversations where students sought support from their teacher, and two important factors were identified. First, in responding to the student’s needs in that moment, as teachers we generally relied on our gut intuition and sought to provide support in the form of emotional first aid and then facilitate a conversation towards seeking further help, where required. The fourth author reflects on these moments of responding to student needs, stating “sometimes we might get it right”. Therefore, subsequently, we often reached out to the school counsellor to discuss the experience, a potential referral, and in some cases the

suitability of our response to the student in that moment. The third author explains that this provided her with the opportunity to share with the counsellor what had happened and how they responded and ask any questions about this response as well as suitable responses to anticipated further conversations with the student. Reflecting on this, as teachers we were aware that we did not have the expertise in responding to students' high socio-emotional needs and felt that the counsellor was equipped with the knowledge, skills, and research to guide these kinds of conversations. Therefore, it was valuable for us to have a collaborative space to discuss these aspects with the school counsellor.

This kind of collaboration often became a reciprocal learning space between the teachers and the counsellor in this writing team. The fourth author found that this kind of collaborative discussion enabled her to learn and perhaps to reinforce or further develop her skills in responding to student needs. This also enabled her to challenge her thinking in areas that required further understanding. For the third author, it was particularly a way of creating safety for students by seeking reassurance for herself that student needs were appropriately responded to in that moment. The second author found that it was a great way to pick up strategies and ideas from each other with the aim to create more efficient student support as well as to better manage staff workloads. The first and second author often referred to this as "tag teaming". For the first author, collaborations were a great way of understanding the New Zealand school system and teaching culture better, so as to develop stronger counselling practice within this context. They also facilitated a shared understanding of the wide range and diversity of students' cultural needs.

This collaboration became a space for developing an understanding of the nature of our roles and working styles to be able to make our approach in responding to student needs more effective (Walker, 2015). For instance, the first two authors often engaged in a "tag team" practice when students presented with difficulties relating to behaviour management. From her senior leadership position, the second author took on the role of placing and maintaining boundaries, while, in her counsellor role, the first author took on a more empathic and supportive position to develop a therapeutic relationship with the student and facilitate their progress. The authors found this a suitable strategy since separating the discipline role from the supportive role led to stronger engagement with the counselling process, and thus more efficient student progress.

Consultation For Wider Issues

In relation to wider issues like classroom or school-wide issues, the school counsellor might engage in a consultative role particularly with the senior leadership team (Dahir et al., 2011; Duslak & Geier, 2017; NZAC, 2015). For instance, in response to traumatic incidents, the senior leadership team and school counsellor at our school had often come together to put a plan in place. Reflecting on some of the tricky situations that we had navigated together, the second author stated that “the counsellor comes in with the cavalry.”

As an example, in an attempt to spread more awareness about responsible social media use, the senior leadership team and the school counsellor engaged in a meeting to discuss some ways of communicating key messages. This enabled them to set up a clear and consistent message about responsible social media use to be communicated through the school. Similarly, in responding to news about a death in the school community, the senior leadership team and school counsellor consulted on the best means of addressing this news as well as potential issues that might arise from it at school. One solution included a classroom conversation or “circle time” with a class that included students most closely affected by the death. Further to this, the first author found that as a school counsellor, facilitating this conversation in class collaboratively with these students’ teacher provided them with valuable insights from the teacher’s perspective and observations of the class.

The Complexities of Teacher-Counsellor Collaboration

In New Zealand, there is a lot of encouragement, particularly from the Education Review Office and the Ministry of Education for teachers and counsellors in a school context to work collaboratively (ERO, 2013; ERO, 2016a; ERO, 2016b; Ministry of Education, 2017; NZAC, 2015). While some of these publications very briefly discuss what this collaboration might look like, there is an overall lack of literature that discusses this subject in depth. More specifically, there is a lack of publications that raise awareness about potential challenges within these collaborative processes and how they might be addressed. Collaboration between a school teacher and counsellor is quite a complex space, in that both professionals work with different ethical codes and their practices are informed by different pedagogical influences. This was a significant motivator for us to write this article.

To begin with, some practical issues that can challenge the ability of counsellors and teachers in schools to work collaboratively include pressures of time (Baker et al., 2009; Limberg et al., 2021), as well as individual differences relating to

perspectives on topics of mental health and counselling. School counsellors and teachers alike are dealing with heavy workloads, as already stated, and this seems to have multiplied following COVID-19 lockdowns. Equally, it is notable that the third author identified the collaborative process as enabling more efficient management of time in addressing the wide range of high student needs.

A major complexity previously identified is the tension between the counsellor's ethical obligation of client confidentiality (NZAC, 2020) and the teaching ethical code (Education Council, 2017) and school policies, which prioritise a collaborative approach. Teachers are committed to the teaching ethical code (Education Council, 2017), which promotes a culture of open collaboration (Armstrong, 2014) and information sharing within children's networks, since this is seen to effect meaningful change (Fuller, 2014). On the other hand, counsellors are committed to the counselling ethical code (NZAC, 2020), which privileges client confidentiality and privacy, except in cases involving an imminent risk of harm. This is quite a significant difference between teaching and counselling and points to another critical grey area about the space for privacy and confidentiality in the lives of children and young people. There are likely also differing viewpoints on this from the perspectives of different stakeholders including parents, school senior leaders, and individual teachers and counsellors. This is perhaps a topic worth investigating, but it is separate to the focus of this article and outside of its scope.

In attempts to navigate through these ethical dilemmas, counsellors may seek the young client's consent for collaborating with their teacher. While this is a suitable and imperative first step, the authors of this article contend that to tout this as a solution would be to oversimplify the range of influences complicating teacher–counsellor collaborations. These influences, beyond ethical and policy obligations, include paradigmatic differences that are believed to impact individual professional roles and responsibilities. There are likely also differences in personality and working styles as well as values and objectives that we believe impact teacher–counsellor collaboration.

We identified that the ethical complexities stem from historical roots and profound paradigmatic divergences between education and counselling. For instance, while education is rooted in ancient times, the field of counselling is much younger and first emerged in response to the needs of adult clients a little over a century ago. The specialist sub-field of counselling with children and young people emerged roughly in the middle of the 20th century (e.g. see the works of

Anna Freud). Therefore, it is conceivable that counselling services, including ethical responsibilities, are geared largely towards working with adult clients (Kaul, 2019). The first author asserts that school counselling is a relatively young and specialist area, and the ongoing work in this field is still contributing to its development. Specifically relevant to this discussion, the ethical obligation of client confidentiality and privacy does extend to children and young people as clients, too. However, there are often grey areas that are negotiated by school counsellors on an ongoing basis.

Peeling further into the layers of paradigmatic complexities in teacher–counsellor collaboration, we draw on Bronfenbrenner’s theory (1979; 1986; 2005) once again. When a teacher and counsellor work together, an interweaving of their two individual bio-ecological systems occurs. In a sense, it is a bringing together of the two different worlds of teaching and counselling (Kimber & Campbell, 2014). In an open and collaborative school culture, the idea of confidentiality might seem “alien” (Armstrong, 2014) to school staff, whilst for the counsellor this is a core feature of the counselling process. Furthermore, the world of education and teaching places importance on collaborative wrap-around support (Education Council, 2017). Therefore, a counsellor’s communication with an individual outside of the therapeutic relationship is somewhat uncertain, given the counsellor’s ethics around client confidentiality and advocacy (NZAC, 2020) as well as the importance of collaboration within the therapeutic relationship (Norcross, 2010; Norcross & Wampold, 2018). This could make it quite challenging for counsellors to engage in collaborative efforts with individuals outside of the therapeutic relationship. The specific point being made here is that this difference between counselling and teaching at the surface appears to be rooted in ethical code and policy differences. A closer look at this space reveals that these differences are rooted within paradigmatic differences that inform practice and policy.

Importantly, each professional role is developed from respective paradigmatic roots and ethical codes as well as policy obligations. These, and likely other paradigmatic differences, inevitably affect the roles and responsibilities of the individual professionals in different ways, likely causing confusion about roles and boundaries within these roles. Relating to this, some international literature has identified the lack of clarity about the school counsellor’s role as well as their ability to work collaboratively with teachers (Jansen et al., 2008; Kimber & Campbell, 2014; Lairio & Nissilä, 2002; Reavie, 2015; Walker, 2015). Echoing

this perspective, the authors of this article ascertained that teachers often know very little about the school counsellor role and feel quite unsure about whether and how they might be able to liaise with the school counsellor.

A further paradigmatic distinction is highlighted by the first author's clinical counselling supervisor, who pointed out a disparity in viewpoints. She explained that the school counsellor role tends to focus on individual student needs, in that every attempt is made to tailor therapy to client needs and preferences (McCashen, 2008; Kaul & Wilson, 2020; Cooper & McLeod, 2011; Norcross, 2010). On the other hand, the senior leader role necessitates a wider consideration of choices impacting the whole school and community. Similarly, teachers consider the young person as part of a whole classroom full of students. This points to a very clear difference in our viewpoints, roles, and goals as we collaborate with each other.

Despite the range of complexities impacting teacher–counsellor collaboration, the first author believes that there is something to be said about inserting a counsellor into a school system. This is a complex space in which the two different worlds of school systems and counselling come together. It is the authors' contention that the school system cannot be completely adapted to “fit” the counselling approach, and neither can counselling be fully moulded into the school's expectations. In fact, it would be remiss to not acknowledge a school's duty of care towards students and its related responsibility towards parents in keeping their children safe (Education Council, 2017). Therefore, we prize efforts towards developing and strengthening collaboration by negotiating these complexities.

Negotiating Complexities Between Two Different Worlds

Having identified some of these complexities from the very outset of working together, it was important for this team to develop ways of negotiating them to strengthen our work together. An initial notion that the first author worked with was that of negotiating middle grounds in order to meaningfully mitigate the differences between the two professional worlds of education and counselling.

Reflecting further, the first and second author were able to identify some middle grounds that had been negotiated early on in relation to the ethical obligation of client confidentiality. The second author had always been quite supportive of counselling for students and held the belief that young people are entitled to their confidentiality. She maintained that there is no need for other individuals to know

about personal details young students share with their counsellor. Often, this perspective of confidentiality and privacy for children was contrary to expectations of other teachers, and especially senior leaders who might believe that they need to know the details in order to protect students. However, the second author argued that this can be effectively done by creating communication where required, and not by sharing all of the student's personal details. For instance, the first author and senior leadership team at our school negotiated early on that safety-related issues would be reported to a member of senior leadership, and a call for further reporting would be made collaboratively. It is noteworthy that the fourth author had not been able to identify these ethical tensions on reporting of safety issues, which demonstrates the benefits of having negotiated middle grounds early on.

A critical feature in the process of negotiating complexities is that of developing role clarity (Bodenhorn, 2006; Duslak & Geier, 2017; Kimber & Campbell, 2014; Lairio & Nissilä, 2002; Walker, 2015). The lack of understandings about the school counsellor role and ethical responsibilities prompted the need for orienting teachers and senior leaders to these topics. We found that developing clarity about roles, responsibilities, and limits within each individual's role was critical to negotiating middle grounds. It enabled each professional to remain grounded within their own roles, responsibilities, ethical obligations, and paradigmatic loyalties, while creatively negotiating middle grounds between the two different worlds of education and counselling.

In order to work towards this kind of creative negotiation grounded in respective roles and responsibilities, it would be helpful for counsellors to signal to school senior leaders as well as teachers their readiness to work collaboratively (Janson et al., 2008). In fact, the first author asserts that the onus of initiating professional working relationships, and collaborative processes within these relationships, lies with the school counsellor. The school counsellor is well-positioned to educate and inform school staff about their role and readiness for collaboration as well as the limits of confidentiality (Janson et al., 2008). It then becomes the responsibility of all parties involved to develop and maintain these collaborative working relationships.

Importantly, even though the counsellor is well-positioned to orient teachers and senior leaders about their own role, there is a lack of clarity about the intermediate school counsellor role. As explained previously, there is a substantial gap in understanding about and expectations of this role. From our own experience, the

first author developed her intermediate school counsellor role based primarily on the NZAC and PPTA *School Guidance Counsellors Appointment Kit* (NZAC, 2015), *Te Pakiaka Tangata: Strengthening Student Wellbeing for Success* (Ministry of Education, 2017), and clinical counselling supervision. Notably, the documents cited here are based on the secondary school counsellor role and appear to differ from the expected counsellor role at primary and intermediate schools as per the Counselling in Schools Initiative (Ministry of Education, 2022b). Evidently, at the time of writing this, the intermediate school counsellor role is still “under construction” and requires further research and discussion to become clearer.

Even so, we contend that there is great value in developing a collaborative approach. For instance, Peacock (2014) suggests that working collaboratively with the teachers, school system, and family, as required, can have multiple advantages. First, their inclusion in the process of supporting the child client can address the school’s anxiety about that child, while also attending to their needs. Second, working in a collaborative manner can rectify the need for the counsellor to work one-on-one with the child client in order to “solve the problem” (Peacock, 2014). In other words, it can help shift stigmas and misunderstandings that counselling services are aimed to “fix the problem”. Instead, a collaborative approach can be beneficial by highlighting the roles that teachers and parents play in a child’s socioemotional wellbeing.

The authors of this article found this collaborative space to be an efficient way of creatively and strategically supporting student needs from within our own specific roles and expertise. This, in turn, was appreciated by us as teachers, since it freed a little time and space to focus on aspects more central to our role and expertise, whilst remaining reassured that student needs were being addressed appropriately.

In a wider sense this collaborative standpoint seeks to develop communities of care that proficiently, resourcefully, and hopefully also efficaciously, support the development as well as socioemotional needs of children and young people. We believe that this approach also has the potential of working as a preventive or early intervention to potential mental health issues that could be amplified in later years. Thus, we believe this is one way in which we have been able to make more effective use of school counselling services within the compact two years of intermediate school.

Conclusion

In this article, we attempted to take an in-depth look at the collaborative working relationships that we had developed in our respective roles as intermediate school counsellor, senior leader, SENCo, and classroom teacher. We aimed to make a case for teacher–counsellor collaboration at intermediate school level and shed light on the nature of these collaborative interactions. Following from this, we shared some of our insights about the ethical and policy obligations as well as wider paradigmatic complexities that inevitably impact our respective roles and responsibilities. Finally, we shared some of our own experiences of negotiating these complexities including the importance of developing role clarity and working in creative ways, grounded within our respective roles and responsibilities. We see these collaborative working relationships as holding the potential for developing communities of care that provide preventative and early interventions for the socioemotional and mental health needs of intermediate-age students.

Importantly, this ability to work with complexity and flexibility in our approach had been an ongoing process as we kept working to develop and maintain our collaborative relationships. The ongoing process primarily involved reflection and communication about individual objectives and was often aligned towards better supporting student needs through collaboration. There had also been a mutual respect for each other’s roles, boundaries within the roles, and professional expertise. These are perhaps the most critical aspects that strengthened these complex collaborative relationships as our different professional worlds entwined to support young people in school.

Endnotes

1. This article was included in the first author’s doctoral thesis as a findings chapter.
2. The first author worked in this school and team for six years, and ended her role there as school counsellor while this article was in its writing process.
3. The second author is no longer in her senior leadership role at school, and retired from education while this article was in its writing process.
4. Literature and research selected for this article was largely international, since this topic has not been examined thus far in the New Zealand context. Importantly, a lot of these publications are based in or draw on the American School Counselling role, which is quite different to the New Zealand context. With this caution in mind, these publications were selected for the current discussion to present a holistic picture and strengthen overall discussion.

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