Does Schools Counselling really make a difference to achievement?: an investigation involving 2 Middle Schools

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Abstract

Independent research has evidenced that 80% of clients who received counselling from a Local Education Authority schools counselling service were “reporting significant improvements as a direct result of counselling”. (Sherry, 1999) Findings from Ryan’s (2007) research similarly found that the raising of achievement amongst adolescent students was linked to a counselling intervention in three main areas: a) Academic achievement b) Personal development achievement and c) Social and life skills achievement (Ryan, 2007). The aim of the current project was, therefore, to seek to verify these findings through evaluating the introduction of counselling into 2 middle schools (Years 5-8). The ultimate goal of this research is to raise awareness of the positive impact that counselling can have within an educational environment in terms of personal, social and academic development for students. The paper will also assist senior managers in making more informed decisions regarding the provision of more sustainable and appropriate counselling services to support both the transition and continued development of their learners.

Background

Independent research has evidenced that 80% of clients who received counselling from a Local Education Authority schools counselling service were:

“reporting significant improvements as a direct result of counselling. A majority of clients also reported feeling better “in themselves” as a result of counselling and as having gained confidence and self-esteem” (Sherry, 1999)

The aim of the project to be reported in this paper was, however, to build on a qualitative study, funded by the Bedford Charity (Harpur Trust), undertaken in 2005 that “sought to explore the views of counsellors working with adolescents in secondary education and their perceptions of how their counselling interventions might help raise their clients’ achievement”. (Ryan, 2007) Such research was conducted through semi-structured interviews with eight
school counsellors working with adolescents in secondary education” who were asked to comment on how they perceived counselling interventions in terms of their impact on raising achievement.

Findings from this research found that the raising of achievement amongst adolescent students was linked to a counselling intervention in three main areas:

- Academic achievement
- Personal development achievement
- Social and life skills achievement

(Ryan, 2007)

The aim of the current project was, therefore, to seek to verify Ryan’s (2007) findings through evaluating the introduction of counselling into 2 middle schools (Years 5-8). As such the research questions to be addressed were:

- What are the perceptions and expectations of each of the stakeholders in terms of the counselling service within an educational environment?
- Can counselling raise academic, personal and social development and how can this be evaluated?
- What are the key factors that impact the introduction of a counselling service within an educational environment?

This particular project was initially funded for a period of one year by the secondary school that takes students from each of the two middle schools, the middle schools themselves as well as the Bedford Charity (Harpur Trust) as part of their Excellence in Education initiative.

**Methodology**

In order to provide a more objective and rigorous, evidence based approach to this particular project the views of parents, teachers and the counsellors involved were sought through semi-structured interviews conducted by university researchers. Such interviews were undertaken both pre- and post intervention of the counselling service in order to gather the various stakeholder’s perceptions and expectations. This then enabled an interesting comparison between findings gathered at different stages of the project as well as from the different schools.
**a) Interview schedule**

A semi-structured interview schedule, based on the work of Hayes (2000) and Rubin and Rubin (2005), was developed to probe perceptions of counselling and expectations of its role in each school. This schedule included a total of seven questions and standardised instructions and explanations formed an integral part. A range of participants were involved including year heads, teachers, mentors, parents as well as the counsellor responsible for the school counselling project.

The actual conduct of the interviews was then based on a modified version of the ‘responsive interviewing’ model (Rubin and Rubin, 2005). Within this model the aim is to obtain participants’ interpretations and understandings within the personal relationship which is established between interviewer and interviewee. The approach within the interview situation is flexible and adaptive and each interview is different, depending on outcomes which develop during the interview process. Responsive interviewing recognises that while the personality, style and beliefs of the interviewer matter, care must be taken not to impose personal views during the interview.

**b) Inductive thematic analysis**

This qualitative approach was then used to analyse the data from the interview schedule. It is an inductive approach which is based on the identification and analysis of themes as they emerge from systematic scrutiny of the data. Using a rigorous staged approach advocated by Hayes (2000), comments made by participants were scrutinised for keywords. As key words and phrases were identified, tallies were used to aid the recording and classification process. As common themes began to emerge, decisions were made about further classification. Data was reconsidered and redefined until key themes had emerged.

**Findings from Phase 1**

**Data analysis**

The responses of participants in each of the schools were transcribed from the original recordings and, in accordance with ethical procedures, coded to ensure confidentiality. Data from each question was analysed and key issues highlighted. The number of references to each key issue is recorded. It is important to note that these references were made by all participants and across all questions raised within interviews.
Role of participants

Of the 18 participants interviewed, 9 held leadership / management roles within the school (3 Assistant Head Teachers, 1 SENCO, 1 Key Stage Manager, 2 Assistant Key Stage Managers, 2 Heads of Department). There were 2 Learning Mentors and one Specialist Support Worker, 2 form teachers as well as 4 parents.

In addition to these, the School Counsellor from the Upper School who was managing the project and who had, some 4 years previously, been employed by both schools (A and B) was interviewed.

Perceptions of counselling

Not surprisingly the School Counsellor herself, saw her role as fundamentally in keeping with the definition of counselling used by the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP):

“a person in the role of counsellor helping a person in the role of a client. Providing an opportunity for that person to look at where they are in relation to a particular issue in their life: giving them space to explore that and find a way to move forwards with a greater sense of well-being”. (School Counsellor)

Five of the participants stated that they had personal experience of counselling, either through counsellor training or as clients of counsellors. Two participants felt that they had little experience on which to base his opinions (3.1). However, all 18 participants offered their views and the following key themes emerged from data analysis.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Emergent theme</th>
<th>Number of references</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Problem solving</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Therapeutic relationship</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offers empathy / understanding</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunities for talking, listening, reflecting</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidentiality</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Potential limitations</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 – Classification of themes
The first theme to emerge in relation to perceptions of counselling, was that of ‘problem solving’. This was mentioned 15 times and the language used suggests that participants saw counselling as offering the opportunity to explore the ‘here and now’ as well as enabling opportunities to ‘move on’. The School Counsellor similarly commented that she felt that, within education, with children and young people, particularly adolescents, the counselling links to identity formation and the development of autonomy, so it really fits with their developmental stage. It is also about removing barriers to learning. Participants also suggested that counselling can offer guidance and advice about coping strategies within difficult situations (such as family break-up or bereavement). Secondly, counselling was seen to offer a therapeutic relationship, based on trust within which feelings can be explored in a supportive context. This theme was mentioned 17 times. Within this relationship the counsellor was seen as a ‘friend’ to the client, offering empathy and understanding. However the Counsellor pointed out that Counselling has to be voluntary because, therapeutically, it’s not usually successful if people are forced to have a therapeutic intervention. It requires their co-operation and their commitment to it. However, the agreed (local) policy for this counselling service is that if children are under the age of 13 years, parental consent is required because of their level of development and understanding. This fact may/may not of course have an impact on the voluntary nature of the relationship. However, opportunities for talking, listening and reflecting were mentioned 17 times and were the fourth key theme to emerge. The importance of confidentiality was mentioned three times, with counselling seen to offer neutrality, being both a ‘haven’ and a ‘safety net’.

Overall, counselling was viewed in a very positive light and can be summed up in the words of one participant (3.2) as ‘someone to be there, really’. One parent (1.4) claimed that, following counselling, her child was much happier and said ‘I’ve got a new boy from it’. Another parent (4.1) said that her son had counselling the previous year and ‘was calmer, happier and had less temper tantrums’

**Expectations of the value of counselling**

In terms of the value of counselling, expectations were generally high. There were 14 references to the potential for counselling to ‘make a difference’ within areas such as behaviour, attitudes and learning. Counselling was seen as a worthwhile and potentially ‘powerful’ opportunity with all participants in favour of the introduction of a counselling service in school. Despite the generally positive feedback here, two participants expressed some reservations.
Table 2 - Expectations

One participant (2.3) raised the possible limitation of seeing counselling as 'a quick fix' which may not be effective with more deep-seated emotional difficulties. She felt that further specialist help (such as psychotherapy) might be needed to look at the broader view of a person’s background situation. Counselling for such children might miss such underlying problems, especially if the person is unwilling to engage in the process (‘the child will not let anyone into his source of pain’). However, for less vulnerable children, this participant felt that counselling could be very helpful.

Several participants who were teachers in the school talked of ‘doing their best’ to meet the needs of children who were sometimes living in difficult circumstances. It was felt by these teachers that they ‘go over and beyond’ a normal school timetable to support these pupils. Counselling was seen to have the potential to develop this work further. As one teacher (3.2) said:

‘From my experience of working in this school, with children who have pretty tough home lives, they need somebody there to listen to them and respect their thoughts. You can’t put a price on that’. (Participant 3.2)

Perceptions of the role of the counsellor in school

Having explored perceptions of counselling in general, how did the participants see the role of a counsellor within the school? As one participant (3.2) said, ‘the counsellor is there as a trained professional’. Several of the participants defined the role in relation to other roles within the school. These included learning mentors, teachers, educational psychologists and other external agencies. One participant saw a school counsellor as:

‘……someone in between a mentor and a psychologist. A mentor’s role is to listen and deal with things as they are now. A counsellor has a view to the future – how things can be improved……more of an understanding of psychology……more of a problem-solving view, rather than just listening’. (Participant 3.2)
Another participant defined the role in relation to more specialist professional help:

‘…………the role is different from psychotherapy. It offers a very much ‘here and now’ approach. The problem is what the person says it is, rather than addressing the history or source of the pain……….’ (Participant 2.3)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Emergent theme</th>
<th>Number of references</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Role defined in terms of others</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Profile of counsellor / relationships with staff</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resource for staff</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support for counsellor</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 – Perceptions of the counsellor’s role

The profile of the counsellor within the school emerged as an important issue. One participant (2.2) said that, as there is a high proportion of pupils who could benefit from counselling within the school, the counsellor should have a high profile. He anticipated that the counsellor would be ‘busy and well-used’. Based on previous experience of counsellors within the school, one participant said:

‘When a counsellor comes to the school we are introduced, perhaps once, when they arrive. Then I might never see them again. I may hear what they’ve done through the children. Life is very busy and perhaps I wouldn’t see them at all’. (Participant 2.2)

The School Counsellor also agreed that a really big part of the Counsellor’s job involves educating people about what they do (and don’t do) – As she said

‘We have limitations. We can’t ‘be all things to everybody’” so when we go into school we go into school assemblies or to class / year group assemblies and talk about the service. We introduce ourselves and explain what we do. We put up posters in school and have leaflets to hand out. In the middle schools, prior to the service starting, parents are informed that there is going to be a counselling service. The school will include it in their literature with contact details. Generally that has been welcomed’. (School Counsellor)

Several participants also mentioned the need for the counsellor to be closely linked to the school’s pastoral system (‘Aspire’) so that teachers ‘on the front line’ have access. A
counsellor is seen as a potential asset to staff (3.2), offering consultation and advice to staff when children confide in them. For example, this participant felt it would be helpful for the counsellor to give staff advice on how to approach the subject of counselling with a child. Issues of confidentiality and disclosure under Pupil Safeguarding were also raised, together with the need for clear guidelines and transparency for staff, pupils and parents. It was also felt that the counsellor should be seen in school so the children are aware of her presence. The title, ‘counsellor’ was raised for possible reconsideration as it could have negative connotations (such as ‘going mad’) : instead it was suggested that children might prefer to use a different / more user-friendly term, or to call the counsellor by her first name ( seen as leading to greater respect / confidence).

Another participant (2.1) felt that, in order for the counselling experience to become a 'two-way street', counsellors need to see pupils in classrooms, interacting in their own environment, among their peers. It is within the classroom situation that they ‘let their guard down’ and become ‘the people they actually are’, and it is very important that counsellors see that impact. This could, however, have implications for the way in which the counsellor is perceived by pupils, and could possibly compromise neutrality. The counsellor’s views would also need to be sought in relation to this issue.

As well as offering consultation to staff about pupils, three participants thought that school staff themselves could also benefit from the provision of a counselling service within the school. One participant (3.4) pointed out that

‘Staff these days often have worries and concerns. They may need someone neutral to speak to, as their partners at home often get ‘dumped on’ in the need to off-load’.

(Participant 3.4)

The Counsellor similarly felt that their role was to support staff when they were dealing with difficult or challenging circumstances and that they do make time for advising staff on a range of issues.

Another participant (2.3) pointed out that workers in the ‘caring’ professions also need to look after themselves, as their work can be emotionally very tiring. Thus support is needed for teachers and other staff who are ‘in the firing line’. This should include the counsellor herself, who will need access to adequate supervision.
Anticipated impact on pupils

It was anticipated that participants might expect to see changes within three possible areas of pupil development: personal, social and academic. Responses indicated that this was, indeed, the case and references were made to these areas as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Areas of potential impact</th>
<th>Number of responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social / behavioural</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4 – Anticipated impact on pupils

Firstly, the complexity of any anticipated impact needs to be acknowledged. As one participant (2.1) pointed out, any impact will potentially be across the whole developmental spectrum and it may not be possible to see a child’s needs in isolation. For example, it may be very difficult to separate the effects of social deprivation from the learning environment. Another participant (2.2) anticipated that any personal and social impact would be seen first, and that this would have a ‘knock-on’ effect on learning because:

‘Kids who are not happy don’t learn well and possibly do not achieve their potential’.

(Participant 2.2)

Secondly, the difficulty of assessing impact also needs to be considered. As one participant (2.3) points out, observation can be a powerful tool. Several participants mentioned changes in pupil behaviour which they had observed in relation to previous counselling. Another participant suggested that evidence for improved behaviour could be derived from monitoring of the school behaviour log in relation to entries concerning individual pupils. Other participants commented on behaviours of concern such as attention-seeking, bullying or being withdrawn being replaced by more positive and socially acceptable behaviours such as the child smiling, appearing more relaxed and so on. On a personal level, changes in terms of self-confidence, self-awareness and self-esteem were anticipated, moving away from more negative expressions of personal behaviour (descriptive words such as distress, grief, vulnerability, anger, troubled and vulnerability were all mentioned). In terms of learning, expected outcomes focused on improved concentration in class, increased on-task behaviour and improved grades.
Finally, the issue of short-term versus longer-term impact was raised by one participant (3.3) and this links directly to the length and intensity of any counselling intervention in terms of the provision available. As another participant (1.1) points out, the impact of counselling would be expected to ‘build up gradually’ rather than ‘happen overnight’. Indeed, one participant (2.3) felt that the impact of counselling could defy immediate assessment, emerging much later in life. She uses a biblical analogy to illustrate her point:

‘The seed has been sown and sometimes that takes a long time to work its way through……..children whose main experience in life is one where they are not loved or esteemed ……..if, in their childhood years, they have a snapshot of genuine love, unconditional regard……..later on, when they realise that everything in the world (or within themselves) is not well, then they have a snapshot they can go back to. This seed is sown and comes out much later’. (Participant 2.3)

Conclusions from Phase 1

Within the data analysis various issues emerged across six key areas. These included: the profile of the counsellor in school; referral procedures; identification of pupil needs; consistency and continuity; meeting the needs of ‘the whole child’; recognising the limitations and potential of counselling.

The profile of the counsellor in school

This was raised by several participants and was clearly seen as a key issue. Overall, some high expectations of the counsellor emerged. These included being visible and having a ‘high profile’ with both staff and pupils. In addition to counselling pupils, several staff felt that opportunities to consult with the counsellor about how to manage issues such as referrals and strategies for individual pupils would be helpful to them. Several participants also saw a need for a counselling service within the school for staff as well as pupils. It was recognised that the counsellor would also need time to liaise with parents and other agencies, where appropriate. This raised further issues about confidentiality, time constraints and the counsellor’s perception of her role. Consideration therefore needs to be given to both how the counsellor sees her role within the school and what can reasonably be expected within the time she has. It might be helpful for the counsellor and pastoral leaders to meet with staff and discuss these issues so all are clear about the counsellor’s role at the outset. The Counsellor herself also noted that:

“It usually takes a while to embed counselling into the school culture, especially if there has not been a counselling service there before. In her own research, talking to counsellors, it was generally felt that it took 2 – 3 years to be fully accepted into a school community’. (School Counsellor)
She was also aware of the fact that, going into schools, counsellors really did need to ‘earn’ the respect of other professionals, rather than just assume they will have this automatically by being a counsellor. As time goes on, she had found that if you can develop good working relationships with staff, then the trust develops. She also noted that:

‘As counselling embeds into a school, it says something about the ethos of the school. It contributes to a sense of the school having a very caring and supportive approach to education.’ (School Counsellor)

Referral procedures

This emerged as another key issue and was referred to by several respondents. Some difficulty accessing appropriate counselling for children via the medical route was mentioned as a source of frustration by two parents participant (1.2) and (4.1). She hoped that, by having a counsellor available in school, help might be put in place straight away in times of crisis, rather than waiting a long time for a medical referral. She also saw counselling as an intervention which might be used following previous, less specialised interventions such as mentoring. Two participants (1.4 and 2.1), saw referrals possibly taking place via the school’s pastoral system and in conjunction with the inclusion unit (‘Aspire’). One participant (3.4) thought that, as well as having an appointment system, a ‘drop-in session’ might also be beneficial to pupils. The need for both shorter and longer term interventions was recognised here. Clearly, there is a need here for the negotiation of clear and transparent referral procedures, as well as defining the nature of the counselling service to ensure is both relevant and manageable within the particular school context. It is possible that the development of a ‘Counselling Policy’ might fulfil good practice as well as provide this framework. The Counsellor similarly noted that there are professional standards and ethics which counsellors need to adhere to but that each school community has a different ethos and structure, that tends to impact on the formation of referral systems and liaison so to have just one model for counselling in schools might be too rigid where flexibility is needed therefore systems need to be negotiated with each individual school.

Identification of pupil needs

This was seen as a complex issue. As well as ‘acting out’ behaviours (‘disruptive’, ‘angry’ and so on), other more withdrawn behaviours were mentioned (‘school refusal’, ‘lack of friends’). Feelings such as ‘distress’, ‘grief’ and ‘vulnerability’ also featured in participants’ answers. The inter-relationship between emotional issues such as these, social deprivation and learning was acknowledged. Difficulties identifying children’s needs, together with the complexity of assessing the impact of the counselling intervention were raised by several participants. In some cases it was felt that the impact might defy shorter-term measurement and may not become evident until the future. It was clear, however, that many of the
participants felt they knew their pupils well and that pastoral systems in place within the school would have an important role to play here in close liaison with the counsellor herself.

**Consistency and Continuity**

Participants generally believed that a ‘quick fix’ in terms of counselling would not work in many cases and that there is a need for continuity and consistency over time. It was recognised that this would vary according to the needs of each pupil and that, for some pupils, a ‘drop-in’ session on a self-referral basis might be sufficient. Flexibility emerged as an important theme here (3.3). One participant (2.2) mentioned that:

'We had a school counsellor quite a long time ago and when she left it was ‘a severe blow’ (Participant 2.2)

Participants’ comments thus recognise the need for providing both long and shorter term counselling interventions within the school. How the counselling service is structured within the school therefore needs careful consideration.

**Meeting the needs of ‘the whole child’**

This was an important theme which emerged, with the school being seen as ‘about more than academic education alone’. This is supported by the current educational agenda for inclusion, embodied in the ‘Every Child Matters’ (2004b) framework. The need for children to stay safe, be healthy, enjoy and achieve, make a positive contribution and achieve economic well-being was implicit in many participants’ comments. It was generally felt that, if children’s emotional needs were met, then this could have a positive effect on personal, social and academic development. Several participants gave specific examples of cases where they had seen this happen and the Counsellor herself noted that feedback from children and young people suggests that counselling is like a big relief: ‘I’ve got somewhere to go with these feelings I can’t cope with and I feel I can cope with them there. I can offload them, get it out of my head, get it off my chest, then I can go off and do something else, so it’s not going round and round.’

‘Once they have said that, then you can start to see the behaviour changes. Counselling tends to calm them down. They feel back in control and empowered, rather than having their emotions ruling them, which is what happens when they are ‘acting out’ (angry – hitting out or withdrawn and crying a lot)’ (School Counsellor)

Counselling was, therefore, seen to be supporting children in developing their potential across a broad spectrum.
Recognising the limitations and potential of counselling

Although some very optimistic expectations were expressed in favour of counselling, some potential limitations were also recognised. One participant (2.3) felt that the effectiveness of counselling will be limited by two factors,

’It is only as good as a) the counsellor and b) the client can allow it to be’. (Participant 2.3)

This participant’s reservations about the value of counselling for ‘very troubled’ children who are unwilling to engage with the process, have been discussed earlier. She felt that this needs to be acknowledged, otherwise in situations like this the counselling process itself could be seen to have failed. Another participant (2.1) recognised that ‘some children regress as well as progress’ and that this might depend on social circumstances which are outside the school’s control. However, these two participants saw counselling as offering much potential benefit to the majority of recipients. All the participants were in favour of introducing counselling to the school. In the words of one of them (3.2),

’Obviously miracles don’t happen, but it would be nice to see that progress had been made’. (Participant 3.2)

This research project is, therefore, helping us to evaluate the introduction of the counselling service into the schools and in the next phase of the project further data will be gathered through focussed observation of pupil behaviour by both teachers and parents as well as through objective measures of the children’s academic achievement. The children involved will also be invited to evaluate the intervention in terms of their own development through distribution of a simple questionnaire. Findings from the next Phase of this project will, therefore be used to develop a model for introducing counselling into schools.

References


Sherry J (1999) LEA-organised counselling in secondary schools in Dudley: clients’ views on services. Independent evaluation carried out for Dudley Education Department

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