Developing and integrating a Schools Counselling service into 2 middle schools: benefits and challenges

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Abstract

Within the UK there is growing interest in the development and integration of counselling services within the school system. Such interest is, according to Pattison, S., Rowland, N., Cromarty, K., Richards, K., Jenkins, P. L., Cooper, M., et al. (2007) “driven by an increasing awareness of the role that schools can play in helping to promote emotional health for children and young people and by addressing mental health issues, including psychological and behavioural problems”.

However, despite such interest, “counselling services across the UK have developed in an ad hoc manner and are often unevaluated. There is thus a limited evidence base for planning the delivery and funding of effective and integrated services”. (Pattison, et al, 2007)

The small-scale project to be reported in this paper was funded by the Bedford Charity (Harpur Trust) and has sought to evaluate the introduction of a schools’ counselling service 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 outline some of the difficulties encountered in integrating the counselling service into each of the schools in order to 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

The Department for Education and Skills (DfES) describe counselling as:

“one of the most important elements of support to be considered for children and young people with emotional and behavioural difficulties” (DfES, 2001:1)

The DfES also recognises, in its guidance:

“the importance of counselling as an early intervention and preventative strategy to stop deterioration in stress levels and mental health of children who have emotional and behavioural difficulties” (DfES, 2001:2)

The British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) also notes that

“it is widely recognised in educational circles that counselling has come of age. Counselling in schools provides a cost effective service for pupils experiencing emotional distress and or behavioural problems as a result of social and peer pressure, family tensions, bereavement and difficulties with normal developmental issues” (BACP, 2002)

As a consequence of such reports a project, jointly funded by the Bedford Charity (Harpur Trust), Abbey and Harrowden Middle Schools, as well as the Behaviour Improvement programme, was undertaken in order to evaluate the introduction of a school’s counselling service into 2 middle schools (School A and School B). A further aim of the project was to try to build on and verify Ryan’s (2007) research regarding the impact of counselling on a) academic achievement, b) personal development achievement and c) social and life skills achievement. In order to provide such verification of Ryan’s (2007) findings, 3 experienced research staff from the University of Bedfordshire were engaged to work on the research aspect of the project and their remit was to conduct a rigorous evaluation of the intervention so that the research findings could inform the development of good practice for introducing counselling into the schools. The research would also look at the outcomes in order to increase the effectiveness of the counselling service. The project was initially funded for a year and was split up into a number of Phases – Phase 1 investigated the perceptions and expectations of various stakeholders in relation to the schools counselling service prior to implementation, Phase 2 investigated and compared perceptions and expectations post implementation. Findings from each of these phases were then compared in order to identify those factors that were considered to be ‘key’ to developing a schools counselling service (Phase 3). Finally Phase 4 of the research sought to investigate whether or not the impact of counselling in terms of the different types of achievement (academic, personal, social) could be reliably assessed. Unfortunately, owing to circumstances related to the initial appointment of the counsellor and subsequent staffing issues in the schools, this aspect has only been partially addressed. Nevertheless, specific research questions that were addressed through the different phases were:
• What are the initial perceptions and expectations of each of the stakeholders in terms of the counselling service within an educational environment? (Phase 1)

• What differences in perceptions and expectations are evidenced post-implementation? (Phase 2)

• What are the key factors that are perceived to be important in developing a counselling service within an educational environment? (Phase 3)

• Can counselling raise academic, personal and social development and how can this be reliably assessed? (Phase 4)

**Phase 1 – pre-intervention – summary findings**

Phase 1 of this project has previously been reported (Jefferies, Ryan, Sach & Marshall, 2008) but the main findings to emerge from Phase 1 was that counselling was generally perceived to offer a) a therapeutic relationship, based on trust within which feelings could be explored in a supportive context, b) support for ‘problem solving’, c) a link to identity formation and the development of autonomy, d) help in removing barriers to learning, and e) a channel for providing guidance and advice about coping strategies within difficult situations (such as family break-up or bereavement).

Overall some very optimistic expectations had been expressed by participants in terms of what they felt that the provision of a counselling service would bring to the schools. It was also clear that all of the participants were in favour of introducing a counselling service despite their recognition of some potential limitations - e.g. issues related to such things as differing perceptions of the role of the counsellor in school and difficulties in assessing the impact of the counselling intervention. The participants had also identified some of the perceived issues (e.g. 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) that would need to be addressed both prior to, and during, implementation. Phase 1 of this research project had, therefore, served to identify a range of stakeholder perceptions with regard to counselling as well as a number of important issues that were then used to inform the next steps.

In the next phase (Phase 2) to be reported here a comparison of perceptions and expectations was gathered post intervention in order to make comparisons with findings from Phase 1.
Phase 2 – post intervention

As had been done in Phase 1, a semi-structured interview schedule was developed to probe perceptions of counselling and its outcomes in each school post-intervention. It was anticipated that the same participants from Phase 1 (year heads, teachers, mentors, parents) would be interviewed again in addition to the Middle School Counsellors at both School A and B following the counselling intervention. In practice, this was not possible as there had been several staffing changes at School A since the Phase 1 interviews were conducted. In addition to this, the two original parent participants had taken up jobs and were no longer available for interview. Of the original 13 participants in Phase 1, it was, therefore, only possible to interview 8 in Phase 2. These included two Learning Mentors, three teachers / heads of department and two Assistant Head Teachers, one of whom was also the SENCO. The original Middle School Counsellor who was servicing both schools had also left mid way through the project and had been replaced by a 2 new ones (one placed in School A and one in School B). As a consequence it was these 2 counsellors who were subsequently interviewed.

Methodology

As in Phase 1, a ‘responsive interviewing’ model (Rubin and Rubin, 2005) was used. Within the original data analysis various issues had emerged across six key areas. These included: the profile of the counsellor in school; referral procedures; identification of pupil needs and assessment of the impact of the counselling intervention; consistency and continuity; meeting the needs of ‘the whole child”; recognising the limitations and potential of counselling. These themes were explored in further depth within the Phase 2 interviews that were conducted, in the main, at School A. Inductive thematic analysis was again used to analyse the data obtained. Within this phase of the research the roles of the participants emerged as a key factor in the way the counselling intervention was perceived.

Findings - Phase 2 – post intervention

Perceptions of the counsellor’s role and profile in school

The Middle school Counsellor at School A herself felt that:

‘There are high expectations of the counsellor within the school and I have seen this in other contexts as well. It’s a heartfelt hope that perhaps this will be the person who can make things better for this child. You have to, almost, manage expectations. It’s about fostering a relationship and seeing where it goes’. (Middle School Counsellor – School A)
She also pointed out that:

‘Sharing expertise with other professionals is an area which can be a struggle. I work with other professionals in other places - CAMH, Youth Offending……..those young people are already in a system where people have assessed, cogitated, pondered, decided. This school is the coal face and I think I’m appreciating more what the struggle is. There has been a dilemma about what the difference is between mentoring and counselling. Perhaps the Pastoral Manager needs to take one approach and the counsellor another. The Pastoral Manager and I have had conversations about this and, now I’ve been here longer I can see more clearly where the dilemma is. It isn’t easy to separate the two. I think in the beginning the Pastoral Manager wasn’t too sure about having a counsellor here. But I said to him just now ‘Is this working alright for you?’ and he said ‘It’s great!’ I felt like I’d brought something which helped him to help the school. As a systemic practitioner, it can’t really be any other way……’ (Middle School Counsellor – School A)

Both Learning Mentors at School A were also very positive about having a counsellor within the school, seeing this as a ‘step-up’ of support for children they were already supporting on a 1:1 basis. They agreed that the two roles (mentor and counsellor) had complemented each other and had offered opportunities for teamwork in meeting children’s emotional needs. It was recognised that the counsellor offered a more specialist role, offering a confidential and more ‘in-depth’ service to pupils. From their perspective, the counsellor was very visible within the school, working in close proximity to them within the ‘ASPIRE’ (pastoral support) unit. One of the Learning Mentors explained that the counsellor was available to speak to adults at break times and this was highly valued:

‘You know, if we’ve got a problem about a pupil we can go and see her. She’s absolutely brilliant. It’s good to have someone like that here’: (Learning Mentor)

It was also mentioned that more counselling time would be a valuable asset to the school, providing on-going support for pupils.

It was, however, interesting to note that, from the perspective of the three teachers (heads of departments), the counsellor was far less visible within the school. One of the teachers pointed out that, as a staff, there was an awareness of there being a counsellor in the school. She was introduced in the staffroom on the first day and had put up notices about the service. However, this teacher admitted to being unsure of the counsellor’s role in the school and whether she was a member of staff or an outside agency. The other two teachers said that they were ‘virtually unaware’ of her presence:
‘If I saw her in the corridor, I wouldn’t know she was the counsellor, although I do officially know there is one’. (Teacher 2)

This teacher went on to explain that this was not a criticism of the counsellor, but possibly a product of her own role within the school, which meant that she rarely went into the staffroom. Another teacher pointed out that, because he had not yet had cause to refer a child, the counsellor was not particularly visible to him. He felt that if he had a child who needed counselling, he would then become much more involved and that this would inevitably happen over time (should there still be a counselling service within the school).

The two Assistant Head Teachers at School A also felt that the counsellor was not particularly visible within the school and one said that changing his own role within the school meant that he was now less aware of the counsellor as his management responsibilities were in a different area. The other Assistant Head Teacher was also the SENCO and, like the Learning Mentors, her room was in close proximity to the counsellor’s room. This meant that she had seen her. She believed that time was an issue here: although she had been introduced, the counsellor had not had enough time to meet staff or children. This participant felt that such relationships would be built over time.

It is interesting to note that a similar situation arose in School B where the counsellor herself commented that:

‘When she started she felt her profile was not hugely high, she attended a staff meeting and was introduced to staff by name but she had no time to explain how long she was to be there and her role’. (Middle School Counsellor – School B)

Referral procedures

All the participants in School A seemed clear about referral procedures for the counselling service. Teaching staff also appeared to be very clear about how the system operated within the school:

‘Yes, everything’s on line and quite clear. We refer to the Pastoral Manager and the ASPIRE (Pastoral) team. We know what to print off and who to send it to. We have a central network that anyone with a user account can access’. (Teacher 2).

One of the Assistant Head Teachers explained that, once the initial referral to the Pastoral Support Team was in place, the Pastoral Manager would liaise with the counsellor and communicate with members of staff concerned. He pointed out the importance of personal contact in addition to paper systems:
'It’s part of the pastoral system and it works because there is a person we can refer to’. (Assistant Head Teacher)

In School B, however, there was a different situation as noted by the Middle School Counsellor herself:

‘Nothing had been discussed prior to a list of pupils’ names being given to her and staff were not clear as to the process of referring. The staff were, she felt, clear about who to refer but not how to do this’. (Middle School Counsellor – School B)
Counselling sessions

One of the Learning Mentors in School A explained that the counsellor had a room in the ASPIRE unit where she operated a 1:1 appointment system based on a timetable with allocated slots for pupils. One of the teachers mentioned that, in addition to these sessions, the counsellor had been offering ‘drop-in’ sessions one lunch time each week. This pattern of provision was replicated in School B. One of the Assistant Heads saw the drop-in sessions as a very valuable asset because ‘many of the children in this area did have difficult home backgrounds’. She felt that within such a ‘drop-in’ the counsellor could ascertain whether or not on-going counselling was needed for individual children. She also felt that offering this facility within the main body of the school (rather than in the ASPIRE unit), avoided the possible stigma involved in children being seen to walk over there. She also felt that, in the case of some children, a few minutes offered within the drop-in might be all that they needed. This participant felt that this approach warranted further discussion with the Pastoral Manager.

Phase 3 – A comparison of perceptions pre and post-implementation

In undertaking a comparison between Phase 1 and 2 it was not perhaps surprising that a number of expectations were and were not fulfilled. For example the role of the counsellor had been deemed to be important but whilst there had been a meeting between them and the staff, the explanation of their roles had not been clearly defined which then lead to uncertainty amongst some of them. Confidentiality and disclosure was also highlighted as an issue here as some of the teachers were not aware of which children had been referred for counselling.

For example, whilst acknowledging the necessity for confidentiality, one of the mentors commented:

‘Their time (counselling session) is confidential and they might talk about things which are completely different from what we’re working with. We do need feedback but because of the confidentiality, disclosure……………you might be fighting the same battle or you might be fighting a different battle, but it would be nice to sit down and say ‘Well, what did you find out?’, but you can’t.’ (Teacher 1)

This comment suggests a possible need for clearly defined roles and boundaries for pastoral staff and counsellors. The boundaries between interventions such as mentoring and counselling were also raised here. This is illustrated by the following example discussed by the same mentor:

‘There’s a pupil I work with – she might benefit from seeing the counsellor, maybe alongside working with me – on alternate weeks. But if you’re being mentored, you
can’t also be counselled. Is that right? ............... It’s a shame that if they’re being mentored, they can’t be counselled as well’. (Teacher 1)

The counsellor also did not appear to have been given a high profile in either of the schools although participants had previously thought that this would have been important. However, one teacher felt that this aspect could be built on over time:

‘I don’t know if it’s my fault or the system’s fault or whether it’s running along smoothly and I’m just not aware of it’ . (Teacher 2)

One of the Assistant Head Teachers felt that the counsellor was not yet very visible to staff or pupils because she was still new and had not yet had enough opportunities to meet them or build relationships. Initially she was ‘just picking up the desperate cases’:

‘To be fair, she hasn’t got that far yet because she is new and it’s going to take time. I feel certain it(counsellor’s profile) will be built over time’. (Assistant Head Teacher)

Such a view was borne out by the counsellor herself who reported:

‘You have to be quite high profile – people have to know who you are and what you do. I come in and go out, do what’s asked of me. I do liaise with the Pastoral Manager sometimes and that’s nice. But he’s always very busy and I haven’t really had a chance to do the scaffolding around the work. I would like to have done more relationship building within the school. I feel that the signposting to a service is very important, explaining what counselling is and how staff can access it for their students. Unfortunately that just hasn’t been possible because there wasn’t time……’

(Middle School Counsellor – School A)

The close links with the school’s pastoral system in School A did, however, seem to have been found to be of great benefit and one of the Assistant Head Teachers identified a need for sharing information and using general issues which emerged from counselling in continuing professional development (CPD) with the teachers:

‘If pupils are going into the system, the original referee needs some answers about the child’s behaviour. Initially you are forming your own judgments. With feedback you will know how to ‘react properly’ in future. This information could then be used for CPD.’ (Assistant Head Teacher)

Expectations that the counsellor might have been involved in classroom observations does not, however, seem to have been discussed although staff acknowledged the benefits of
having them involved in supporting the development of the children in the school. For example, one of the Learning mentors felt that, if the counselling service continued, it might be helpful for the counsellor to do more 'outreach' work, helping staff more in a ‘team’ approach. A specific example of such a team approach was also mentioned by one of the teachers. She explained a weekly Inclusion Forum was held in School A to discuss children who had been referred to the Pastoral Support Team. Occasionally other professionals, such as the Educational Psychologist, attended and contributed to these discussions. This teacher felt that it might be beneficial for the school counsellor to join and contribute to this forum.

One of the Counsellors did, in fact, pick up on this issue by saying that she thought that:

‘It might be an asset to the school for another professional (such as a counsellor) who is ‘in the thick of it, with them’ to be involved in discussions and decisions’. (Middle School Counsellor – School A)

One of the Assistant Head Teachers felt that, in addition to developing ‘drop-ins’ further, it might be possible for the counsellor to work closely with teachers on aspects of PSHE and emotional literacy work. She recognised that, again, time was a potential constraint here.

One of the Middle School Counsellors in her interview had also mentioned that:

More ‘outreach’ work could be done. I have thought about sitting in the canteen and chatting to pupils – hopefully then would then feel able to come and speak to me privately if need be. This type of work could maybe be tied in with PSHE or work on emotional well-being in classrooms. (Middle School Counsellor – School A)

Overall staff had been appreciative of the role that the counsellor had been playing and recognised the fact that sometimes it was beneficial for the child to visit the counsellor rather than be seen to be visiting the pastoral unit. Both of the Middle School Counsellors also felt that a varied provision was important.

‘Sometimes pupils are slotted in by the Pastoral Manager because he’s worried about them and needs a second or third opinion. It’s delicate ground and in this school you need to be proactive’. (Middle School Counsellor – School A)

Other expectations that were fulfilled were that the teachers thought that there would be difficulties in trying to evidence a causal relationship between the counselling service and achievement. This expectation was borne out although in Phase 4 there has been some anecdotal evidence provided that does indicate that there have been some positive changes
in some children’s behaviour. The expectation that the impact would build up over time was also borne out by interviews with all of the stakeholders including the counsellors themselves.

Phase 4 - Perceptions about the impact of counselling

Finally, in Phase 4 of the project, further data has been gathered through focussed observation of pupil behaviour by both teachers and parents in order to see if any causal effect could be established. The children involved were also invited to evaluate the intervention in terms of their own development through distribution of a simple questionnaire.

Findings – Phase 4 – impact of counselling

Both Learning Mentors felt that it was too early to assess the impact of the counselling project as the new counsellor had been at the school for less than a term. Moreover, she was only in school for two days FTE each week which meant that she may not necessarily be in on the same day/time each week. However, it was reported that pupils ‘appeared more relaxed’ and ‘seemed more secure  in the knowledge that there had been someone there who could support them with what’s going on’. This participant also believed, from talking to pupils, that they knew that what they said was confidential and that the children had

‘felt much better coming out than what they did going in’ (sic).

However, having had so little contact with the counsellor in School A, the three teachers found it very difficult to comment on the impact of the counselling service and one of them raised an important point about confidentiality. Because of confidentiality issues, he was not actually aware of which children were receiving counselling and whether any of them were in his tutor group or classes.

Another teacher commented on the difficulty of providing evidence of impact when counselling formed part of a more general pastoral ‘package’ within the school:

‘There are very few children who see just the counsellor in isolation. They perhaps see the counsellor, have a mentor and there may be other outside involvement as well. So it would be hard to say ‘the counsellor did this bit, they did that bit’…………..Also, in some children, the impact might be very noticeable and in others, less so’. (Teacher 3)

One of the Assistant Head Teachers also commented on the difficulties inherent in attempting to quantify complex processes such as counselling. He felt that such evidence could, at this
stage, only be anecdotal. However, he also thought that, if more time were available, it might be possible to collect data electronically and undertake more systematic analysis of impact.

The other Assistant Head Teacher did have some anecdotal evidence of the positive impact of the counselling, based on her observation of the body language of pupils known to her in her role as SENCO. She mentioned children ‘looking up and engaging more’ and ‘appearing happier to be around’:

‘I’ve got a couple (of pupils) who I know are going and I’ve noticed that their heads are up, and they’ve only had two or three sessions!’ (Assistant Head Teacher)

Another teacher anticipated further impact over time:

‘As the role develops further I would anticipate that it will have a positive impact. It’s just on-going really. I would expect children to be happier within themselves – they will have someone to talk to, develop more coping strategies…….’ (Teacher 4)

One of the Middle School Counsellors also felt that:

“Counselling is not just about now. What we do now might affect them when they have their first child, or their first boyfriend. We don’t know what impact it might have: we can just try our best. I personally think it defies measurement.

It is always good to have a second session. You can say ‘Have you thought about what we talked about?’ or ‘Have you done anything differently?’ And if they have, we can acknowledge and build on that. Sometimes they say ‘Nothing has changed’, but after probing, you find that things might have changed but that they haven’t recognised this. It helps having more sessions, being able to go back and unpick what somebody is saying. It’s about helping people to ‘carry their successes’, especially when they have self-esteem issues. They may not even recognise their own progress because they feel so rubbish about themselves. Counselling might help them to think about things differently.” (Middle School Counsellor – School A)

Other comments offered regarding the impact of counselling were:

‘They (the counsellors) do a really good job. I had it when I was younger and it really does help. (Learning Mentor)

‘I think it’s great that we have it. As teachers we have to be everything – we’re dads, counsellors, big sisters……..we’re everything. But it’s a thin spread of training that we
have. So being able to offer children a professional counsellor can only be a good thing. It releases pressure on the teacher to ‘get it right’. (Teacher 2)

‘I feel more happier and confident’ (sic) (Child 2)

Overall Conclusions

Despite having limited evidence to date of the impact of counselling in terms of academic achievement, personal development and/or social/life skills achievement, the participants all retained high expectations for positive outcomes over time, possibly reflecting a strong pastoral ethos within the school. One teacher said

‘I imagine there probably is an impact, although we can’t see it yet. Anything these kids can have that helps them, I’m sure will be of great benefit…………to talk to a child to establish problems. I can try my best, I’ve got common sense. I can unpick a problem, as can most teachers, but I don’t have the training to deal with it properly. This is why I think a counselling service is vital’. (Teacher 2)

Both Learning Mentors also felt that the counselling project had gone very well overall. They valued ‘having the extra input’ which complemented their own role:

‘We work on the ‘here and now’ and they (counsellors) work on the future.

Although they believed that the counselling project was having a positive impact, in general the teachers had not had enough experience of it to mention specific aspects. One Assistant Head Teacher pointed out that it was still ‘early days’ and the other emphasised the on-going need for such a service to remain within the school:

‘I am still extremely for counselling. I think our children need it, they are desperate for it…………for goodness sake, don’t take it away!’ (Assistant Head Teacher)

She mentioned a time in the past when she was Head of Year 8, and had to do her own ‘unofficial’ counselling of troubled pupils and recognised the value of this counselling service to the school:

‘It is so valuable …… there are things some of our kids really can’t cope with (and shouldn’t have to cope with). The more help we can provide for them now………that’s what we should be doing’. (Assistant Head Teacher)
Overall, despite the short term nature of the project and the various difficulties encountered in setting up the counselling service all of the stakeholders do seem to have remained positive in their expectations. They have also, through reflection upon the intervention, identified a number of issues that have now been used to develop a series of recommendations that can be used by others to inform similar implementations.

**Recommendations**

Some of the areas that were found to be absolutely crucial to the implementation and development of the counselling service were, therefore, the need to:

a) Set up a Counselling policy that is accessible to all.

b) Develop CPD to promote multi-agency working.

c) Develop strategies within the school which prompt/facilitate the following activities:

- The setting up of initial and ongoing meetings between staff to define roles and boundaries of all of the stakeholders involved in supporting the children (teachers, counsellors, pastoral care unit, learning mentors and the like) to ensure that a collaborative approach is adopted – i.e. assigning the mentoring role to the pastoral unit and more specialist counselling work to the counsellor.

- Addressing the issue of what title should be used for the Counsellor. For example it was felt that this could have negative connotations and 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 which would be seen as leading to greater respect / confidence.

- The development of referral procedures that would be clear but flexible – e.g. to allow for initial assessment sessions to be undertaken prior to formal referral.

- Determining clear guidelines and transparency of process for staff, pupils and parents in terms of confidentiality and disclosure.

- Developing a varied provision of counselling in terms of ‘drop-in’ sessions coupled with 1-1 appointments
• Developing a range of activities to raise the profile of the counsellor within the school. All staff should be made fully aware of the presence and role of the counsellor through a variety of methods so that this understanding is not dependent upon teachers actually referring pupils to the counsellor.

• Developing outreach and teamwork through involving the counsellor with staff and children in other aspects of school life – e.g. observations/involvement in classroom activity, involvement in discussions, getting the counsellor to work closely with teachers on aspects of PSHE and emotional literacy work.

• Providing opportunities for the Counsellor to share information and contribute to Continuing Professional Development with other staff within the school – e.g. for the counsellor to give staff advice on how to approach the subject of counselling with a child

• Providing support for teachers and other staff (including the counsellor) who were ‘in the firing line’ – e.g. providing opportunities for school staff themselves to benefit from the provision of a counselling service within the school.

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