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## School Counsellors in England, Tackling a Children's Mental Health Crisis

### Abstract

This paper explores the current provision and roles of school counsellors in England's schools. Government interventions are discussed and the ongoing problems with the deteriorating mental health of children and adolescents, caused by social pressures, and then the Covid 19 pandemic, addressed. The numbers of counsellors available has risen, but is in no way equal to the provision in other countries and the response of the National Health Service (NHS) is also under severe pressure. Attitudes of parents, teachers and young people to counselling are explored, together with the wide-ranging qualifications and duties required of counsellors in England's schools. The conclusion is that the change of attitude by government towards counselling in schools, is still too little and too late. as many children have no access to in-school help with mental issues, or teachers the support they need to understand the mental health problems affecting children in their classes.

Keywords: counselling in school, mental health, qualifications for counsellors, Covid 19 effects on children's mental health

### Introduction

At the end of 2021 the House of Commons was presented with research briefing *Provision of School-based Counselling Services* (DfE, 2021), as a means of updating Parliament on the practice and state of counselling services in schools in England and Wales. Concerns had begun to rise about the numbers of young people suffering from mental health issues, pre the Covid 19 pandemic. The virus has subsequently exacerbated the problem, giving rise to further worries related to the mental health of young children and adolescents. Theberath et al. (2022) conducted a study of reports from multiple surveys, which had explored the effects on the mental health of the age groups (4-19 years of age) in the pandemic. Mental health they confirmed, was adversely affected by issues such as social distancing, lockdowns, school closures and quarantine restrictions. This led to depression, anxiety, loneliness, stress and tension. The authors called for family and social support to be increased and that coping strategies, needed to be taught to young people to help them manage the adverse effects of the pandemic Their conclusions were, that more support was needed for sufferers and this included adolescents who overused the internet during the isolation times, which was not good for their mental or physical health. At the height of the Covid pandemic and from earlier reports on the declining mental health of young people in the country, the government thought it right to inform MPs on what was happening in schools, where many children

had missed months of on-site schooling and were learning online, with all the inherent implications for their socialisation, mental health and disrupted learning. The report, underlined the state of the law, in that providing in-school counselling services is not a statutory requirement in schools in England. However, since the 1970s many schools, starting with public schools and then moving into the state school sector, had been providing some type of mental support for children with social, emotional, or disability issues, mental or physical. The author had, in her second teaching employment, as a Head of Department in a large comprehensive school at the end of the 1960s, encountered a school counsellor for the first time. On dealing with a sixteen-year-old girl who, because of mental health issues over puberty, had reverted to infancy, believing and acting if she was a child of four. The author was thankful for the support of the school counsellor, in dealing with this classroom crisis. Not only with the individual involved, but her classmates who were also distressed and concerned by the events that occurred. Both schools that had employed this author, had school nurses on site, who also provided useful support.

NHS self-reporting surveys of the mental health of children and young people (NHS Digital, 2022) raise alarming statistics showing that now, a quarter of seventeen- to nineteen-year-olds has some kind of mental health disorder, up from one in six the year before. Rates of mental problems in teenagers were similar but twice as high in seventeen- to twenty-four-year-old women. It appears from the survey that in classes of seven- to sixteen-year-olds, there could be five children in each classroom with mental health issues. Separate NHS figures also show a rise in the numbers of under eighteens in contact with children's mental health services in the last year, had risen by thirty percent. These results point to a severe crisis in the mental health of our young people requiring prompt action, including enhanced availability of counsellors in schools.

### **Counselling in schools**

DfE (2016, p. 10) had produced guidance, bringing schools' attention to a group of priorities for developing counselling services in schools. These included: practices should be evidence-based with careful monitoring of outcomes; ensuring that ethnic minorities were equally entitled to counselling services; that the services should, in particular, meet the needs of vulnerable people, for example, foster children, or those in Local Authority care and young people with SEND issues; better monitoring and liaison and work with other mental health services and ensuring children are consulted on the services provided. This led to a further push to ensure the links between school and health service liaison on children's mental health were improved and was followed by a green paper (DHSC & DfE, 2017). This paper suggested areas to be developed, including mental health support teams and the need to shorten waiting times for access by children, to young people's mental health services. This latter partly, as a result of the pandemic and its isolation and its effects on young people, has in no way been realised. As a result, in 2021 extra funding was proposed to support the mental health of children and young people, including expanding mental health teams in schools. In May 2021, the Government announced more than £17 million to improve mental health and well-being support in schools and colleges, to help their students recover from the challenges of the pandemic.

The most recent survey of the provision of counselling in schools showed a result of 84% for secondary schools, as opposed to 56% of primary schools (DfE, 2017, p. 29).

These show growth in the numbers of schools offering counselling, but it is in no way universal and costs can be too high for schools to afford. A considerable proportion of schools, despite advice from government on how counsellors should be qualified to The British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) level or above, admit to employing staff with no formal qualifications in counselling which gives rise to concern. The Former Children's Commissioner for England, Anne Longfield, had demanded that NHS funded counsellors should be in post in every school, but this has not occurred. In her annual report on children and young people's mental health services for 2020/21 (Children's Commissioner for England, 2021) she criticised the lack of action on this and admitted that these services were still not easily available to all children and should be. After the pandemic, it was vital that counselling services were offered to all children, many of whom had suffered so badly as a result of the crisis.

Place2Be, a mental health charity and the National Association of Headteachers (Place2Be/NAHT, 2020) undertook a survey in 2019, which discovered that provision of help to support students with emotional and mental well-being had risen from around 36% to around 66% in 2019, but this is still way below the 100% provision required for school students. Most staff surveyed said they would recognise children with mental health issues. However, there was concern that the provision by the NHS for children with these difficulties, was not sufficiently prompt in supplying help, due to a large backlog of cases. BACP have continued to campaign for all schools to offer counselling services to young people, as England is lagging far behind other parts of the United Kingdom in provision, as it has less government financial support than the other nations. After the effects of the pandemic on children's mental health, more needs to be done to support this area of their development.

### **Parents' opinions**

BACP (2019) conducted a survey of adults' attitudes to school counselling. The results demonstrated that 72% of those questioned, believed that schools should offer counselling services and for parents with children under eighteen, it was 79%. Interestingly it appears that school counselling services were most popular with the sixteen to twenty-four age group, 83% of who were strong advocates for provision of counselling in schools and colleges. Post pandemic, it is likely that these figures of approval for in-school counselling service provision would have increased.

### **The positive effects of counselling**

The positive opinions expressed above about the efficacy of counselling for young people, was supported by a study undertaken by University of Roehampton of the efficacy of counselling in schools (Cooper et al., 2021). The research published, was conducted between 2016 and 2018 across 18 London schools and surveyed 329 children aged between 13 and 16 years old, at six-week intervals. The study found that counselling led to long term reductions in physiological distress in children, compared to merely providing pastoral care. The problem was though, the high costs of providing these services, totalling between three to four hundred pounds per pupil, funding that schools did not have. This was in the main, caused by the nature of the counselling offered, that is one to one meeting between counsellor and pupil, rather than the less expensive group approach, when working with young people. The study revealed that one in eight five-

to nineteen-year-olds in the UK, have serious mental health issues and clearly demonstrated that there should be an expansion of mental health services in schools, as pupils who had counselling, had improved self-esteem, resulting in an increase in achievement in their personal goals.

### **The qualifications required to become a school counsellor**

There are no specific qualifications required to become a school counsellor in the UK, but to work in a school it is generally expected that candidates will possess a first degree, for example in social work, education or psychology. This can then be enhanced by study at Masters or even Doctorate level, if so wished, but the most essential element is a qualification in counselling under the control of a professional body such as BACP. These courses are designed to give practical experience as well as theoretical knowledge. BACP suggest following a Diploma programme, offered in colleges around the country, part or full-time. These involve practical, supervised experience. Most schools expect this element of practicing counselling skills for at least a year, as well an academic qualification, before being considered for a counsellor's role is essential and this attitude is supported by government encouragement, though it is not as yet embedded in all schools. Once this core training is completed it is suggested that individuals register with an approved body such as BACP, as a counsellor or psychotherapist. Many schools' counsellor job vacancies, now ask for a degree or Masters qualification, counselling qualification from an accepted body and at least one year of practical counselling experience.

To be a school counsellor in England the required qualifications are intended to aid counsellors in helping students address their emotional problems and allow a student to discuss their problems and concerns in either a confidential setting, one to one, or in a group session with other students of their age. Counsellors aid students in fitting into a school's culture, as this differs across the country and starting into a new school, for example, because of family movements or immigration, which can prove very challenging to young people. In addition, the counsellor can act as an intermediary between student and staff, providing valuable information to a teacher who is having difficulty with a particular student, who has concerns and stresses unknown to that staff member. Above all, they need to work with teachers, so as to help a student with problems adjust to their environment and act as an intermediary between student and teacher. They can also involve parents in helping the student, teacher and the parents themselves, in understanding the concerns of the student and offer support so the student overcomes their problems.

### **What the role entails in England and Wales**

In England and Wales school counsellors work with staff, students and the parents of students in order to encourage an environment that fosters good health, particularly mental health and helps student succeed and be productive in school. Their role is to listen and aid students in overcoming worry and stress about school work or achievement levels, but also help with concerns about the school culture, bullying etc. Counsellors work with school staff to design programmes to help individual students succeed. The whole process of school counselling is to enable students to discuss concerns and problems in confidence and obtain help in overcoming those issues. Adapting to a school

culture is very important for educational success and this is particularly so with students who have SEND issues. Administration of the records of individual students is required and the ability to obtain a student's trust is essential, in order for counselling to be successful. A counsellor will also attend open days and parents' discussion evenings and meet parents individually if deemed necessary. Counsellors' roles vary from school to school and can involve developing academic plans for SEND students; collaboration with teaching staff; observations of students in classroom situations; designing programmes to help students through particular areas of difficulty, so as to improve their academic success; discussing students' problems with parents and school teachers; providing non-judgemental relationships where students can talk freely about their concerns; aiding students to unburden their feelings and discuss their choices and attitudes in class and in their lives.

These outcomes can be achieved through:

- Individual counselling sessions for young people aged 11-18.
- Student support through drop-in style sessions.
- Staff support through drop-in style sessions.
- Work with the staff teams to facilitate a whole school approach to good mental health and wellbeing.

Advertisements for school counsellors ask for the possession of the following skills, good verbal communication, listening skills, calm approaches in times of crisis and stress, empathy, ability to balance providing professional counselling and administrative duties and knowledge and understanding of how the school system operates. Counsellors are valued members of staff but do not, as in other countries such as Argentina have leadership roles in questioning staff on their own mental health backgrounds, or advising staff on teaching methods or class organisation (Hilton, 2022).

Employment can be on a single school basis, though often term time only, or may be part-time with several schools in, for example an Academy Chain, or working for a Local Authority and visiting a certain number of schools under the control of that Authority. Public schools have their own systems of employment depending on size and fees charged to parents. Salaries for counsellors vary but are around £30,000 pounds for part of a week say four days during term time. However, this can be raised if working in more than one school and also if providing in addition, private counselling services.

In other countries where counsellors in schools are mandatory, there is sometimes a requirement to have trained teachers who have then completed a counselling qualification before being allowed to work as counsellors in schools (Harris, 2013). However, this author points out that in some areas this need to be a trained teacher is not required and most counsellors have a psychological or social work background. She points to the wide variety of requirements for counsellors world-wide, for example some being students' careers oriented, others leaving that to careers specialists in schools, as in the UK. Many counties are now moving towards, what the author terms 'a pluralistic approach to counselling in schools, because of the diverse needs of students' (Harris, 2013, p. 2).

*There is pressing need for a diverse and comprehensive mental health provision and care for young people in schools across the UK, but it is essential that this is properly assessed to establish what works and what should be widely implemented to improve the mental well-being of young generations. (Cooper, 2021, p. 1)*

In their study, Cooper et al. (2021) employed one to one sessions with a counsellor, based in school. Unlike therapist-led approaches, such as CBT, this is a child-centred approach, with children talking about their issues and developing solutions with the aid of the counsellor and not group therapy so popular in countries like Argentina. This of course greatly adds to the costs as pointed out by the leader of the study quoted above. In addition, it is essential to accept that the effects of the school disruption during the pandemic have had individual, but not all-encompassing effects on students. Oates et al. (2022) suggest that action needs to be specifically targeted at those who have been most affected by the disruption of learning, including responses directed at individual specific needs and include tutoring, special classes and extra school time, despite the financial difficulties now faced worldwide. Possibly easy, quick, access to counselling should be included in this action list. Owston (2023) in a Blog from Ofsted examining the effects of lack of school attendance, raises the effects of Covid on present school attendance, made worse by recent teacher strikes. In autumn 2022 one in four students were missing ten percent of school sessions, nearly double that in 2019. Ofsted are most concerned about this rise. It is not just missing learning opportunities as this can badly affect later ambitions, but also the lack of social interaction and mixing, which being part of a school community entails. DfE is most concerned about these issues. Schools have an important role to play in improving attendance, but so do parents, who must ensure good regular attendance. In addition, the NHS has issued guidance to parents on when and when not to send children to school, if suffering from some illness. It is essential that schools learn from each other and follow good practice, such as supporting families via Attendance Hubs where groups of schools share good practice and set up attendance monitors who can be trained by the charity Barnardo's.

### **The effects on young children's mental health resulting from the pandemic**

This is a small case study of one infant department in a Primary School in a county outside of London. Discussions were held with teachers and the infant headteacher, related to the effects of the pandemic on the children's development. This, in a good school with generally excellent discipline and high academic results. It is a large, four stream entry infant/junior mixed school in a middle-class area. Now, after the pandemic, when so many children have been isolated as nurseries and schools closed, mixing was forbidden and many adults themselves became depressed and anxious, as a result of being cut off from families and friends; the effects on children are clearly displayed. National reports have noted that young children are coming to school unprepared for social mixing, unused to sharing and suffering from serious delays in the ability to express themselves, in a manner adequate for their age. These problems had been noted in this particular school for the first time. Teachers have expressed their concerns to their unions about mothers bringing children to reception classes, not toilet trained and being unable to express themselves in a manner expected for four-year-olds and the teachers in this school shared these concerns. It had been a shock to the teachers, as these problems were not normally faced in this school.

Teachers said:

*Other children are seen as threats and something to avoid, rather than potential playmates and lack of language competency is presenting severe difficulties, for teachers and other children in the classroom. Some children have started school between ages four and five, unable to say their own name.*

This the teachers agreed, is putting tremendous burdens onto staff, who are supposed to be building on what has been already achieved, only to find those expected competencies lacking. There appears to be little opportunity to offer such children, suffering from the effects of being cut off from society, help from counsellors in infant schools. It has therefore fallen often onto classroom assistants, to attempt to make some type of social relationships with these lonely and frightened individuals, bewildered by a world they had not previously experienced, with large numbers of other children and adults who expected responses to their verbal commands.

One infant reception class teacher told the author:

*It is so sad, we have a boy, a four-year-old who has hit and kicked in the stomach other boys, also aged four, terrifying them. He uses violence against other children, as some are really articulate and he is not. He is unable to express his feelings clearly to anyone else, so he is afraid and resorts to hitting and kicking other children and even teachers. We have had numerous complaints from parents and children afraid of coming to school. He himself is terrified of coming to school and has to be dragged from his mother's grasp at the school entrance, really distressed. His mother does not know how to cope.*

The infant headteacher in the same school said:

*We have never had such difficult reception classes before this year, I am sure it is due to the Covid restrictions. It is obvious that the isolation the children have undergone has seriously affected their social skills and mental health. We have had very difficult behaviour to confront and children who are afraid of social situations, speaking, and a lack of understanding of how to share. In all my years of teaching, I have never had to struggle so much with discipline and lack of social ability in young children. I am really concerned for their future development. These early years are so important and we have had to lower our expectations for this year group. It is obvious that urgent help is required, but at present the pandemic affected children are having to cope with little or no support for their socialisation and language deficiencies. More has to be done to help them, but the finance is not easily available.*

## Conclusion

From the evidence presented it is clear that urgent responses have to be made, especially for younger children, whose development, in some cases, has been severely delayed by their inability to attend nurseries or preschool groups and learn by trial and error, how to mix and play with other children, develop their language skills and some ability to control their emotions. Counselling provision is expensive, but unless we are to lose a large number of children to a life of low achievement due to lockdowns, isolation and school closures, we have to provide support for them. In addition, it is of concern that so many older students are badly affected by social media slurs, bullying and hateful comments, that can lead to mental stress, eating disorders or even of late in the UK, suicide. Schools and the students in them, need a person they can trust not to judge them and to offer release, from what is often despair. We need counsellors in every school and teachers working with them, to ensure that children in difficulty have the support of someone who listens, helps them to address loss of self-esteem and confidence and enables them to adjust and grow in strength emotionally and socially as well as academically. Not all parents are able to supply this type of support, so it needs to be easily available to children in school, or in future we are facing a mental health crisis not experienced previously, as young people now have pressures on them that most adults have never had to face.

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Cite this publication as:

Hilton, G. L. S. (2024): School Counsellors in England, Tackling a Children's Mental Health Crisis. In *Education in Developing, Emerging, and Developed Countries: Different Worlds, Common Challenges* (pp. 113-120). BCES Conference Books, Vol. 22. Sofia: Bulgarian Comparative Education Society.