

Optimisation of school and community-based counselling services: a whole-education system model

Gillian Hewitt¹

¹Research Associate, Cardiff University

Correspondence: hewittg@cardiff.ac.uk

Additional Author: Rhiannon Evans²

²Reader, Cardiff University

Aim or purpose

This study aimed to review the fitness for purpose of the statutory school and community-based counselling service for children and young people (10-18 years) in Wales and to make recommendations for improvement.

Design or methodology structure

Consultations were conducted with a range of stakeholder groups, including children and young people, parents, carers, school staff, and counselling service managers. Nine semi-structured interviews were undertaken with stakeholders in health and education. Five school case-studies were conducted, with interviews with school staff, pupils, and school counsellors. Data were analysed using thematic analysis.

Ethical approval

Cardiff University School of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee.

Results or findings

Issues with existing counselling services included waiting lists, low awareness of the availability or purpose of the service, and lack of flexibility. Positive aspects included self-referral routes and allocation of counsellors to particular schools. Drawing on these findings and participants' ideas for improvements, a model for the optimisation of counselling services was designed. The model's underpinning principle was that services should be part of a whole-education system approach to mental health. This approach recognises education systems as complex adaptive systems, with dynamic actors and processes that determine whether an intervention, such as a counselling service, becomes successfully and sustainably embedded in the system. The model addresses different levels of the system and includes characteristics of counselling sessions; counselling as part of universal mental health provision; capacity and culture of the education system; and system stakeholder relationships. Recommendations for service improvement are mapped on to the model.

Research limitations

Children and young people with experience of counselling participated in the study, but not all talked directly about their experiences. This may have been due to interviews being online, where it is harder to establish rapport. One case-study primary school withdrew from the study and one secondary school could only offer a staff member interview. This reduced variation in school contexts and meant that no pupils from a Welsh medium secondary school participated.

Conclusions or implications

School and community-based counselling services may be optimised by adopting a whole-education system approach to their implementation. This approach takes into account the dynamic actors and processes at different levels of the system, and an understanding of which may lead to more sustained, higher quality implementation of counselling services.

Considerations given to issues of equality, diversity and inclusion

A diversity of stakeholders took part in the study and Welsh medium schools participated in the consultations and case-studies. We conducted consultations with groups of young people from minority ethnic backgrounds, foster carers, and care-experienced young people.