

COUNSELLORS' STRENGTH-BASED PRACTICES  
IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS:  
MANAGING MULTIPLE METANARRATIVES

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## **Abstract**

Secondary school counsellors are often in a pivotal position to affect the lives of our young people and thus the philosophical framework and counselling modalities which inform and influence their practice are significant. This research explores the contribution school counsellors make towards positive youth development using strength-based counselling practices through the lens of a narrative methodology.

Strength-based counselling draws from the ethos of positive psychology and focuses on promoting an adolescent's strengths to enhance their wellbeing rather than focusing on limitations and problems. Most research into strength-based counselling focuses on the wellbeing of adults. Positive outcomes among youth and how these are achieved have received less attention. It is thus important to explore the role counsellors' strength-based practices play in managing adolescents wellbeing, especially given the high incidence of youth suicide in New Zealand (Mental Health Foundation, 2017; Ministry of Health, 2016). To this end, counsellors in secondary schools in Auckland, New Zealand, were interviewed using semi-structured interviews to elicit their narratives on strength-based counselling.

The aims of the research were: To examine the multiple metanarratives available to counsellors in a secondary school context; to make sense of how these metanarratives construct strength-based counselling practices; to examine the potential influence of these constructions on co-creating adolescent wellbeing; and to explore the broader community's influence on a counsellor's practice.

A distinct method of narrative analysis evolved in two stages: Narrative storyboards for form and content; and Narrative storyboards for context and metanarratives. These storyboards each reflect a different aspect of a counsellor's narrative thereby adding a depth and richness to the interpretation process. The construction of this method of analysis drew on the research of a selection of authors who engage with narrative as theory and practice (Crossley, 2000; Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998; Zilber, Tuval-Mashiach, & Lieblich, 2008).

Multiple metanarratives vie for counsellors' attention and their adherence to their preferred metanarrative are erratic; drawing intermittently on both the traditional deficit metanarrative of the counselling profession as well as the strength metanarrative of strength-based counselling. The meanings counsellors assign to these metanarratives and

the educational/counselling theories and school/systemic policies that underpin them may either encourage or discourage strength-based counselling in schools.

This thesis further introduces a model for co-creating adolescent wellbeing using a strength-based counselling approach. Drawing from counsellors' narratives and counselling processes this model for co-creating adolescent wellbeing may assist counsellors in a practical way: it provides school counsellors with a foundation from which to think about their practice in a strength-based manner but without ignoring existing issues and inherent tensions.

This study is uniquely set in a New Zealand context and makes a contribution to our understanding of the diverse, complex and multifaceted nature of school counsellors' strength-based practices in secondary schools. By acknowledging the multiple metanarratives that support and/or diminish a school counsellor's practice, being mindful of the contexts school counsellors negotiate, and embracing the understandings that can be gleaned from their narratives, we may be more able to enhance our ability to address the prevalence of mental health issues for adolescents and enhance adolescent wellbeing.

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### **Attestation of Authorship**

I, (Char)maine Bright, hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Signed:

Date: 22 November 2017

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## Dedication

*This work is dedicated to two incredibly special beings:*

*My Mother, Dolores Ann Kruger (who passed suddenly shortly before I completed my Doctorate) and my pride and joy, my fur baby, Gemma “Smoochie” Bright.*

*Mom, your love and encouragement will continue to live on in my heart. You may be gone from this world, but your presence on earth continues to live on in and through me.*

*Gems, you are aptly name.*

*I will forever treasure your innocent adoration, patience and love.*

*You were content just to be near me as I spent hours writing my thesis.*

*You have taught me more about unconditional love than any human ever could.*

*Mommy loves and keeps you always close to my heart.*

## Chapter 1: Introducing the narrative

Usually we think of our “negative” qualities as something we have to “get rid of.” And from that comes all manner of dysfunctional parenting systems, educational systems and justice systems. Imagine what the world would be if we looked at each other and thought, “I know there’s something wonderful in there.”

—Williamson (2004, p. 38)

Adolescents who may be at risk require substantial support and school counsellors play a significant role in providing such support (Geldard, Geldard, & Foo, 2016; Musa, Meshak, & Sagir, 2016; Palmisano, 2007; Sklare, 2005; Stiglbauer, Gnambs, Gamsjäger, & Batinic, 2013; Straus, 2017). This counselling support is especially prudent given the current high incidence of youth suicide in New Zealand (Mental Health Foundation, 2017; Ministry of Education, 2013b; Ministry of Health, 2006, 2016; Te Pou, 2013). In 2016, New Zealand’s youth (15–24 years) suicide rate was the highest among the 34 OECD countries (Ministry of Health, 2016). Furthermore, provisional statistics for 2017 reflect the highest number of suicide deaths since the provisional statistics were first recorded for the 2007/2008 year (Mental Health Foundation, 2017). This research aimed both to create an awareness of the importance of secondary school counsellors and to explore the contribution they make towards positive youth development using strength-based counselling practices. To this end, the study examines the metanarratives, contexts and narrative categories in the stories of secondary school counsellors who use strength-based counselling as part of their professional practice. In particular, the significance of strength-based counselling in a school context and its potential influence in co-creating adolescent wellbeing is examined.

### 1.1 Rationale and significance of the study

Researchers in positive psychology propose that it is possible to cultivate social environments that nurture individual strengths like resilience, competence, and optimism (Boniwell & Ryan, 2012; Catalino, Algae, & Fredrickson, 2014; Compton & Hoffman, 2013; Csikszentmihalyi, 2008; Dawood, 2014; Diener & Seligman, 2002; C. Peterson, 2006; Seligman, 2003, 2011; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich, & Linkins, 2009; Tugade, Shiota, & Kirby, 2014; Williamson, 2004). Clonan, Chafouleas, McDougal and Riley-Tillman (2004) agree and suggest schools, with

their access to children, families and staff resources, are ideal institutions for promoting youth development using strength-based approaches. This thesis extends this suggestion to argue that, within the educational context, school counsellors are also well placed to instigate and promote such initiatives.

Most research into strength-based counselling approaches like positive psychology focus on the wellbeing of adults. Positive outcomes among youth and how these outcomes are achieved have received less attention (Geldard et al., 2016; Musa et al., 2016; Park & Huebner, 2005; Park & Peterson, 2008; Stiglbauer et al., 2013). This research therefore aims to add to the limited literature in this area by exploring how school counsellors perceive and define adolescent wellbeing and how strength-based counselling practices contribute to adolescent wellbeing. According to Hill (2004), the positive outcomes of the helping process can be observed in terms of “the enhancement of wellbeing; remediation or the achievement of symptomatic relief; and rehabilitation or the reduction of troublesome, maladaptive behaviours that interfere with functioning in areas such as family relationships and work” (p. 57).

Manthei (2001) conducted a content analysis of the *New Zealand Journal of Counselling* editions of 1999 to 2001 and concluded that little research has been done in the area of school counselling and positive outcomes for youth. Manthei further noted that only 33% of all articles put forward for publication in the journal during that period were empirically based. Besides the overall lack of published material relating to school counselling, there has been a steady decline in guidance related articles on adolescence published in the *New Zealand Journal of Counselling* since 1991. More published counselling research has therefore been called for (Crowe, 2006, 2014; Manthei, 2004; Stanley & Manthei, 2004). Evaluating and researching what counsellors do is imperative if we are to further educate counsellors and continue to advance the counselling profession (Barclay, Crocket, Kotzé, & Peter, 2013; CCAANZ, 2009; Crowe, 2006, 2014; Education Review Office, 2013b; Manthei, 2001; Tudor, 2013). The research reported here is empirically based and the resulting publications will contribute towards school counselling literature on positive outcomes for young people due to counselling. These publications may in turn provide school counsellors with some valuable insights into their counselling practice with adolescents.

The researcher found further validation for conducting this research in that its intended focus coincides with several of the objectives of the New Zealand Association of Counsellors – Te Roopu Kaiwhiriwhiri o Aotearoa (NZAC) and may therefore contribute to the NZAC’s knowledge base. This study aligns with the NZAC’s (2017c) objectives in the following ways:

- The objective to “promote effective counselling services that are consistent with obligations under the Treaty of Waitangi and; to express, through its activities and resource allocations, a strong commitment to reduce the social disadvantages resulting from differences of race, gender, age, class, religion, sexual orientation, and any contravention of human rights” concurs with this research in that:
  - It will explore counselling in an educational context and the practices that are in place to provide counselling that reduces social disadvantage.
  - It will examine the degree to which the principles of protection, participation, and partnership referenced in the Treaty of Waitangi are visible during the counselling process.
- The objective to “protect the interests and public standing of counselling personnel” concurs with this research as it aims to promote the interest and public standing of school counsellors by making this research available to various stakeholders in education.
- The objective to “develop common policies on counselling issues and transmit comment on these issues to the public, to the government, and to other appropriate authorities; to ensure the establishment, maintenance and enhancement of professional standards; to promote quality training, supervision and professional development; and to publish such journals, monographs and other publications, as the National Executive shall from time to time decide” concurs with this research in that school counsellors’ stories may contain themes and threads relating to counselling issues that could enhance professional standards, training, supervision and professional development.
- The objective to “assist clients to obtain services adequate to their needs” concurs with this research in that it will examine what students value most about counselling.
- The objective to “promote satisfactory conditions of employment for counsellors concurs with this research in that it will highlight the issues and challenges faced by

counsellors in a school context that may then be used to further promote satisfactory conditions of employment.

- The objective to “provide a forum for members to discuss matters of common concern” concurs with this research in that it may provide a platform for discussion and draw attentions to matters of common concern for counsellors working in schools.
- The objective to “affiliate with national and international organisations of counselling” concurs with this research in that it may provide national and international organisations with valuable insights into counselling in a school context.

The rationale and significance of this study influenced the development of its aims, which are presented next along with the research topic and research questions.

## **1.2 Aims, research topic and questions of the study**

The aims of this study are as follows:

- Examine the multiple metanarratives (embedded narratives/discourses) available to counsellors in the Auckland, New Zealand, secondary school context
- Make sense of how these metanarratives (embedded narratives/discourses) construct strength-based counselling practices
- Examine the potential consequences of such a construction on co-creating adolescent wellbeing.
- Explore the broader community’s (within which an adolescent is embedded) influence on a school counsellor’s practice

Bearing in mind the aims of the study, the research topic and research questions were constructed after extensive and repeated reading, questioning and analysis of the participant school counsellors’ transcripts (see the outline of the thesis below and chapters 7 and 8).

The research topic was thus constructed as:

- How do the multiple metanarratives (discourses), which are available to school counsellors, construct their strength-based counselling practice?

To explore this research topic, the following research questions were developed:

- What influence do my assumptions, biases and metanarratives (discourses) as researcher have on the research process?
- Which metanarratives (discourses) are drawn on to construct school counsellors’ practice stories?

- How do the metanarratives (discourses) of the school context influence a school counsellor's practice?
- What are school counsellors' constructions of adolescent wellbeing?
- How do school counsellors describe their strength-based practice as co-creating adolescent wellbeing?
- How do the metanarratives (discourses) of the broader community (within which an adolescent is embedded) influence a school counsellor's practice?
- What are school counsellors' experiences of the adolescent's family during the counselling process?

### **1.3 Overview of theoretical framework**

This section gives a brief overview of methodology used in this inquiry to orientate the reader; full details are given in chapter 2.

This research explores, from the counsellor's perspective, the counselling relationship negotiated between secondary school counsellors and adolescent students within the school context. It uses the principles of positive psychology, within the scope of a broad qualitative framework, and attempts to make sense of, and interpret events in terms of, the meanings people assign to them (Denzin, 2008; Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; Flick, 2009; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

A narrative methodology is proposed, narrative research deriving its epistemological position from the social constructionist paradigm, and the ontology of this thesis is therefore one of critical realism. Social constructionists reject the idea of one fixed reality. Instead, they view knowledge as socially constructed by people as they interact with the world and each other (J. Bruner, 1991; Burr, 2003; Crossley, 2003; Crotty, 1998; Lock & Strong, 2010; Riley & Hawe, 2005). This epistemology seems most appropriate as I want to look at how school counsellors interpret their use of a strength-based counselling approach with adolescents in a secondary school context.

Critical realism embraces epistemological relativism. The latter suggests that knowledge of our world is a personal construction and is co-created through our interaction with others in that world (Parker, 2002; Pujol & Montenegro, 1999). Yet, critical realists also recognise ontological realism which holds that there are certain structures, procedures, mechanisms, rules and regulations that produce "things" that are observable (Bhaksar,

1978; Parker, 1994, 2002). Thus, in this study, critical realism allows the acknowledgement of the materiality of the context in which school counsellors work. This context can therefore be “known”, but the “knowing” is not objective and is mediated through the lens of those interpreting this reality. This subjective lens aligns with the social constructionist epistemology of this study (see chapter 2 for more detail).

A narrative methodology is relevant because I want to explore, among other things, the stories of school counsellors who use aspects of strength-based counselling in their counselling practice. Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach and Zilber (1998) assert that “people are storytellers by nature” (p. 7). They believe that stories have a central role in our communication with others and give unity to our experiences. Narrative inquirers suggest that it is through the medium of language that individuals understand and engage in the process of creating themselves (J. Bruner, 1990; Crossley, 2000; Denison, 2016; Mishler, 1986; Polkinghorne, 1988; Riessman, 1993). According to Bruner (2004), stories presented by narrators about their lives and experiences are the best way in which to learn about their inner worlds. Since we “understand and experience the world narratively”, it makes sense to “study that experience narratively” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 17). The current research therefore looks, in particular, for the meaning behind the school counsellors’ stories. The stories are understood through a narrative analytic lens, which will be discussed in chapter 3.

#### **1.4 Presuppositions**

According to Crossley (2000), before conducting research it is necessary to “clarify some of the assumptions involved in the pursuit of such an endeavour” (p. 87). We need to ask ourselves what it is we are interested in learning, and to reflect on the personal backgrounds, assumptions, and biases that we as researchers bring to the research process (Riessman, 1993, 2008). During the research process, the researcher and the participants are viewed as linked and as creating a reality between them that can be perceived as engendering bias in an inquiry (Bleakley, 2005; Crotty, 1998; Flick, 2009; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Steier, 1991). However, according to Angen (2000), reflexivity does not claim to eliminate bias but makes the researcher’s perspectives apparent in relation to the topic studied. By means of our self-reflective capacity we are able to act responsibly



because we can reflect not only on our beliefs but also on the “quality of our intentions and motivation” (Van Amburg, 1997, p. 189).

According to Crossley (2000, 2003), in narrative research the interviewer and interviewee bring with them their own narratives to the research relationship. Hollway and Jefferson (2004) suggest the narratives that emerge from research are thus always a product of the relationship between the researcher and the participant. Both parties in the research relationship are subject to the ideas and feelings of the other. Crossley (2000) refers to this as the “interactional dynamics” of the interview situation and believes these considerations are extremely important because the rationale behind narrative research is that “narratives are context-sensitive and their form and content are responsive to the aims and conditions of the interview setting” (p. 106). It is consequently essential that researchers reflect on the focal points of their research, and consider the effects their subjectivity may have on how they view and interpret the research material. I believe that since I have my own narrative as a secondary school counsellor, I may be able to identify with what participants say, which will possibly give us some common ground and could be beneficial to the research process.

Pilot interviews were conducted and analysed to identify some of my presuppositions to make me more aware of the possible biases I was bringing to the research process. Once all the interviews were completed, I further reflected on these possible biases and their influences, if any, on the research process (see chapter 6 for more detail).

### **1.5 Personal relevance and positioning**

Before presenting the stories and characters of this inquiry it is important to present my own background, for my story initiated this inquiry and became part of the larger story that it generated.

I have worked in the field of education since 1999, initially at secondary level and subsequently at tertiary level. At secondary level I worked as a school counsellor and English teacher for 4 and 9 years respectively. I then trained and worked as a life coach for 2 years before moving to the tertiary sector where I have worked as a Psychology lecturer for the past 12 years.

During my time as a school counsellor in South Africa I was focused on promoting positive outcomes for the adolescents I counselled by empowering them to take ownership of their own wellbeing. In 2002, I emigrated on my own to New Zealand and the importance of taking ownership of one's own wellbeing was reinforced for me. There were no available positions for school counsellors so I gained employment as an English teacher in a secondary school. It was erroneously assumed that I would assimilate easily into New Zealand society due to the perceived similarities between South Africans and New Zealanders, and that I would need no additional support. In turn, to prove myself capable and efficient, I was reluctant to ask for support and felt isolated. My surroundings were unfamiliar to me and I found immigration challenging both personally and professionally.

As sometimes occurs with transition and adversity, I grew tremendously from the experience. The difficulties I experienced in emigrating and in teaching in a new country, as well as my background as a school counsellor, fuelled my interest in looking at the lives and experiences of others and how they deal positively with challenges in their lives.

All these experiences further motivated me to train as a life coach in New Zealand. I coached clients on how to achieve their goals by focusing on the positive steps to be taken towards reaching these goals, rather than on the problems that impeded their progress (Rock, 2007). My work as a school counsellor and life coach nurtured my passion for positive psychology which I started teaching at tertiary level in 2012.

Positive psychology, in the humanistic tradition and in the same spirit as coaching, has moved away from a preoccupation with repairing the negative aspects of life and emphasises human strengths and wellbeing (Boniwell & Ryan, 2012; Park & Peterson, 2008; C. Peterson, 2006; Seligman, 2011; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

Positive psychology, my background as a school counsellor and English teacher, and my passion for stories sparked my curiosity in the stories of secondary school counsellors. As discussed, I was interested in the positive aspects of secondary school counsellors' practice within the school context where they interact with the various role-players in education. As my thinking evolved, ultimately this focus on the positive aspects of school counselling shifted to include the importance of context and metanarrative.

Due to my love of stories, the choice of a narrative inquiry as a means of conducting my research was a natural one which I subsequently found to be well suited to exploring the

experiences of secondary school counsellors. It is therefore with quiet anticipation that I invite you to engage with the stories of secondary school counsellors with me.

## **1.6 Outline of thesis**

This thesis consists of 13 chapters and these are outlined individually below.

Chapter 1 introduces the research as a study of secondary school counsellors who use strength-based counselling practices with adolescent students in a school context. The rationale and significance of the study are presented together with the aims of the research, theoretical framework, presuppositions and the relevance of this study to me personally.

Chapters 2 and 3 introduce the methodology and method adopted for this research. Traditionally, a literature review precedes the methodology and methods of a thesis. However, the presentation of the epistemology and ontology of this thesis, followed by my subsequent choice of methodology and method, provides the framework for the literature review of this research. This literary context is discussed in chapters 4 and 5 but is aligned with the epistemology presented in this chapter and permeates the entire thesis. Furthermore, chapters 2 and 3 also provide the foundation on which I constructed the method of narrative analysis presented in chapters 7 and 8.

Chapter 2 introduces the theoretical orientation to the thesis and is organised as follows: I start with an overview of the basic tenets of a theoretical orientation to research including a definition of ontology, epistemology and methodology. I then outline the philosophical positioning of this thesis and explain the ontology, epistemology and methodology that I use herein. To do this I provide a description of social constructionism, critical realism and narrative methodology. After a discussion of social constructionism, I explain the research paradigms of relativism and realism and introduce the ontological stance of this thesis, which is one of critical realism. Under the section on narrative methodology I discuss embedded narratives, discourses and metanarratives as I understand them within this study. Finally, I provide a brief explanation of axiology and reflexivity, which I expand on in chapter 6.

In chapter 3 I introduce the narrative research method utilised in this study. I reiterate the aims of the study, discuss who the participants are, and the recruitment procedure used to gain participation. This is followed by an explanation of the narrative interview and transcription process and I also reflect briefly on the construction of a method

of narrative analysis for form, content and context (discussed further in chapters 7 and 8). Finally, I discuss the limitations, rigour and ethics of narrative research.

In chapters 4 and 5 I provide a literature review and literary context for school counsellors and strength-based counselling. In chapter 4 I explore counselling in a secondary school and what this entails. I define counselling in general terms and then explore counselling in a New Zealand context. This exploration of the counselling context includes a focus on counsellor training in New Zealand and looks particularly at counselling in a New Zealand school context. Within the school context, I discuss self-managing schools, the legal imperative to employ school counsellors, an association for school counsellors, schools' legislative and policy requirements, funding for school guidance staff and teacher versus non-teacher qualified school counsellors. I also look at challenges of counselling in a school context and ask the question, "Is counselling in a school context important?" Having provided a context for counselling and school counsellors I discuss the school counsellor's client, the adolescent, and look at how he or she is positioned within the school context. This section includes a discussion on adolescents and counselling at school and adolescents at risk. The chapter concludes with a section on the metanarratives of school and counselling.

In chapter 5 I explore the literary context of secondary school counsellors' strength-based practices. I ask the question, "What is strength-based counselling?" I then provide an overview of strength-based counselling practices covered in this thesis in three sections: positive psychology counselling, narrative counselling and solution-focused counselling. In these sections I look at the use of these counselling modalities within the school context and explore the implications thereof for school counselling. I include a section on countering the "positive" in positive psychology which includes an exploration of the benefits of negative emotion and post-traumatic growth. This is followed by a discussion of existing strength-based initiatives in health and education in New Zealand and the limitations and provisos of strength-based counselling.

While I present the literary context as two distinct chapters, given the social constructionist nature of this research references to pertinent literature continue throughout the thesis.

As discussed in chapter 2 on methodology, this thesis takes a social constructionist position. Chapter 6 therefore presents the narrative of this thesis as a co-construction

between myself, as the researcher, and my participants as they tell me their stories about strength-based counselling. Within this co-construction between researcher and participants, the researcher must be aware of the influence of their assumptions, biases and metanarratives on the research process. In this chapter I present my narrative of “becoming” as a researcher framed within the evolving story of my experience of the research process (Deleuze, 2004b). In so doing I take a reflexive look at my background and how I engaged with the research process to co-construct the narrative categories that structure the results chapters of this thesis (see chapters 9–12). This chapter is also in part about my engagement with my participants. I reflect on the interview process and point to the intersubjective context between researcher and participant, including a discussion of my assumptions and biases. The research question that frames this chapter is:

*What influence do my assumptions, biases and metanarratives (discourses) as researcher have on the research process?*

Chapters 7 and 8 present, in two stages, the process I went through in engaging with participants’ transcripts and in constructing a final method of narrative analysis for interpreting these transcripts. In chapter 7 I present stage one of this process of working towards a method of narrative analysis. I outline the evolution of the interpretation process in three iterations or narrative storyboards, drawing largely from Lieblich et al.’s (1998) four modes of reading a narrative for form and content. In chapter 8 I present stage two of the process of working towards a method of narrative analysis. I outline the evolution of narrative storyboards four, five and six, introducing context and metanarratives to the interpretation process. This chapter also introduces Zilber et al.’s (2008) three-sphere model for analysing external context.

Together the six storyboards in chapters 7 and 8 provide the reader with a reflexive map of my process of interpreting transcripts and of working towards a final method of interpretation for my participants’ narratives (presented in chapter 8 as storyboard six). The six different storyboards each chart the progression of my method of narrative analysis as the process of interpretation evolved.

Storyboards one through five document the progression of my method of narrative analysis and storyboard six presents the final method of narrative analysis for interpreting participants’ transcripts. The six storyboards are titled:

- Storyboard one: A holistic-form construction to introduce the story

- Storyboard two: A move to a holistic-content construction
- Storyboard three: Reading across school counsellor's narratives – introducing a categorical-content construction
- Storyboard four: A categorical-content construction
- Storyboard five: A categorical-content construction revisited
- Storyboard six: A categorical-content construction and exploration of context and metanarratives

The next four chapters construct and explore the categorical-content, themes or narrative categories, contexts and metanarratives that I recognised within school counsellors' stories. The exploration of narrative categories is predominately based on Lieblich et al.'s (1998) analytical model and categorical-content mode of reading a narrative (see chapters 7 and 8). In addition, these narrative categories are situated within certain contexts. Zilber et al.'s (2008) three-sphere model of external context was used to construct the contexts apparent in school counsellors' narratives relevant to their counselling practice (see chapter 8). Thus, in this thesis, both a categorical-content approach and the three-sphere model of external context were used during the narrative analysis of transcripts to construct narrative categories and contexts in school counsellors' counselling practice.

The exploration of the categorical-content and context of school counsellors' narratives in this thesis is represented in the final version of the story-map grid for metanarratives, context and categorical-content and provides an outline of the results presented in chapters 9–12 (see chapters 7 and 8 for explanation of this process). In addition, the final heuristic device for categorical-content and contexts, also discussed in chapter 8, was used as a guide during the interpretation process and forms part of the co-construction of knowledge within this thesis. This heuristic device is presented in section 9.1 to link it directly to the results chapters of this thesis.

The complementary methods of narrative analysis for narrative categories (categorical-content) and context referred to above together with the story-map grid and heuristic device were used in an innovative way to address the research questions of this thesis. The overarching research topic is:

*How do the multiple metanarratives (discourses), which are available to school counsellors, construct their strength-based counselling practice?*

The research questions that come under this research topic each link to a different results chapter (see chapters 6 and 9–12). These research questions were formulated through repeated reading of participants' narratives to construct narrative categories and contexts. In addition, each context and narrative category recognised in school counsellors' transcripts are discussed in a separate chapter.

Chapter 9 explores the narrative category of the counsellor context. The counsellors' context looks specifically at a school counsellors' practice of counselling within the school. The chapter starts with a brief discussion of the intersubjective context to position the reader and to remind them of the relational context of this thesis. It then focuses on school counsellors' constructions of their counselling practice and explores their background and philosophical positioning. In particular, it explores school counsellors' narratives of strength-based counselling and practice.

The chapter ends with a discussion on metanarratives of deficit and strength, as well as a reflection on strength-based counselling and my interpretation of how the school counsellors I interviewed view this counselling modality.

The research question that frames this chapter is:

*Which metanarratives are drawn on to construct school counsellors' practice stories?*

Chapter 10 focuses on the narrative category of the school context. The school context is the environment in which a school counsellors' counselling practice is situated since school counsellors do not work in isolation but instead form part of a broader educational context. This context makes counselling in schools different from counselling in private practice. To explain this diverse context the chapter starts with a brief discussion of the social field as context. The chapter then explores the school context as being both ally and hindrance to school counsellors and strength-based counselling. A discussion on resisting the dominant deficit metanarratives in schools and acknowledging subjugated strength metanarratives follows next. The chapter moves on to a discussion of school counsellors as part of the school system and explores what school counsellors bring to the school context. A survey of the unique features of counselling in the school context, strength-based models in a school context, and strength-based models in the classroom as part of teaching ends the chapter.

The research question that frames this chapter is:

*How do the metanarratives (discourses) of the school context influence a school counsellor's practice?*

Chapter 11 focuses on the narrative category of *the adolescent context*. It looks at school counsellors' constructions of the adolescent student and the context that adolescents are situated within when they attend counselling sessions in a school environment. The chapter explores school counsellors' constructions of adolescent wellbeing from different theoretical perspectives that were recognised within school counsellors' narratives. School counsellors' constructions of strength-based counselling and its influence in fostering adolescent wellbeing are also presented.

It was noticed that this fostering of adolescent wellbeing appeared to follow a set pedagogy or formula that starts with recognising adolescents' strengths and resources and culminates in the teaching of a skill set to adolescents to help them self-regulate and manage their daily lives. This pedagogical approach is introduced and outlined as a model of the steps involved in co-creating adolescent wellbeing using a strength-based approach. The chapter goes on to discuss what adolescents value most about strength-based counselling and looks at working with adolescents at risk. It ends with an exploration of the deficit metanarrative that sometimes underpins society's view of adolescence and strength-based counselling's attempts to counteract this perception of adolescents.

The research questions that frame this chapter are:

*What are school counsellors' constructions of adolescent wellbeing?*

*How do school counsellors describe their strength-based practice as co-creating adolescent wellbeing?*

Chapter 12 focuses on the narrative category of *community metanarratives, counselling and the family context*. In reading school counsellors' stories, there was a strong narrative thread pertaining to the family's role in providing support for an adolescent in counselling. Alongside this notion of familial support was the inherent difficulty involved when such support from the family was lacking from the family or unwelcomed by the adolescent. This chapter presents school counsellors' metanarratives of wellbeing and deficit as they relate to the adolescent, to the strength-based counselling process and to the family and community context.

The chapter starts with a discussion of wellbeing metanarratives and focuses on the importance of community support, decentred practice, and school counsellors' cultural



awareness. School counsellors' stories of creating a community of support and how this facilitates adolescent wellbeing is discussed next. The chapter ends with an exploration of the deficit metanarratives reflected in school counsellors' stories and looks at the implications of lack of support and the pre-existing parental and school counsellor attitudes on adolescent wellbeing. This section includes a discussion on lack of family support, adolescents' reluctance in enlisting support, the potentially detrimental nature of familial relationships on adolescent wellbeing, the effect on adolescents of how they are "seen" by adults, and school counsellors' pre-existing attitudes and deficit constructs of cultural groups.

The research questions that frame this chapter are:

*How do the metanarratives (discourse) of the broader community (within which an adolescent is embedded) influence a school counsellor's practice?*

*What are school counsellors' experiences of the adolescent's family during the counselling process?*

Chapter 13 weaves together the narrative threads of the story told in this thesis. The chapter starts with a narrative overview that identifies a contribution of this study, including the construction of a method of narrative analyses to interpret school counsellors' transcripts. It recaps my design and use of narrative tools and then presents my findings for the narrative categories, contexts and metanarratives recognised in school counsellors' narratives. I present the research context first (see chapter 6) and then examine the multiple metanarratives that counsellors engage with across the various contexts in which they work, including: the counsellors' context, school context, adolescent context and, community metanarratives, counselling and the family context (see chapters 9–12). Together these narrative categories and contexts answer the research questions posed in this thesis and contribute to the knowledge base of counselling practice. The chapter then focuses on the tensions, epistemology and ontology in school counsellors' narratives and looks at the limitations of strength-based counselling from the school counsellors' perspective. The overall narrative contributions including: highlights and implications, challenges of this thesis, and recommendations for further research are presented next. The chapter ends by closing the narrative for this thesis. In the next chapter, I present an introduction to the methodology for this thesis.

## Chapter 2: Introduction to methodology

A concept is a brick. It can be used to build a courthouse of reason. Or it can be thrown through the window.

—Massumi (2004, p. xiii)

This and the next chapter introduce the methodology and method for this thesis, respectively. Traditionally, a literature review precedes the methodology and methods of a thesis. However, in the case of this study, the presentation of the epistemology and ontology of this thesis, and then my subsequent choice of methodology and method, provides the framework for the literature review (presented in chapters 4 and 5). However, in addition to the literature review chapters and in accordance with the epistemology presented in this chapter, the review and comparison of relevant literature permeates the entire thesis. Chapters 2 and 3 also provide the foundation on which I construct the method of narrative analysis presented in chapters 7 and 8.

This chapter provides a theoretical orientation to my thesis. It outlines my ontological and epistemological positions, and describes my methodological approach. I provide a description of social constructionism, critical realism and a narrative methodology including embedded narratives, discourses and metanarratives. Finally, I provide a brief explanation of axiology and reflexivity which I expand on in chapter 6.

### 2.1 Ontology, epistemology and methodology

All research occurs within a framework that has certain ideas and philosophical underpinnings about how “we” are in the world and how we glean knowledge from the world. This, in research terms, is expressed as our ontological and epistemological perspectives.

Ontology “is a study of the nature of being” while epistemology “is concerned with the nature of knowledge” (Rosen, 1996, p. 6). Giddings and Grant (2002) further explain ontology and epistemology and highlight the link between them:

Ontology refers to our most basic beliefs about what kind of being a human is and the nature of reality. This is the basis for developing an epistemology which defines

the nature of the relationship between enquirer and known, what counts as knowledge, and on what basis we can make knowledge claims. (p. 12)

Thus, what we believe about “the nature of reality” determines what we can “know” about said reality. I would further argue that one cannot promote a certain epistemology (knowledge) adequately without addressing the ontological constructs behind that epistemology (being). Yet, how do we come to access this knowing? We do so from a methodological standpoint.

The methodology used during the research process articulates the ontology and epistemology the researcher subscribes to with respect to how we come to understand our world and how we glean knowledge through this understanding (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Giddings and Grant (2002) explain methodology as “the abstract theoretical assumptions and principles that underpin a particular research approach” (p. 12). The authors add that the methodology guides the researcher in framing the research question and determines the methods that will be used during the research process. The methods are “the practical means, the tools, for collecting and analysing data” (p. 12).

## **2.2 Positioning of this thesis**

This study set out to examine the narratives of secondary school counsellors who used strength-based counselling approaches as part of their counselling practice. It further sought to examine the metanarratives (discourses) within school counsellors’ narratives and to explain their role in school counsellors’ professional practice with adolescents.

Accordingly, a qualitative research approach using a narrative methodology and method was adopted. Qualitative methods are empirical procedures that describe and interpret the experiences of the research participants in a contextual setting (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). This involves exploring the researched phenomena in their natural setting and attempting to make sense of or interpret these phenomena in terms of the meanings people assign to them. The resultant material gathered from qualitative research is thus of an in-depth nature.

In this thesis, I used narrative interviewing to access the narratives of eight secondary school counsellors, exploring in depth their stories against the backdrop of the school context in which they work. The nature of the knowledge gained from these narrative interviews was understood within a critical realist ontology and social

constructionist epistemology. Adopting a critical realist ontological stance to analyse school counsellors' narratives acknowledges the materiality of the external school context. I argue that this context can be "known" however, the knowing thereof is not objective and is subject to interpretation (see discussion on critical realism below). I thus adopt a social constructionist epistemology as outlined by several authors (Burr, 1995, 2003; Crossley, 2003; Gergen, 1985, 1994; Lock & Strong, 2010; Nightingale & Cromby, 2002). In particular I draw from the theoretical positioning and work on narrative research of Lieblich, Tuval-Maschiach and Zilber on narrative form, content and context (Lieblich et al., 1998; Zilber et al., 2008).

### **2.2.1 Social constructionism**

Social constructionism is a relativist epistemological position and suggests that our world is constructed through our interactions with others and that these constructions are subjective and cannot be perceived as the "truth" based on one fixed reality (Burr, 1995, 2003). This social constructionist premise of there being multiple truths stands in contrast to realism, which suggests that the "truth" can be known in an unbiased and objective way and that there is only one reality out there on which this "truth" is based (Tuffin, 2006; Willig, 2010).

Burr (1995, 2003) outlines four central assumptions of the social constructionist position which are in opposition to a realist position. The first assumption is a critical stance to taken-for-granted knowledge (metanarratives/discourses). The way in which we observe the world is not objective; rather our observations are prejudiced by our experiences that are essentially interpreted through language. It is these subjective observations that we internalise and perceive as knowledge. Crossley (2000) agrees that social constructionists highlight the link between self and social structures, particularly the interrelationship between self and language.

The second assumption talks about historical and cultural specificity – the categories in language used to identify things develop because of social interactions between groups of people and are contingent on a specific time and place. Meaning derived through language, then, is situational. Burr (1995) suggests that "the particular forms of knowledge that abound in any culture are therefore artefacts of it, and we should not

assume that our ways of understanding are necessarily any better (in terms of being any nearer the truth) than other ways” (p. 4).

Lock and Strong (2010) agree that social constructionism is concerned with meaning and understanding as the central feature of human activities; meaning and understanding have their beginnings in social interaction and ways of meaning-making are inherently embedded in social-cultural processes. The authors further suggest that social constructionism has an uneasy relationship with realism and takes a critical perspective towards the topic being examined.

Burr (1995, 2003) and Lock and Strong (2010) thus agree that social constructionism takes a critical stance towards the topic under review, which is seen as being subjective. Social constructionism highlights the importance of social processes in meaning-making and takes more of a relativist orientation to the nature of “truth” and “reality”. This notion of a critical stance towards the topic might appear to be somewhat at odds with a subjective, constructed view of reality and I discuss this further in section 2.2.3 below.

The third assumption of social constructionism, according to Burr (1995), is that knowledge is sustained by social processes – the way in which we perceive reality at any given moment is filtered through the communication system in place at the time. The strength of our social structure determines how concrete our knowledge appears to be. Burr adds that “for social constructionists the nature of the world is constructed between people and it cannot be perceived ‘as it really is’” (p. 4).

The fourth assumption is that knowledge and social action go together – all of us are connected to each other through patterns of communication and language (Burr, 1995). How we choose to interpret and act on these patterns of communication determines our socially constructed reality. As each of us may interpret and act on these patterns of communication differently, it follows that the way in which we construct our reality will differ.

A social constructionist epistemology, which acknowledges the meaning-making of social processes, facilitates the examination of school counsellors’ narratives and positions the interpretation of the co-constructed reality that ensued between myself as researcher, the school counsellors, and the adolescents receiving counselling. However, social constructionism’s relativist orientation and position that nothing can be objectively known

would suggest that the materiality of the school context is also constructed and fluid and can thus cannot be interpreted objectively as being fixed.

In the next section I examine the concepts of relativism and realism and argue for an ontological perspective that allows for the duality of a constructed subjective reality that occurs within an objective context. In this sense, I take an epistemological position of “light” social constructionism rather than “strong” social constructionism.

### **2.2.2 Relativism/realism; subjectivity/objectivity**

The epistemological positions of realism and relativism are research paradigms that view reality from different perspectives. As explained above, social constructionism is more obviously aligned with relativism. Realism suggests that there is a “world out there” that can be known and which is not reliant on our constructions of it; that is, that there are fixed structures in the world that can be objectively explained “as they are” (Burr, 2003; Nightingale & Cromby, 2002; Parker, 1994). Reality under this paradigm can be interpreted and the “truth” is seen as available to us (Burr, 2003). Relativism, however, is sceptical of a knowing of what the “world out there” is and suggests that any explanations given of “the world” are our subjective constructions of it (Cromby & Nightingale, 1999). There is thus no one “reality” and “truth” exists only as a construction of those who are interpreting it (Burr, 1995, 2003).

If, as relativism suggests, there are multiple realities and if truth is merely a construction, critiquing our representations of reality becomes challenging (Burr, 2003; Cromby & Nightingale, 1999; Hook, 2001; Parker, 2002). Gergen (1994), who supports a relativist social constructionist stance, explains this challenge and says we cannot provide a “foundational description” of the world “out there” as opposed to a world “in here”. He argues that “once we attempt to articulate ‘what there is,’ we enter the world of discourse” (p. 72). What Gergen is saying here is that language and knowledge are subjective and socially constructed, and that they cannot provide us with an objective tangible reality. This assertion is central to the social constructionist perspective I explained in the previous section and several authors have taken this to mean that “language can never refer to any aspects or properties of an external reality” (Cromby & Nightingale, 1999, p. 703).

Gergen (1994) does concede that we do use “objects of various kinds within particular settings” (p. 36), however he does not grant these “objects” a status beyond their place in our reference to them. Cromby and Nightingale (1999) disagree with this view:

If objects exist independently of language, then, unless materiality were wholly uniform, they must have differential properties. And if objects have differential properties, it is untenable that the language we use to socially construct our world and activity does not on occasion, and however imperfectly, partially, tangentially or implicitly, reference these differences. (p. 703)

The authors continue that acknowledging the existence of objects does not necessarily imply that we view these objects objectively. They agree that “language is never a perfect mirror of materiality”, however they suggest that it need not be considered “autonomous, transcendent, free-floating and wholly self-referencing”. Instead they consider language as performing “flawed, incomplete reference” (pp. 705–706).

This study embraces a social constructionist epistemology which falls under a relativist paradigm and which allowed me to examine the constructed nature of the reality formed between school counsellors and the adolescents in counselling. However, I also wanted to examine the *materiality* of the school context as it relates to the counselling process within schools. Such an examination fits more within a realist paradigm. Cromby and Nightingale (p. 701) explain that a core issue within social constructionism due to its relativist positioning concerns the “possibility of postulating and adequately theorising a world independent of our representations of it”. They ask if constructionism can provide us with a “‘true’ account of the world?” (p. 701) and answer that, “with certain provisos” (p. 702), it can. The authors argue that it “is possible to theorize a knowable, extra-discursive ‘reality’ in ways consonant with the main tents of constructionism” (p. 702). Similarly, Berger and Luckmann (1967), major social constructionist proponents, argue that while the world may be socially constructed by our social practices, we can simultaneously experience the nature of our world as fixed:

Human beings together create and then sustain all social phenomena through social practices, because future generations are born into a world where this idea already exists, they ‘internalise’ it as part of their consciousness, as part of their understanding of the nature of the world. (p. 10)

It became apparent to me that I wanted an epistemology that could encompass aspects of both relativism and realism, and after reading the work of the authors above it seemed attainable. In the next section, I examine critical realism, which forms the ontological foundation of this thesis and embraces aspects of both relativism and realism.

### **2.2.3 Critical realism**

Critical realism provides the ontological foundation of this thesis and embraces aspects of both relativism and realism. Critical realism embraces epistemological relativism. The latter suggests that knowledge of our world is a personal construction and is co-created through our interaction with others in that world (Parker, 2002; Pujol & Montenegro, 1999). Yet, critical realists also recognise ontological realism, which holds that there are certain structures, procedures, mechanisms, rules and regulations that produce “things” that are observable (Bhaksar, 1978; Parker, 1994, 2002).

Taking these two contrasting perspectives may appear contradictory, however critical realists successfully negotiate this difference. They do so by embracing both the co-construction of reality in line with social constructionists and simultaneously viewing this reality as being “real” and “true” for those constructing it. Nightingale and Cromby (2002) explain it this way:

Wherein referentiality and objectivity are possible, though always partial, limited and necessarily dependent upon further empirical and discursive revision. What this permits is a conceptual and theoretical framework within which the evaluation as to the accuracy of our accounts becomes possible. (p. 710)

In addition, critical realists acknowledge materiality and its influence on us beyond being a social construction. Thus, in this study, critical realism allows the acknowledgement of the materiality of the context in which school counsellors work. This context can therefore be “known” but the “knowing” is not objective and is mediated through the lens of those interpreting this reality. This subjective lens aligns with a social constructionist epistemology.

In applying a critical realist orientation to social constructionism, I make room for the interpretation of the co-constructed reality between myself as researcher, the school counsellors and the adolescents receiving counselling. At the same time, the materiality of the school context, including physical attributes such as location and layout as well as



abstract influences such as its power dynamics, rules, regulations, policies and procedures, are acknowledged for the contribution they make to the counselling process within schools. Adopting critical realism as my ontological approach thus allowed me to embrace aspects of both realism and relativism (Nightingale & Cromby, 2002).

#### **2.2.4 Narrative methodology**

I chose a narrative methodology and method for this study because it aligns with the epistemology of social constructionism and ontology of critical realism, and because “people are storytellers by nature” (Lieblich et al., 1998, p. 7). The narrative methodology enables the researcher to access participants’ experiences. It aligns with critical realism and respects participants’ expression of “truth” and makes room for them to explain reality as they perceive it. At the same time, the narrative methodology aligns with social constructionism and the researcher becomes part of the participants’ narrative and influences the way in which it is told. Using a narrative methodology and method also allows the researcher to look beyond participants’ narratives to that which may not have been said. In this way, the researcher can put forth alternative interpretations of participants’ reality without incurring a challenge to participants’ “truth”. A critical realist ontology permits that which the researcher learns from school counsellors’ narratives to be used as a constructive teaching. This teaching may assist other school counsellors in honing their practice and will contribute to school counselling research in general. After an extensive review of the literature (J. Bruner, 1990; Carter, 1993; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Crossley, 2000; Crotty, 1998; Denison, 2016; Elliott, 2005; Lieblich et al., 1998; Mishler, 1986; Polkinghorne, 1988; Riessman, 1993, 2008; Sarbin, 1986; Sclater, 2003; Zilber et al., 2008), I found empirical evidence to support my view that narratives are the best way in which to access experiences.

##### ***2.2.4.1 Narratives align with social constructionism***

We define ourselves through narratives and in listening to the narratives of others we are granted access, through our interpretation, to their inner experiences. Lieblich et al. (1998) suggest that the most efficient way to learn about people’s “inner world is through verbal accounts and stories” (p. 7). The authors add that narratives give us “access to people’s identity and personality” (Lieblich et al., 1998). Similarly, Crossley (2000) believes that

“through narratives we define who we are, who we were and who we may become in the future” (p. 67).

Lieblich et al. (1998, p. 7) cite several authors that likewise regard our individual narratives “in both facets of content and form” as our identities. These authors believe that narratives replicate our lives and represent our internal world externally. Narratives are, however, more than a representation of who we are; they also construct who we are and how we represent ourselves (Gergen, 1994; Gergen & Gergen, 1986; McAdams, 1993; Polkinghorne, 1988). Lieblich et al. (1998) state that “we know or discover ourselves, and reveal ourselves to others, by the stories we tell” (p. 7).

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) recommend narrative as “the best way of representing and understanding experience” (p. 18). Day (2004) suggests that “one way of reclaiming, reconstructing, and recapturing events” (p. 121) is through dialogue. Bruner (2002) agrees and states:

We constantly construct and reconstruct ourselves to meet the needs of the situation we encounter, and we do so with the guidance of our memories of the past and our hopes and fears for the future. Telling oneself about oneself is like making up a story about who and what we are, what’s happened, and why we’re doing what we’re doing. (p. 64)

This construction and reconstruction of self shifts our perspectives and allows us to negotiate changes in our world, including changes in cultural themes and belief systems (see section 3.3).

Winslade and Monk (1999) also go beyond seeing narratives and metanarratives as a way of “understanding experience” and give an example of how these narratives may affect adolescent lives in school, which has direct relevance for this thesis. Stories do not just *describe* what we see; they *construct* what we see. In schools, stories about what constitutes a “good” or “bad” student do not just describe adolescents’ lives; they actively shape children’s experiences of themselves and of school (p. 22). Thus, while we define ourselves through our personal narratives, these narratives are not constructed in isolation and occur within a cultural and community context that reflects certain values and beliefs (see section 3.3).

D. Carr (1986) concurs and explains that narratives are active and thus “it is not the case that we first live and act and then afterward, seated around the fire as it were, tell about

what we have done” (p. 61). The creation of our narratives is an active process that is co-constructed with others in a social context and is not merely a reflection of our story as it happened in the past. Carr explains that the “retrospective view” of the storyteller with their ability to view the entire narrative does not conflict with “the agent’s view” that the narrative is created in the telling of it (p. 61). He suggests that the narrative is interwoven within the acts of daily life and it is through living that meaning is created, “not merely after the fact, at the hands of authors, in the pages of books” (D. Carr, 1986, p. 61).

Crossley (2003) agrees and explains “the self is constituted through ‘webs of interlocution’ in a ‘defining community’” (p. 298). In other words, it is through our conversations, discussions and dialogues in the community of which we are a part that our personal narratives arise. Our narratives are thus co-constructed alongside the narratives of the people in our lives and within a cultural and community context. Furthermore, our narratives and stories, according to Lieblich et al. (1998), “provide coherence and continuity” to our experience and “have a central role in our communication with others” (p. 7).

Gergen and Gergen (1986) extend this argument and explains that narrative research aligns with the central assumptions of social constructionism and supports the notion that “truth” is socially constructed between people and that this constructed reality (metanarrative) is situated in a specific context both historically and culturally. “Truth” is not seen as being objective, with one “right” reality. Instead, it is viewed as being open to interpretation, subjective and consisting of multiple realities – an ever-evolving phenomenon in time.

Foucault (1971) describes it this way:

It is always possible one could speak the truth in a void; one would only be in the true, however, if one obeyed the rules of some discursive “policy” which would have to be reactivated every time one spoke. Disciplines constitute a system of control in the production of discourse, fixing its limits through action of an identity taking the form of a permanent reactivation of the rules. (p. 17)

My assumptions about the nature of knowledge are founded on social constructionism and the social influence on knowledge construction is recognised. Narrative truth then would appear to be an oxymoron, since “truth” in this sense is constructed in a social context. However, the critical realist ontology of my research would suggest that the “discursive

‘policy’” that Foucault refers to above and narrative “truth” do “exist” in the school and counselling systems for the school counsellors and can thus be observed as “real” and carrying a weight of influence on counsellors within these systems.

Thus, the metanarratives (dominant narratives and discourses) of the school counsellors I interviewed are their perceptions of “truth” and are fixed within the constraints of the school system in which they work. Similarly, while my research process is a co-construction (see chapter 6) with school counsellors, this process is constrained within the expectations of academia and within the limits of my own thinking, which can also be perceived as “real”.

In the next section, I examine further critical realism’s alignment with a narrative research method.

#### ***2.2.4.2 Narratives align with critical realism***

My theoretical positioning around the narrative is one of a “light” social constructionist epistemology with a critical realist ontology. The writings of Lieblich, Tuval-Maschiach and Zilber (Lieblich et al., 1998; Zilber et al., 2008) on narrative research, and Crossley’s (Crossley, 2000, 2003) writings on narrative psychology have greatly influenced my thinking around the epistemology and ontology of narratives and the use of a narrative method for my research. “Strong” social constructionism would suggest that “truth” is a social construction and that both our identity and our stories are co-creations constructed in relation with others in a social context.

Crossley (2003) speaks of “strong” social constructionism and the challenges it makes against “implicit realist assumptions” of mainstream research and therapeutic approaches such as the narrative. She explains that postmodern perspectives of the “self” as a construct are categorised by “interpretation, variability, relativity, flux and difference” (p. 289). From this perspective, one cannot “make universal claims about the nature of human selves and personal experiences” since they differ with respect to “historical, cultural and practical contexts” (p. 289). Given this theoretical lack of “unity and constancy”, postmodernists pronounce the “death of the subject” (p. 289). Thus, from the postmodern relativist perspective, a person’s narrative is a construction of reality and does not express a sense of identity or experience in any “real” sense. I too believe that the language used, our interaction with others, and the context within which a narrative is told all work together in constructing narratives. However, I also believe that there are aspects of the narrative, and

the context in which it is told, that are more “concrete” in nature than “strong” social constructionists would advocate. These aspects of the narrative can describe a person’s experience and are not solely a construction of that experience.

Suggesting that narrative can be both a social construction of reality and an “accurate” reflection of that reality would seem to be a contradiction. However, Denzin and Lincoln (2000) suggest that “the field of qualitative research is defined by a series of tensions, contradictions and hesitations” (p. 15). Lieblich et al. (1998) posit that at the centre of these apparent contradictions lies “the nature of ‘truth,’ ‘knowledge,’ and ‘research’” (p. 8). Lieblich et al. (1998) position themselves somewhere between relativism and realism and explain that they do not “advocate total relativism”, which sees narratives as works of “fiction”. However, they stress that they also do not see narratives as exact replicas of “reality” (p. 8). The authors explain that narratives are typically “constructed around a core of facts or life events”, however they are also open to individual interpretation and the creative selection of “remembered facts” (p. 8). They argue that when narratives are used adequately they allow researchers to access a narrator’s experiences and his or her understanding of that experience in both its “‘real’ or ‘historical’ core, and as a narrative construction” (p. 8).

Crossley (2003) also questions the theory of “strong” social constructionism and argues that there is space for another type of psychology – what she calls “narrative psychology” – which aligns with the critical realist assumptions of this thesis and with Lieblich et al.’s (1998) views on narrative research. Crossley’s (2003) approach has “the ability of appreciating the linguistic and discursive structuring of ‘self’ and ‘experience’”. At the same time, it sustains “a sense of the essentially personal, coherent and ‘real’ nature of individual subjectivity” (p. 289). Crossley’s position then, like that of Lieblich et al., also falls somewhere between relativism and realism.

Taking Lieblich et al.’s (1998) and Crossley’s (2003) perspectives on narratives in relation to this thesis means that the way in which school counsellors tell the stories of his or her counselling practice is partly a personal construct and partly historical “truth”. As such the knowledge gleaned from this thesis may be applicable to other school counsellors. School counsellors’ narratives, while personal constructions of the counselling process, also revealed “real” characteristics of the counselling process that may be relevant to other counsellors.

### **2.2.5 Axiology**

Axiology focuses on the researcher's values in relation to the research process (Ponterotto, 2005). Since this study takes a social constructionist approach that views reality as being socially constructed by both the researcher and the participants in the research process, the researcher's values and biases form part of this process. I therefore examined my values in relation to my background and life experience and used the process of reflexivity to examine any potential biases and/or assumptions I held about the research process to minimise their influence, while at the same time acknowledging that the researcher's influences are considered part of the research process and thus interpretation of narratives is not value-free (see chapter 6). The theoretical positioning of this thesis with its social constructionist epistemology and critical realist ontology aligns with Lieblich et al.'s (1998) position on narrative research. In the construction of a method of narrative analysis I draw extensively from these authors (see chapters 7 and 8).

### **2.3 Diagrammatic representation of the theoretical positioning of this thesis**

The follow diagrammatic representation outlines the theoretical positioning of this thesis including the methodology and methods used. The next chapter introduces the methods used in this thesis.

**Title of thesis**

Counsellors' strength-based practices in secondary schools:  
Managing multiple metanarratives

&lt;

**Research paradigm**

(Worldview)

Qualitative

&lt;

**Ontology**

(Nature and form of being)

Critical realism

“Referentiality and objectivity are possible, though always partial,  
limited and necessarily dependent upon further empirical and discursive revision.  
The evaluation as to the accuracy of our accounts becomes possible”  
(Nightingale & Cromby, 2002, p. 710).

&lt;

**Epistemology**

(Nature of knowledge)

Social constructionism

Reality is socially constructed.

Multiple realities can be constructed by individuals even in the same context  
(Burr, 1995, 2003).

&lt;

**Axiology**

Researcher's values in relation to the research process

&lt;

**Methodology**

(How do we know the world, or gain knowledge of it?)

Narrative methodology and metanarratives

Stories do not just describe what we see they construct what we see.

&lt;

**Methods**

(A series of steps, or collection of methods, taken to acquire knowledge)

Narrative interviews

Semi-structured interviews guided by an interview schedule of open-ended indicative questions

&lt;

**Narrative interpretation and analysis**

Analysis of data is a process transforming data with the goal of gathering  
useful information, suggesting conclusions, and supporting decision-making.

Categorical-content, context and metanarratives

(Lieblich et al., 1998; Zilber et al., 2008).

&lt;

**Research topic**

How do the multiple metanarratives, which are available to school counsellors,  
construct their strength-based counselling practice?

&lt;

**Research questions**

- What influence do my assumptions, biases and metanarratives as researcher have on the research process?
  - Which metanarratives are drawn on to construct school counsellor's practice stories?
- How do the metanarratives of the school context influence a school counsellor's practice?
  - What are school counsellor's constructions of adolescent wellbeing?
- How do school counsellors describe their strength-based practice as co-creating adolescent wellbeing?
- How do the metanarratives of the broader community (within which an adolescent is embedded) influence a school counsellor's practice?
- What are school counsellors' experiences of the adolescent's family during the counselling process?

## Chapter 3: Introduction to method

[Research methods are] the practical means, the tools, for collecting and analysing data.

—Giddings and Grant (2002, p. 12)

The previous chapter explained the philosophical positioning of this thesis including its adherence to a critical realist ontology, a social constructionist epistemology and a narrative methodology. In this chapter, I introduce the narrative research method utilised in this study. I outline the aims of the study, describe the participants and recruitment procedure, explain the use of narrative interview, and reflect briefly on the construction of a method that incorporates narrative analysis for form, content and context (discussed further in chapters 7 and 8). Finally, I discuss the limitations, rigour and ethical considerations of narrative research.

### 3.1 Aims of the study

The aims of this study were to:

- Examine the multiple metanarratives (embedded narratives/discourses) available to counsellors in the Auckland, New Zealand, secondary school context
- Make sense of how these metanarratives (embedded narratives/discourses), construct strength-based counselling practices
- Examine the potential consequences of such a construction on co-creating adolescent wellbeing
- Explore the broader community's (within which an adolescent is embedded) influence on a school counsellor's practice.

### 3.2 Narrative research method

There are few prescriptive guides for conducting narrative research. According to Crossley (2000), this is a consequence of the nature of narrative research, which can be compared to conducting a critical reading of a poem. Likewise, Lieblich et al. (1998) contend that narrative analysis can be challenging and the authors state that the narrative approach advocates “pluralism, relativism, and subjectivity” (p. 2). However, researchers are responsible for providing a sound and systematic rationale for their choice of methods, as I



do in this chapter, and a clear account of the processes of interpretation that have produced the results, as I will do in chapters 7 and 8.

Carter (1993) suggests that narratives capture the unpredictability of experiences more than numerical data ever could. Narratives are “a mode of knowledge emerging from action” (p. 6). The author states that the actions we take have multiple influences. Narratives, which have multiple layers of meaning (referred to as discourses, dominant narratives and metanarratives in this thesis – see section 3.3 below), are therefore a good way in which to express knowledge that results from actions. Yet, how do we access and interpret these layers of meaning?

Several authors suggest that reading and re-reading transcripts will assist the researcher in recognising narrative themes within the stories (Lieblich et al., 1998; Riessman, 1993). This process of reading the transcripts is interpretive, and is always “personal, partial, and dynamic” (Lieblich et al., 1998, p. 10). According to Lieblich et al., researchers should be able to reach interpretive conclusions and alter them, when necessary, from further readings. This reassurance was of little comfort to me, however, as I have a pragmatic nature and I needed more structure and direction. This direction was provided by several authors who have extensive experience in the process of narrative interpretation (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Crossley, 2000; Crotty, 1998; Lieblich et al., 1998; Polkinghorne, 1988; Riessman, 1993; Zilber et al., 2008). However, Lieblich et al. (1998), Crotty (1998), and Crossley (2003) caution that with narrative research there is neither an absolute “truth” in humanity, nor one correct interpretation of a text.

To collect participants’ narratives, I conducted semi-structured narrative interviews using an interview schedule of direct questions – to collect demographic information – followed by open-ended indicative questions (see section 3.6 and appendix B). I then started interpreting the interview transcripts. To assist me with this process exploratory research questions were used as a guide to explore the limits and boundaries of strength-based counselling. These questions were not regarded as fixed and shifted as the interpretation process evolved (see chapters 7 and 8). Lieblich et al. (1998) explain that in narrative studies there are usually “no *a priori* hypotheses” (p. 10). They believe that the directions of the inquiry usually develop from reading the transcripts, and hypotheses may then be produced from them. This aligns with Foucault’s (1970) notion of rupturing the existing foundation of discourse and building a new foundation of alternative discourses.

The direction of this inquiry did develop during the interpretation process as the rupturing of my method of narrative analysis occurred and evolved.

In terms of the interpretation of transcripts, I started out using certain themes that I had recognised in the literature as a guide during this process. Some of these themes included positive emotion, wellbeing and strength. Again, having preconceived ideas about what was to be explored in participants narratives could be viewed as pre-emptive, since it is important in narrative research to allow each individual to reveal his or her own narrative (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). However, the themes and exploratory questions I chose were merely used to focus the research process, which embraced participants' narratives as they choose to tell them, including any other themes that could be recognised from their narratives (see appendices C and D). Participants' narratives thus guided the method of narrative analysis (see chapters 7 and 8). Participants' active shaping of the narrative in this thesis aligns with the social constructionist nature of this study.

Furthermore, due to the social constructionist nature of narrative research in this study, the experiences and diversities of not only the participants but also myself as researcher were considered, as I formed part of the research process (Flick, 2009) (see chapter 6). It follows, therefore, that one needs to reflect on the nature of the relationship between researcher and participant (Flick, 2009; Gergen & Gergen, 1991; Parker, 1994; Steier, 1991; Zilber et al., 2008) since the specific realities that arise from this are socially constructed between them (Crotty, 1998; Guba, 1990; Highlen & Finley, 1996; Punch, 1998; Zilber et al., 2008).

According to Guba (1990), these realities are viewed as intangible mental constructs that are constantly changing and are dependent on the individuals that create them. The form and content of the socially constructed reality, situated within a certain context, is interpreted by the researcher (J. Bruner, 1991; Crossley, 2003; Crotty, 1998; Riley & Hawe, 2005). The interpretation of the form and content of the narrative for this thesis is discussed in detail in chapter 7 and the interpretation of metanarratives and context is discussed in chapter 8.

By exploring the narratives of secondary school counsellors, I intended to co-construct a narrative within this thesis that reflected the potential influences of strength-based counselling on adolescent wellbeing (see section 8.3.2). As the research process

progressed I also became aware of, and interested in, the role of metanarratives and context in informing school counsellors' professional practice with adolescents in schools. The term *metanarrative* is defined in different ways in the literature. In the next section I examine metanarratives, context and the subjugated narrative. I have included this section in this chapter since these concepts form part of the interpretation process.

### **3.3 Metanarratives, narrative context and subjugated narratives**

In this thesis I use the terms *discourses*, *embedded narratives*, *dominant narratives* and *metanarratives* interchangeably. In this section I explain my interpretation and use of the term *metanarrative* and draw from the writings of several authors (Foucault & Gordon, 1980; Gergen & Gergen, 1991; Lieblich et al., 1998; Lyotard, 1986; Winslade & Monk, 1999; Zilber et al., 2008). I also refer to *subjugated knowledges*, *disqualified knowledges*, the *alternative story* and the *petits recits* (little stories or small narratives) that may be recognised alongside and within a metanarrative (Foucault & Gordon, 1980; Lyotard, 1986; Winslade & Monk, 1999).

A metanarrative, according to postmodernists, is an intangible construct that professes to explain all knowledge or experience (Lyotard, 1986). Stephens and McCallum (1998) view the metanarrative as “a global or totalizing cultural narrative schema which orders and explains knowledge and experience” (p. 6). The word “metanarrative” has two component parts: “meta”, meaning “layer”, “beyond” or “about”, and a “narrative”, meaning “story”. Given these meanings, a metanarrative may be seen as a story with layers that can be interpreted, the pervasive story beyond the story that is told, or a story about a story that creates the overriding schemas into which other “little stories” are corralled. I like to think of a metanarrative as the story “underneath” the story that may be recognised in the narrator's words, situated within a specific context, often without his or her awareness.

As discussed in chapter 2, social constructionists believe that we construct a sense of self in interaction with others within a certain interpersonal context (Gergen & Gergen, 1991). Metanarratives can colour our personal stories since a metanarrative establishes the context in which we tell our story. As a researcher, it is important to listen to the story but also to be aware of what may have been left unsaid.

Winslade and Monk (1999) agree with Gergen and Gergen (1991) and explain that the stories we live by are not produced in a vacuum; rather they are the result of many

conversations, by countless people, in a social context. Winslade and Monk (1999) reflect that the experiences we call our own are often shaped by the stories that “float around in the cultural soup in which we swim” (p. 23). They further suggest that discourses (what I refer to as metanarratives in this thesis) are ingrained within these stories. Similarly, Lieblich et al. (1998) suggest that stories “construct and transmit individual and cultural meanings” (p. 9). The authors explain that we are “meaning-generating beings” and that we create ourselves and our “self-narratives” from the fabric available to us in our “common culture”, and that this creation goes beyond our solitary experiences (pp. 9–10). Polkinghorne (1988) concurs and states:

The invitation to tell one’s story directs people to tell their own personal story. Yet one’s culture affects this narrative construction by providing narrators with collectively shared meaning systems – narratives about human nature, human behaviour, and history – that serve as templates or scripts for individual stories. (p. 153)

It is in examining and analysing these “self-narratives” that researchers can gain a sense of not only the “individual identity and its systems of meaning but also the teller’s culture and social world” (Lieblich et al., 1998, p. 9). Narratives, then, cannot be separated from the cultural context in which they are told.

According to Winslade and Monk (1999), the general use of the term *discourse* describes a conversational exchange between people (p. 22). However, in an alternative usage of the term, discourses are understood as the clusters of “taken-for-granted assumptions” that inform many conversations in a social context (p. 22). The authors stress that discourses “are social phenomena that live in the talk that we hear and repeat” (pp. 23–24). They define a discourse as

A set of ideas that can be embodied as structuring statements that underlie and give meaning to social practices, personal experience, and organizations or institutions. They often include the taken-for-granted assumptions that allow us to know how to go on in social situations of all kinds. (pp. 122–123)

Zilber et al. (2008) refer to metanarratives rather than discourses, however they define the term similarly. The authors see metanarratives as “the collective web of meanings underlying the story” sourced from “the available cultural forms that can be used by the narrator” (p. 1063). They explain that typically the narrator is not aware of the

metanarratives within his or her own story as they appear implicitly within it. They add that metanarratives “construct the narrative” and create the storyline “without the narrator’s explicit acknowledgement” (p. 1054). To access and interpret metanarratives is a “bottom-up” process (p. 1054):

[Metanarratives] are discovered (and reconstructed) by reading and comparing many stories and abstracting general cultural patterns (plot lines, figures’ roles, moral lessons, typical scenes, etc.) or brought in by the researcher while implementing insights from the research literature (p. 1054)

Zilber et al. (2008) suggest that to do this certain questions can be asked of the text such as “What are the meaning systems that give sense to this story? What do we know, or believe, that make this story sound plausible to us?” (p. 1054). However, there are some that question the functionality of the metanarrative, which I discuss next.

### **3.3.1 Subjugated narratives/*petits recits*/alternative stories**

Zilber et al. (2008) propose that a metanarrative reflects cultural themes and beliefs that give a local story its coherence and legitimacy. Lyotard (1986) however sees metanarratives as positioned on one end of the knowledge continuum and *petits recits* or little stories on the other. Metanarratives uphold the existing power structures of the dominant culture (the dominant narrative) (Foucault & Gordon, 1980). However, humans are diverse beings and thus an overarching doctrine that attempts to constrain us could understandably be met with resistance.

Lyotard explains that there is a tension and a resistance to metanarratives that come through in the little stories. Metanarratives thus do not necessarily provide coherence and legitimacy to the “local” stories, as Zilber et al. (2008) suggest, but rather these *petits recits* may challenge the dominant story, narrative or discourse through acts of resistance (Foucault & Gordon, 1980; Lyotard, 1986).

A dominant culture wields power over and subjugates lesser cultures which are seen to be inferior. A dominant culture enforces its rules, regulations and processes on the lesser culture and regards itself to be superior. This means that these lesser cultures are often sidelined and are given only token amounts of time, attention and respect (Foucault & Gordon, 1980).

Winslade and Monk's (1999) definition of the dominant story, narrative or discourse (terms used in narrative counselling – see chapter 4) aligns with the definition of the metanarrative in this thesis. The authors see the dominant story as the “‘normal’ way of understanding a situation or the set of assumptions about an issue that has become so ingrained or widely accepted within a culture that it appears to represent ‘reality’” (p. 123). They explain that in narrative counselling the alternative story, narrative or discourse stands counter to the dominant story or metanarrative:

Despite the fact that dominant discourses wield an enormous influence on our self-evaluations, there exists contradictory or alternative discourses with which we sometimes align ourselves. Many people do not live by or adhere to dominant cultural specifications and develop pride in choosing to live by alternative cultural patterns. (p. 25)

Winslade and Monk define the alternative story as a narrative that grows through the counselling process, one that stands counter to the dominant story in which the presenting problem is situated.

Winslade and Monk (1999) base their philosophy of narrative counselling on their reading of Foucault. Foucault also speaks of knowledge that stands counter to the metanarrative or dominant story (Foucault & Gordon, 1980). Foucault described the idea and theories put forth by the so-called lesser cultures not as “alternative stories” but as “subjugated knowledges”:

a whole set of knowledges that have been disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated: naïve knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity ... It is through the reappearance of this knowledge, of these local popular knowledges, these disqualified knowledges, that criticism performs its work. (Foucault & Gordon, pp. 81–82)

What Foucault is saying here is that so-called subjugated knowledges stand counter to the dominant knowledge base (metanarrative) and have the potential to challenge that which is accepted at face value within the dominant culture.

Metanarratives can be a useful tool for researchers as they enable the possibility of critically deconstructing comment. However, at the same time it is important to embody a

respect for the importance of *petits recits*, the little stories (small narratives) that characterise people's lives (Lyotard, 1986).

To conclude this section, it is important to acknowledge the metanarratives pertaining to education, adolescents, schools and counsellors. These metanarratives undoubtedly form part of and shape the school counsellors' narratives. At the same time, I wanted to examine the subjugated knowledges and alternative stories to these metanarratives and/or dominant stories. I believe that it was in these "acts of resistance" against the dominant stories that insights into school counsellors' practice can be gleaned. Both metanarrative and subjugated narratives were recognised and interpreted from school counsellors' narratives in this thesis and form part of both the method of interpretation and the results chapters (see chapters 6–12). In chapters 4 and 5 I discuss the possible implications of metanarratives for adolescents and for school counsellors working within a school context.

### **3.4 Participants**

The participants of this study were recruited from secondary schools in Auckland, New Zealand. In total eight secondary school counsellors who met the selection criteria were interviewed.

The selection of participants, as suggested by Grbich (1999), was purposeful and deliberate so as facilitate the research process. The selection criteria for the school counsellors were that they were the appointed counsellor in a secondary school and were registered members of the New Zealand Association of Counsellors – Te Roopu Kaiwhiriwhiri o Aotearoa (NZAC). NZAC membership was part of the selection criteria for this research to ensure that participants had received appropriate training and were not teachers who had been appointed to the counselling role. Finally, all counsellors recruited had received some type of training in, and used aspects of, strength-based counselling approaches as part of their counselling practice.

Participation was voluntary as it was my belief that those who chose to participate would be more amenable to sharing their stories. This was found to be so. Only a relatively small number of participants were required, as the methodological approach of this study does not require large numbers to establish validity. Lieblich et al. (1998) state that "the use of narrative methodology results in unique and rich data that cannot be obtained from

experiments, questionnaires, or observations” (p. 11). Furthermore, the authors explain that, “In spite of the fact that most narrative studies are conducted with smaller groups of individuals than the sample size employed in traditional research, the quantity of data gathered in stories is large” (p. 11). Sandelowski (2002) supports this contention and states that the integrity of collected materials may be evaluated in terms of the richness of the information obtained from participants, rather than the size of the sample group.

### **3.5 Recruitment procedure**

I utilised professional contacts and snowball sampling as recruitment methods. This entailed using communication networks to disseminate research information to individuals who could potentially assist in recruiting prospective participants who met the selection criteria (Grbich, 1999). I had several professional contacts with secondary school counsellors who use aspects of strength-based counselling approaches. These counsellors were invited via email to participate and asked to reply should they meet the selection criteria and be willing to participate. These potential participants were asked to forward the email to any other secondary school counsellors who they thought might be interested in participating.

I indicated that a maximum of 10 participants was required and they would be selected on a first come, first serve basis. Any additional participants after the cut-off point, and who replied after the given deadline, were given the option of being put on a list to be contacted in the event further participants were required.

Participants who registered their interest by replying in the affirmative were sent by email attachment an information pack with the Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form (see appendices E and F, respectively). A follow-up phone call to the school counsellors who replied in the affirmative was made after a period of one week to give the prospective participants an opportunity to ask any questions about the research. They were asked to sign and return the Consent Form to me.

Eight secondary school counsellors expressed an interest in participating in this research and all of them were selected. Once consent had been obtained, counsellors were each invited to participate in separate interviews. It was explained to all participants that as some level of privacy was needed and interviews would be audio-recorded, they should take place in a quiet and private space. Participants were encouraged to choose a place in



which they felt comfortable. A private place at Auckland University of Technology (AUT) at a time of the counsellor's choosing was offered. However, the counsellors were given the option of setting an alternative place (such as at their school) for the interview. Permitting participants to choose the venue and time meant they were given a degree of autonomy over the research process, which is an important consideration in narrative inquiry (Hague & Mullender, 2005). Only one of the eight participants chose to be interviewed at AUT; the remainder were interviewed after hours in the counselling suite at their school. Participants were informed that the interview would be audio-recorded and transcribed and would take approximately one and a half hours of their time.

### **3.6 Narrative interviews and interview transcripts**

This research used the interview method because “qualitative interviewing is a way of uncovering and exploring the meanings that underpin people's lives” (Arksey & Knight, 1999, p. 32). The focal point of the research is on strength-based counselling and in order to identify relevant material the interviews needed to be directive to a certain extent (Lieblich et al., 1998). Individual face-to-face, semi-structured interviews were therefore conducted with the participants. This form of interviewing is consistent with narrative methodology (R. Josselson, Lieblich, & McAdams, 2003). Furthermore, a semi-structured interview style offered flexibility in the research process and allowed me to enter, as far as possible, the “psychological and social world of the respondents” (J. Smith, 1995, p. 12).

Crossley (2000) takes an interesting position on narrative interviewing. She explains that from a realist perspective narrative interviews are seen as a tool that “elicits information about the respondent's beliefs, perception or accounts of a particular topic” (p. 87). However, the author explains that social constructionists take a more relativist approach to narrative interviews and sees the interview as “a place where specific social and interactive functions are being performed” (Crossley, 2000, p. 87). The author further suggests that aspects of both realism and relativism are apparent during the narrative interviewing process. The realist approach to narrative interviews aligns with critical realism, the ontology of this thesis, while the relativist approach to narrative interviews aligns with social constructionism, the epistemology of this thesis. Both a critical realist approach and a relativist approach were brought to bear during the interpretation of narrative interviews.

Initially, one interview was conducted with each participant and participants were asked if they were agreeable to additional interviews if they felt they had more to share. Three of the eight participants were interviewed twice and therefore 11 interviews were conducted in total. After the first interview, and then continually throughout the research process, I reflected deeply on each interview to refine and improve the interviewing technique. In addition, any biases and/or assumptions that arose from this interview process were acknowledged and I remained aware of these throughout the interview process (see chapter 6). This awareness was to ensure, as far as possible, that the interviews were conducted in an open and comprehensive manner. Due to the in-depth nature of the eight participants' narratives, a saturation of information was reached, meaning that further interviews would have added no additional relevant information.

Before initiating the interviews, an interview schedule of primarily open-ended indicative questions was prepared (see appendix B). According to Hollway and Jefferson (2004), open-ended questions in a narrative interview are used as prompts, and are dependent on the flow of conversation. The interview schedule was flexible and was intended to direct the interview process without limiting the participant's narrative – open-ended questions being used only as required. Crossley (2000) affirms that open-ended questions allow respondents to have greater autonomy over the direction of the interview and this assists the interviewer in building a rapport with them. Moreover, having some structure in the form of open-ended questions is important as although being able to narrate may be regarded as an everyday skill, it is mastered in varying degrees (Flick, 2009).

Initially, direct questions were asked to gather demographic information. Once this was done, each interview proceeded with the same open-ended question: "Can you tell me about a recent counselling experience in which you used a strength-based counselling approach with a student, from start to finish?" According to Flick (2009), this question, called the "generative narrative question", refers to the topic of study, and is used to stimulate the interviewee's main narrative.

The envisaged time for each interview was approximately one and a half hours, as noted above. According to Rice and Ezzy (1999), this length of time for a research interview is common to many studies. The audio-recordings of the interviews provided raw material for the interpretation. In addition, as Wengraf (2001) recommends, I made detailed field notes after each interview of my reflections, and of stories told by participants before

and after the recording, to assist with interpretation. Interviews varied in length from between 45 minutes to 2 hours, with most interviews being over 1.5 hours long. In those interviews that reached 1.5 hours, I stopped the interview to ask if the participant wished to continue and in all instances participants replied in the affirmative.

After each interview, the audiotapes were transcribed by a transcriber (see appendix G for confidentiality agreement) who played, replayed stopped, and started the recording until an adequate copy of the interview material was reproduced on paper (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Potter and Wetherell state that the question of what constitutes an “adequate copy” is a contentious one. Crossley (2000) explains that for many types of research questions fine details such as “pause-lengths” and “hesitations” are not important and may actually interfere with the readability of the transcript (p. 73). Because in this research I was interested in the content and metanarratives (embedded narrative/discourses) of the narratives, these finer details were not included in the interpretation of transcripts. The transcriptions of participants’ narratives varied in length between 19 and 39 pages and between 6900 and 21,600 words. On average, the transcripts were 31 pages (single-spaced) and 13,100 words in length.

Lieblich et al. (1998) see the story elicited in an interview setting as “a hypothetical construct” that they suggest cannot be “fully accessed” during research (p. 8). The reasons they give for this are twofold. Firstly, the story evolves and is altered in time:

When a particular story is recorded and transcribed, we get a “text” that is like a single, frozen, still photograph of the dynamically changing identity. We read the story as a text, and interpret it as a static product, as if it reflects the “inner”, existing identity, which is, in fact, constantly in flux. (p. 8)

Secondly, the authors suggest that each story is embedded in a certain context within which it is told and is influenced by the purpose of the interview, the “audience”, and the co-construction of the relationship between the researcher and participants (Lieblich et al., 1998, p. 8).

However, Crossley (2000) asserts that there is a “middle position” between a realist and a relativist approach (p. 87). She suggests that the participant’s story “does have some significance and ‘reality’ for them beyond the boundaries of the specific interview context” and certain “things” can be known (p. 87). She explains:

This is not to suggest that people are not also performing particular social and interactional tasks in the interview situation. But this is not all we are interested in. We can also work on the assumption that what people are telling us does bear some relationship to the reality they are experiencing in their psychological and social worlds. (p. 87)

This position that participants' stories are "real" for them beyond being solely constructions of the interview process aligns with the critical realist ontology of this thesis (see chapter 2). This research embraces both critical realism and social constructionism. The participants' stories are seen as co-constructions of the interview process but may nonetheless be regarded as "real accounts" reflective of the reality that counsellors chose to disclose.

### **3.7 Transcription**

I decided on the initial process that I would use for interpreting the transcripts before I began the interviewing process. After I had conducted and audio-recorded all the interviews, I submitted these recordings to a professional transcriber for transcription to make them conducive to interpretation. Once I received the transcripts back, and as suggested by Crossley (2000), I read each transcript numerous times to become familiar with the content and also to examine any metanarratives (discursive forms) that were apparent to me in the transcripts. Once I had done this, I omitted all repetitions and verbal utterances from the transcripts, including all encouragers given by me and text that was not in some way related to the counselling experience. In addition to this, I numbered each line of the transcripts for ease of reference during the process of interpretation. According to the literature, it is during the reading and re-reading of transcripts that different categories for discursive form and content can be recognised (Crossley, 2000; Lieblich et al., 1998).

### **3.8 Introducing the construction of a method of narrative analysis**

In alignment with social constructionism, I positioned myself as a co-constructionist within the research process. As such, the interpretation of the transcripts evolved through my continued engagement with them. This engagement with participants' narratives became in and of itself part of the narrative of my "becoming a researcher" (see chapter 6). In chapters 7 and 8 I outline in detail how I constructed a method of narrative analysis for interpreting

transcripts through my active engagement with the transcripts. This process was part of the co-construction of the narrative of this thesis which was not linear but resulted from repeated reading and reviewing of participants' narratives during the ongoing research process. The interpretation process is presented in two parts. Chapter 7 presents stage one of the process and discusses the evolution of the interpretation process in three narrative storyboards for form and content. This chapter draws largely from Lieblich et al.'s (1998) four modes of reading a narrative for form and content. Chapter 8, meanwhile, presents stage two of the process and discusses the evolution of narrative storyboards four, five and six, introducing context and metanarrative to the interpretation process. This chapter introduces Zilber et al.'s (2008) three-sphere model for analysing external context.

### **3.9 Limitations of narrative research**

As with all types of research, the use of a narrative methodology has certain limitations and some critics are inclined to question the worth of individual narratives as a source of research data (Frank, 2000; Koch, 1998). In narrative research the researcher's interpretation of a participant's narrative is subjective and brings with it numerous challenges (Koch, 1998). The narrative may contain multiple layers of meaning. The researcher therefore cannot guarantee that his or her interpretation is the only way of viewing the narrative, and in some instances the researcher may misinterpret the narrator's account. Furthermore, although narratives do not produce generalisable findings in the statistical sense they can be generative, and in this regard the researcher, as a social constructionist, should endeavour to ensure that his or her constructions are meaningful.

Another consideration is that narrators are telling their story retrospectively, and as such they are relying on memory to give an account of their experiences. The narrative account may be filled with contradictions and embellishments on the part of the narrator. The narrator may also exclude relevant aspects of their narrative and may present their experiences in a biased manner; accordingly, all stories can thus be considered fiction (Denzin, 1989; Poirier & Ayres, 1997). Consequently, narrative research has been criticised for not representing the "truth" of participants' experiences (Frank, 2000). This highlights the fact that providing an accurate representation of another's experiences is extremely challenging (Denzin, 1989).

However, in contrast with the positivist perspective of objective truth, narrative research approaches the notion of truth differently and asserts that “truth” is socially constructed: “What counts in narrative inquiry is the meaning that actions and intentions have for the protagonists” (Conle, 2000, p. 52). Atkinson (2002) agrees and claims that the meaning of the narrative is more important than the precise details of the account:

historical truth is not the main issue in narrative; telling a story implies a certain maybe unique, point of view. It is more important that the life story be deemed “trustworthy” than that it be “true”. We are seeking the subjective reality, after all.  
(p. 134)

An additional criticism of narrative research is that it is more of an art form than research, since it is difficult to teach, is not logical and orderly, and can be seen to be based on the researcher’s intuition and talent at interpreting narrative text (Lieblich et al., 1998). However, these apparent flaws may also be considered strengths, depending on the perspective from which they are viewed and how one perceives the notion of rigour in narrative research, which is discussed next.

### **3.10 Rigour in narrative research**

The scientific world considers research rigour to underscore the validity of an inquiry, and it is seen to be an essential element in conducting sound research. Rigour is achieved through discipline and the meticulous adherence to detail and accuracy (Burns & Grove, 2005). It has been argued by critics of qualitative methodology that this type of research lacks the rigour of quantitative research and is not truly scientific.

Koch (1998) argues that in narrative research there is no specific method for ensuring rigour. Angen (2000) believes that rigour in qualitative research refers to the importance of providing “faithful accounts of the real world” (p. 289). Since this research is supported by a social constructionist epistemology, and reality is regarded as socially constructed, there is, however, no “real world”. As Elliott (2005) observes, “There is now awareness that the process of research itself does not simply produce descriptions of reality but should also be understood in some senses to construct reality” (p. 154). Thus, for the purposes of this study, reality is constructed by the participants and then retold to me through their stories, as they perceive it to be. Furthermore, the participants’ perceived

reality was further constructed through their interaction with me and was then in turn subject to further interpretation by me through the lens of what I perceived to be “real”.

Angen (2000) recommends that instead of using the term *validity* the term *validation* be used. He suggests validation of an inquiry is possible through a continuous “process of confirmation” (p. 393), which depends on a complete disclosure of the processes used in research, adherence to ethical guidelines, and the use of reflexivity. To this end, I have made such a complete disclosure in the writing up of this research. Denzin and Lincoln (2000) support the practice of reflexivity in qualitative research to ensure rigour.

Another important consideration in conducting research is the question of representativeness (*credibility*) and generality (*transferability*) (Crossley, 2000). According to Crossley, in quantitative approaches it is frequently assumed that the sample on which data analysis is based is adequately representative of a particular population, so that any conclusions drawn can be generalised to the whole population. The material analysed exists, and is interpreted, in isolation from the researcher, and the aim is to achieve objectivity and neutrality. Narrative research, meanwhile, has a different model of representativeness (Crossley, 2000). In narrative research, the researcher influences the material used in interpretation. He or she frames the questions, chooses the participants, and interacts with them to produce subjective data that is used for interpretation. Crossley states that such researchers cannot therefore withdraw themselves from the interpretation or treat the findings of the research as an objective record of “reality” (p. 106).

Narrative research thus cannot be viewed as objective, value-free, and neutral (Crossley, 2000). Instead, the rationale of narrative research requires an in-depth interpretation of meaning, within the context it occurs, to produce “detailed, information-rich data” to ensure that the meaning gleaned is clearly representative of the person’s individual narrative (Yardley, 1997, p. 36). Again, it should be stressed that this meaning, while constructed, is “real” for the person telling the narrative.

Polkinghorne (1988) states that in narrative research, the concept of validity or validation means being “well-grounded and supportable” (p. 175). However, if there is no objective truth existing in isolation from the interpretive practices of the researcher, how can interpretation claim to be well rounded and supported? Researchers, to justify their interpretation of the interview transcripts, have to build up arguments through a thorough

and conscientious exploration of the transcripts and then present evidence from the transcripts (Angen, 2000; Bleakley, 2005). Crossley (2000) states that these arguments do not produce “certainty, rather they produce likelihood” (p. 104). Interpretations may then be justified on the basis that they are “comprehensive and coherent, meaningful to both participants and peers, consistent with the data and theoretically sophisticated” (Crossley, 2000, p. 104).

To ensure the rigour of this inquiry, the methods and procedures used are clearly outlined. In addition, I used reflexivity, which is considered to promote rigour and integrity in qualitative research (Bleakley, 2005; Game & Metcalfe, 1996; Krefting, 1990; Rice & Ezzy, 1999; Van Amburg, 1997). In being reflexive, I considered my existing beliefs, assumptions, experiences and knowledge. I explored possible connections between them and my analytic findings, to see how they may have affected the research process. At all times during my interpretation, I built up my argument by continuously referring to each individual transcript to support my interpretation. Transcripts were read and re-read and interpretations altered as new meanings emerged. Furthermore, the original interview transcripts were emailed to individual participants for their comments. Any changes required by participants to their transcripts were made. I also emailed select participants to gain further clarification on certain aspects of their transcripts.

The research process was monitored and guided by experienced research supervisors. Supervision meetings provided support to work through any challenges that arose and stimulated much thought and self-reflection. These considerations were important in the validation of this narrative inquiry.

However, it must be reiterated that while every effort was taken to ensure a rigorous interpretation of participants’ narratives, the interpretation is still my own and was impacted on by my understanding of both the participants’ narratives and the metanarratives that these narratives reflected. Furthermore, the quality of my interpretation of participants’ narratives was also dependent on the participants’ ability to reflect on and share their narratives with me.

### **3.11 Ethical considerations**

Ethics approval was obtained from the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC) on 4 February 2011. The AUTEC Reference number is 10/295.



Ethical considerations are always of the utmost importance in research; however, when in-depth interviews are used to gather information ethical and procedural concerns are further highlighted (Chase, 1996). This is especially the case when a small number of participants are revealing a great deal of personal information about themselves. Bakan (1996) agrees that “narrative research, based on the real lives of people made public, converts what is private into public; can violate privacy; and cause mental, legal, social, and financial hurt and harm” (p. 3). Chase (1996) recognises greater participant vulnerability in narrative research but asserts steps can be taken to minimise the possible detrimental impact of this research.

The key ethical principles used by AUTECH to ensure a high standard of ethical research aligned with Tolich and Davidson’s (1999) five principles of ethical research: informed consent, voluntary participation and confidentiality, do no harm, and avoid deceit. In addition, AUTECH (2016) incorporates the principles of “social and cultural sensitivity, including commitment to the principles of the Treaty of Waitangi – Te Tiriti O Waitangi, research adequacy, and avoidance of conflict of interest, respect for vulnerability of some participants, and respect for property”.

Since this research explores the strength-based counselling practices of secondary school counsellors, and requires them to be registered with the NZAC, I deemed it pertinent to include the NZAC’s ethical considerations for counsellors as part of this research inquiry. The NZAC (2016b) first puts forward a set of core values for counselling, the practices of which involve the expression of these core values:

- Respect for human dignity
- Partnership
- Autonomy
- Responsible caring
- Personal integrity
- Social justice.

Subsequently, the NZAC (New Zealand Association of Counsellors, 2016b) outlines the following ethical principles for counselling, which are expressions of the core values in action and form the foundation for counsellors’ ethical practice. Counsellors shall:

- Act with care and respect for individual and cultural differences and the diversity of human experience.

- Avoid doing harm in all their professional work.
- Actively support the principles embodied in the Treaty of Waitangi.
- Respect the confidences with which they are entrusted.
- Promote the safety and wellbeing of individuals, families, communities, whānau, hapū and iwi.
- Seek to increase the range of choices and opportunities for clients.
- Be honest and trustworthy in all their professional relationships.
- Practice within the scope of their competence.
- Treat colleagues and other professionals with respect. (p. 3)

As far as possible and wherever it was relevant, I upheld these ethical considerations during the research process.

The Treaty of Waitangi (the Treaty), and the principles of partnership, participation and protection that uphold it, were honoured throughout this research. This research is founded on the epistemology of social constructionism and takes a narrative approach, both of which align well with Treaty objectives. In particular, the principles of partnership and participation form part of the theoretical and methodological basis on which a narrative approach is founded. Furthermore, while narrative research focuses on openness, it also engenders the provision of participant protection.

In terms of protection, participation was voluntary and all participants who registered their interest in participating in this research were sent an information pack including the Participant Information Sheet, giving details of the research, as well as the Consent Form. All forms in the information pack were written in simple, clear and concise language so that participants could easily understand what was written (see appendices E and F). In this way, participants were fully informed about the research process and their consent to participate was obtained.

Pertaining to the issue of consent, Josselson (2007) proposes there be two stages to the consent procedure. The first stage involves asking participants to sign a contract of informed consent. This effectively obtains consent from participants whereby they agree to be interviewed, and have their interviews audio-taped and transcribed before the information collection phase of the research process begins. The second stage involves informing participants of how their stories will be dealt with in the future. Thus, as a further measure of protection, participants were sent copies of their original transcripts, to make

certain they were satisfied with the level of anonymity and as a way of ensuring that transcripts were an accurate reflection of what participants said. Participants were asked if they would like to exclude or change any information in their transcripts to increase accuracy and anonymity and some of the participants availed themselves of this opportunity. This approach is comparable to the one used by Chase (1996) in her narrative research with school leaders, where she faced the problems of possible identification due to the detailed nature of the stories provided. In effect, this approach informs participants of what aspects of their stories may potentially be included in the final thesis. This gave them an opportunity to consent to what they wished to be included and made the research process more transparent. It also limited any unintentional deception on my part. In this thesis, only select excerpts from participants' narratives were included in the interpretation process.

During the actual research process, numerous safeguards and practical steps were introduced to protect participants. Before commencing the interviews, participants were informed that they need discuss only those areas they felt comfortable discussing and that they could decline to answer a question without having to give a reason. Furthermore, participants were told that they could stop talking about a particular issue and have it deleted from the audio recording at any point during the interview (Elliott, 2005). During the narrative collection phase of the research, participants could withdraw from the study at any time without having to give a reason. These issues are particularly relevant to the current research, as due to its in-depth nature and the requirement for school counsellors to reflect on their practice, issues of a sensitive nature could potentially have been recognised, and insecurities and/or doubts could have arisen concerning a school counsellor's counselling practice. This, however, did not occur in this study.

As already mentioned, one of the selection criteria for participation in this research was that the school counsellors must be registered members of the NZAC. The NZAC guidelines (New Zealand Association of Counsellors, 2016b) indicate that school counsellors should receive frequent supervision (at least fortnightly). This enables school counsellors to access the necessary support they require within a relatively short time span. Given this supervision requirement (which is paid for by the counsellor's school), there was already a strong collegial network in place that provided for school counsellor support should a participant in this research have needed to be debriefed after the interview.

If the school counsellors wanted alternative support, they were eligible for three free counselling sessions through AUT Counselling Services (memorandum attached – see appendix H). This was confirmed by the then AUT Head of Counselling, Kevin Baker (RGON, Dip Psychotherapy, PG Cert). Counselling services can be utilized on all AUT campuses.

The Participant Information Sheet (see appendix E) informed participants of potential risks and explained that counselling will be provided should it be required. Participants were assured that all discussions would be kept confidential and every effort was made to ensure their anonymity. Pseudonyms were used for participants and identifying personal information was altered. The eight participants were named Abigail, Angus, Gabrielle, Hamish, Jessica, Thomas, Pam and Valerie.

Participants were selected from across Auckland, New Zealand, and it is unlikely that participants will be identifiable. However, as the research takes a detailed look at certain participant experiences, a reader to whom the participant is known may be able to identify them. In some instances “individuals may be happy to be identified within the research and it is more honest to discuss this possibility with them than to promise levels of anonymity that are impossible to ensure in practice” (Elliott, 2005, p. 143). Mishler (1986) concurs, observing that in narrative research “confidentiality and anonymity may not always be a good thing if individuals feel that they have been deprived of the chance to have their voices heard within the context of a piece of research” (p.243). Participants were informed of this potentiality and were given the choice to be named, however all participants chose to remain anonymous.

A further factor, which I felt buffered participants from any potential harm, was my background and motivation as a researcher. I have worked extensively in education; I am a trained secondary school counsellor, teacher and life coach. As such, I drew from these experiences, along with my genuine passion and interest in the participants’ stories. In this way I was able to communicate empathy, build trust, create rapport and provide a safe environment for participants during the interview process. In addition, I actively sought the advice of my supervisors who have extensive experience of supervision and the research process.

The Treaty principle of partnership between the participants and researcher has already been discussed, and this was implemented from the inception of this research by

ensuring that all research goals and practices were made transparent to participants. Furthermore, participants were encouraged throughout the research process to ask questions and to voice any concerns they had. Some participants had some minor concerns regarding anonymity and I addressed these concerns in a practical and reassuring manner.

This research gave school counsellors the opportunity to tell their stories, thus allowing them to participate in research that was about them, and whose outcomes could be of benefit to them. These participant stories may influence counselling processes in secondary schools and have an impact on future students, school counsellors and researchers in the field. Consequently, the partnerships created between participants and myself in this study were potentially of reciprocal advantage.

As discussed above, I initiated each narrative interview by asking the following open-ended question: “Can you tell me about a recent counselling experience in which you used a strength-based counselling approach with a student, from start to finish?” In terms of the Treaty principle of participation, participants directed the interview process in that they were free to choose how they wished to respond and which thoughts they wished to omit. This gave the participants authority over the direction of the interview and bestowed on them the rights of full participation in shaping the nature of research outcomes. Furthermore, as already indicated, participants were asked to check and approve the transcripts from their interviews to ensure accuracy. I respected and carried out any amendment requests to the transcripts made by the participants with the highest integrity. In this way, school counsellors were active participants for much of the research process.

To reiterate, every measure was taken to ensure that the Treaty principles of partnership, participation and protection were upheld. However, as a researcher one needs to find a balance between participant protection and allowing the research to reflect the participants’ intended stories so that the principles of partnership and participation are maintained.

In chapter 6 I explain how I located myself as co-constructionist within the research process and I discuss issues of reflexivity, which forms part of the method of this study. Chapter 6 itself forms part of the co-construction of my narrative as researcher within the research process. In the next chapter, I situate secondary school counsellors’ practice within a literary context.

## Chapter 4: Literary context to counselling in secondary schools

Many students commented that guidance counsellors were able to help them and provided practical and useful advice and guidance.

—Education Review Office (2013b, p. 4)

Developmentally, adolescence may be viewed as a challenging time of the lifespan (Hoffnung et al., 2016; Musa et al., 2016; Straus, 2017), and within the school context secondary school counsellors are tasked with the role of assisting adolescents in managing some of these challenges. In this and the next chapter, I review literature related to counselling in a secondary school and what this entails (chapter 4), and then I explore secondary school counsellors' strength-based practices more specifically (chapter 5). However, given the social constructionist nature of this research, reference to pertinent literature continues throughout the thesis.

In this chapter I define counselling and explore counselling in a New Zealand context. This exploration of the counselling context includes a focus on counsellor training in New Zealand and specifically within a school context. I discuss self-managing schools; the legal imperative to employ school counsellors; an association for school counsellors; the legislative and policy requirements of schools; funding for school guidance staff; and teacher versus non-teacher qualified school counsellors. I also look at the relevance and challenges of counselling in a school context. Next, I discuss the school counsellor's client – the adolescent – and consider how he or she is positioned within the school context. This section includes a discussion on adolescents and counselling at school and adolescents at risk. The chapter concludes with a section on metanarratives of school and counselling.

### 4.1. What is counselling?

According to the New Zealand Association of Counsellors – Te Roopu Kaiwhiriwhiri o Aotearoa (NZAC, 2017d), “counselling is the process of helping and supporting a person to resolve personal, social, or psychological challenges and difficulties”. The NZAC (2017d) explains that a counsellor assists clients to seek clarity, explore different views and focus on “feelings, experiences or behaviour that will facilitate positive change”. Counselling is not giving advice, judgemental, attempting to resolve a client's problems as the counsellor determines, getting emotionally involved with the client, or looking at a client's problems

from the counsellor's perspective, based on their own value systems (New Zealand Association of Counsellors, 2017c).

Secondary school counsellors offer support and guidance to students to promote their emotional and mental wellbeing. This support can come in the form of one-on-one counselling services for troubled adolescents and school-wide guidance initiatives to promote the wellbeing and development of all students within the school environment. School counsellors provide the kind of counselling that the NZAC recommends. In the school context, the role of the school counsellor is varied. Crowe (2006) explains:

Each school day, in most New Zealand secondary schools, guidance counsellors help and support adolescents who are experiencing a range of difficulties that impact upon their emotional and mental well-being. This work includes counselling, consultation, guidance leadership and management of guidance programmes, networking with and referral to outside agencies, and other support roles. In addition guidance counsellors, like teaching staff, are expected to contribute to co-curricular activities. (Crowe, 2006, p. 16)

The title of guidance counsellor has been replaced in certain schools by school counsellor or counsellor to more closely reflect the nature of and context within which counsellors practice (Crowe, 2014). These terms are used interchangeably within this thesis and reflect the same meaning.

#### **4.2 Counselling in a New Zealand context**

In New Zealand there is currently no statutory registering body for counsellors and any practitioner who has completed some form of counsellor training can claim to be a counsellor. The lack of a statutory registering body for counsellors is an exception among the so-called talk therapy professions. As required by law, both psychologists and psychotherapists must be registered with the New Zealand Psychologists Board or the Psychotherapists Board of Aotearoa New Zealand, respectively.

There are, however, counselling associations in New Zealand that regulate the competency of counsellors to ensure that they are adequately qualified and abide by the code of ethics of the association. The most recognised of these associations is the NZAC. The NZAC was established in 1974 and was then known as the New Zealand Counselling and Guidance Association. Initially there were 42 members comprised of secondary school

guidance counsellors and those who trained and employed them. The NZAC now includes over 2500 counsellors who work in a range of institutions including education, health, justice, social welfare, community services, Iwi social services, Pacific Island organisations, private practice, and a range of ethnicity-specific helping agencies (New Zealand Association of Counsellors, 2017b).

According to the NZAC (2017b), the work of these counsellors is “underpinned by a rigorous membership application process, a comprehensive code of ethics, a formal complaints procedure and a commitment to supervision and professional development”. However, it should be noted that the NZAC does not have authority over counsellors who choose not to be members of the Association (CCAANZ, 2009).

While the lack of a state-regulated professional registration body for counsellors in New Zealand is not the focus of this thesis, I would like to discuss it briefly. In March 2009, the CCAANZ, which includes the NZAC and the New Zealand Christian Counselling Association (NZCCA), recognised the need for an external authority to regulate counsellors. Such a regulatory authority “would be able to set requirements for the qualifications required for registration, and for ongoing practice requirements, professional supervision and professional development” (CCAANZ, 2009, p. 9). The CCAANZ (2009) made an application to the Minister of Health to designate counselling as a health profession under the Health Practitioners Competence Assurance Act (2003) (HPCA Act) and to establish a responsible authority (RA) to administer the registration of counsellors. It was felt that through registration of counsellors they would be recognised “as a distinct and unique professional group” (CCAANZ, 2009, p. 8). This RA would also extend to the regulation of counsellors who work in educational settings. Should the application be successful, the CCAANZ suggested that counsellors and Drug and Alcohol Practitioners of Aotearoa New Zealand (who were drafting their own application) be added to the profession of psychotherapy and that a merged authority be established. The CCAANZ argued that the professions of counselling and psychotherapy are very similar and if counsellors were to have a separate regulatory body issues around shared scopes of practice could emerge. They further proposed that the new blended authority’s name be changed from the New Zealand Association of Psychotherapists and that the new name to be canvassed (if a successful outcome were achieved) should include the term “counselling” (CCAANZ, 2009).



The NZAC stressed that, irrespective of the outcome of the application for registration, they would continue to support its members, organise conferences, publish journals and provide opportunities for professional development. Should state registration eventuate, NZAC membership fees would be reduced as the Ethics and Membership Committees would be disbanded and managed by the new regulatory authority (Bocchino, 2009, p. 11).

This move to register the counselling profession under the HPCA Act met with some opposition from NZAC members and an alternative proposal by which the NZAC (2016g) would “adopt a more formal and robust self-regulatory system” was presented. For a full argument against state-regulated professional registration, see Tudor’s (2013) article “Be Careful What You Wish For: Professional Recognition, the Statutory Regulation of Counselling, and the State Registration of Counsellors”. The most notable argument against state registration concerns the absence of any mention of the Treaty of Waitangi in the HPCA Act. Tudor (2013) explains:

Given the NZAC’s commitment to biculturalism, and the various explorations of the meaning of this commitment and, indeed, of te Tiriti/the Treaty itself for counselling, it would appear that the absence in the Act of any reference to te Tiriti/the Treaty would—or should—give the NZAC second thoughts about the regulation of counselling under this Act. (p. 58)

To ensure that its members were aware of the implications and benefits of both a state-regulated registration system and a self-regulatory system, the NZAC National Executive undertook extensive consultation with members. In November 2016, the decision was opened to a professional independent voting process and members were asked to vote on the preferred option. NZAC (2016f) members voted “to pursue an enhanced self-regulatory regime, rather than register under the Health Practitioners Competence Assurance Act”.

The President of the NZAC, Beverly Weber, said the decision to be self-regulatory is an important step for the counselling profession towards being “self-owning” (quoted in NZAC, 2016f). The existing regulatory system within the NZAC (2016f) is to be enhanced and further developed and will be independently audited. The regulatory system will continue to be synonymous with a high level of competence and expertise among counsellors registered with the NZAC. Furthermore, the NZAC (2016f) will continue to act “for members and their clients, while collaborating on standards for the profession with recognition of the Treaty of Waitangi”.

#### **4.2.1 Counsellor training in a New Zealand context**

Part of the purview of the NZAC's enhanced self-regulatory system referenced above will be to ensure that counsellor training within tertiary institutions meets the NZAC's rigorous competency standards. The NZAC intends to introduce new counselling standards in 2019 and these standards will require provisional membership applicants to hold a minimum of an undergraduate degree in counselling (three-year course) or a two-year Master's degree in counselling, and undergo a New Zealand Police vetting procedure (New Zealand Association of Counsellors, 2016c). This is more demanding than the current requirements of a New Zealand Qualifications Authority-recognised diploma at Level 6. However, these new requirements will not affect existing members. NZAC-approved tertiary course providers will be audited every three years to ensure these standards are maintained.

As of December 2016, the NZAC had accredited 18 institutions as counsellor training providers. These include Auckland University, Massey University, AUT University, New Zealand Institute of Professional Counsellors, Bethlehem Tertiary Institute, Nelson Marlborough Institute of Technology, Canterbury University, Ntec, Gestalt Institute of New Zealand, Otago Polytechnic, Institute of Psychosynthesis, Unitec, Manukau Institute of Technology, Vision College/Integrity College, Laidlaw College/Bible College, Waikato Institute of Technology, Weltec and Waikato University (New Zealand Association of Counsellors, 2016c).

The Education Review Office (ERO)'s national evaluation of counselling services in secondary schools showed that schools who provide excellent counselling had highly qualified competent counsellors (ERO, 2013b). Many counsellors had both counselling and teaching qualifications, receive continual professional development, use a code of ethics within their practice, and are members of the NZAC (Barclay et al., 2013; Crowe, 2014; Education Review Office, 2013b; Manthei, 1999; W. M. Payne & Lang, 2009).

#### **4.2.2 Counselling in a New Zealand school context**

Secondary schools in New Zealand have employed guidance counsellors since 1966, in response to social problems and an increase in "troubled youth" in the country (Hermansson, 1999). School counselling is now acknowledged as having an important place in education. However, the role of the counsellor in the New Zealand secondary school context is an isolated one, as Crowe (2006) explains:

Counsellors stand alone in their schools; there is no external educational authority that sets standards for or oversees the work they do. There are no avenues available to them within the education system to access guidance and support or to receive recognition for their work. Each secondary school decides on its own how it will manage the provision of guidance and counselling. (p. 16)

In this section, I explain the influence of the change to self-managing schools in the 1990s on school counsellors and the lack of a legal imperative to employ them. I discuss how school counsellors must seek support outside of the education system that takes the form of an association for counsellors (the NZAC). The legislative and policy requirements schools must uphold are delineated and the role of the school counsellor in assisting schools in fulfilling these is highlighted. The intricacies of the funding provided by the Ministry of Education for school guidance staff and the issues of teacher-qualified versus non-teacher-qualified school counsellors is also explored.

#### ***4.2.2.1 Self-managing schools and the legal imperative to employ counsellors***

Until the end of the 1980s the school counsellor's role had a well-established place in New Zealand (Crowe, 2006, 2014). Crowe explains that in the 1990s changes in education policy led to self-managing schools, which rendered obsolete the centralised role previously held by school counsellors. This meant fewer school counsellors were employed by schools. In 1996, school staffing formula changes also resulted in the removal of tagged funding for the counsellor position. This resulted in not only a reduction in counselling hours in schools but also the loss of a prescribed position for counsellors (Besley, 2002; Crowe, 2014). These changes nullified the legal requirement for schools to employ counsellors, although most schools still employ counsellors (Crowe, 2006, 2014). Crowe (2014) explains that the lack of legislative guidelines or expectations on schools to provide counsellors meant school counsellors had to negotiate their role and place in their respective schools. This negotiation by school counsellors included the funding for professional development as well as supervision.

In 2001 however, a guidance staffing component was reinstated for “eligible schools that met certain criteria and reached a minimum enrolment” (Crowe, 2014, p. 200). Once this minimum enrolment was reached the allocation for this guidance staffing component corresponded to two-and-a-third teaching positions irrespective of the roll size

beyond the minimum requirement (Crowe, 2014; Education Review Office, 2013b). However, while this allocation is available to schools they are still not required to employ guidance counsellors or other staff in a guidance capacity.

The ERO (2013b) has reported in detail on the changes to and efficacy of guidance and counselling in secondary schools in New Zealand since the inception of self-managing schools in the 1980s. Crowe (2014) discusses the implications of this:

With each school, responsible for counselling provision, and no requirements or standards to be adhered to, the effectiveness of the provision has become dependent upon a school's ethos of care, and its understanding of the role that counselling play in student wellbeing, learning, and achievement. (pp. 212–213)

Thus, the introduction of self-managing schools has made the management of counsellors in the school context challenging. There is, however, an association that does provide guidelines for school counsellors, which is discussed next.

#### ***4.2.2.2 An association for school counsellors***

The Ministry of Education provides no professional guidance as to what training school counsellors should undergo, although it does provide some funding for the training of counsellors. There is also no guidance on how school counsellors should practice professionally (Crowe, 2006). This guidance is left to the NZAC (2017b), the regulatory body for all counsellors in New Zealand who choose to become a member. The NZAC promotes professional counselling, ensures members are qualified, professional and accountable, and that their practices are based on the NZAC's (2017d) Code of Ethics.

The formation of an association to support and advocate exclusively for school counsellors has been advocated (Hooper, 2009). Such an association would establish a close relationship with a school counsellor representation group, and set up an email network to provide information, support and an avenue for feedback. The NZAC would continue to offer support to school counsellors alongside the new association. The NZAC was initially established for secondary school counsellors and would continue to recognise the importance of counsellors (Hooper, 2009). A steering committee to investigate the initiative would work closely with the NZAC and the New Zealand Post Primary Teachers' Association (PPTA) to explore various options with regard to, among other things, the nature of the relationship between the new school counsellors' association and the NZAC.

The potential establishment of an association exclusively for school guidance counsellors reflects the efforts of school counsellors to establish an identity and professional standing of their own. To this end the School Guidance Counsellors' Advisory Group was established to both collaborate with the NZAC and advocate for school counsellors. The group sought the input from school counsellors around the establishment of a separate school guidance counsellor association. The outcome of this process was that the School Guidance Counsellors Advisory Group remain as part of the NZAC, and advise the School Counselling portfolio holder on the National Executive of the NZAC (Barclay et al., 2013).

According to Crowe (2006), there are about 300 secondary school guidance counsellors registered with the NZAC. Secondary school guidance counsellors who are members of the NZAC are subject to its regulations and requirements (NZAC, 2016d).

#### *4.2.2.3 Schools' legislative and policy requirements*

While there is no legal imperative to employ school counsellors, schools still need to fulfil certain legislative and policy requirements in relation to students' wellbeing, safety and achievement. School counsellors may be ideally positioned to meet these requirements, which are:

- That schools in accordance with National Administration Guideline 1(c) and “on the basis of good quality assessment information, (must) identify students and groups of students (a) who are not achieving, (b) who are at-risk of not achieving, (c) who have special needs, and (must also identify) (d) aspects of the curriculum which require particular attention” (Education Review Office, 2013a; Ministry of Education, 2013a; New Zealand Post Primary Teachers Association and New Zealand Association of Counsellors, 2010).
- That schools through their Board of Trustees, and in accordance with the National Administration Guideline 5(a), provide students with a safe physical and emotional environment (Education Review Office, 2013a; Ministry of Education, 2013a; New Zealand Post Primary Teachers Association and New Zealand Association of Counsellors, 2010).
- That in accordance with National Education Goal 2 schools provide “equality of educational opportunity for all New Zealanders, by identifying and removing barriers to achievement” (Education Review Office, 2013a; Ministry of Education, 2013a; New

Zealand Post Primary Teachers Association and New Zealand Association of Counsellors, 2010).

- That in accordance with the Human Rights Act (1993) students are to be protected from victimisation, sexual harassment and discrimination (New Zealand Government, 1993).
- That schools uphold their responsibilities under the New Zealand Suicide Prevention Strategy 2006–2016 (Ministry of Health, 2006); see section 4.3.2 below).
- That school principals are to ensure that students receive good guidance and counselling (Education Act 1989, section 77) (New Zealand Government, 1989). However, no indication is given as to what good guidance and counselling entails and there is also no indication as to who should provide this service. Each school decides for itself how, and if, counselling will be provided in a formal capacity by a school guidance counsellor; and the responsibility for appointing and managing of school guidance counsellors falls to the Board of Trustees of each school.
- That schools in accordance with the revised New Zealand Curriculum 2010 are to nurture “young people who will be confident, connected, actively involved, lifelong learners” with values of “excellence; innovation, inquiry and curiosity; diversity; equity; community and participation; ecological sustainability; integrity; respect” and fulfil the key competencies of “thinking; using language, symbols and texts; managing self; relating to others; participating and contributing” (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 7).

The above qualities required by the New Zealand Curriculum for students can be facilitated by the work done by school counsellors (Hughes, 2009). With regard to school counsellors and the key competencies, Hughes, Burke, Graham, Crocket and Kotzé (2013) state:

For the first-time school guidance counsellors, may be able to demonstrate that our role is not a secondary adjunct to the main task of schools, but that the learning that happens in the counselling room makes a direct contribution to the core business of schools as described by The New Zealand Curriculum. (p. 6)

In 2012, the ERO conducted a national evaluation of counselling services in secondary schools. The ERO’s (2013b) report on the outcomes of this evaluation also highlighted the role that counselling in schools plays in developing the key competencies put forth by the New Zealand Curriculum 2010. The key competencies of managing self, relating to others,

and participating and contributing are especially impacted on by school guidance and counselling.

Making reference to the New Zealand Curriculum 2010, Crowe (2014) explains that the learning that transpires in the counselling suite happens “in a different context than learning in the classroom” (p. 203). Counselling exposes the student to further learning opportunities that he or she may not otherwise have experienced. Crowe refers to the relationship between the counsellor and student and its point of difference from the relationship between teacher and student:

The student in counselling has different rights, including the right to confidentiality (with certain exceptions), thus making the counselling room a safe place for students to explore and learn from the issues they bring, including high-risk personal issues (p. 203)

It is thus apparent that counsellors may make a contribution towards assisting schools in meeting legislative and policy requirements. Furthermore, many of the outcomes required from schools with respect to young people listed above can be facilitated by a strength-based approach to school counselling, which is underpinned by the field of positive psychology (discussed in chapter 5). However, Crowe (2006, 2014) argues that despite this, schools still tend to focus on standards of achievement, curriculum and administration while school guidance is given only token attention. This is evident in the loss of the tagged funding specifically for school counsellors.

#### ***4.2.2.4 Funding for schools' guidance staff***

The tagged funding allocated specifically for school counsellors was lost in 1996, as noted above (Besley, 2002). The ERO's (2013b) report on counselling services in secondary schools explains that the Ministry of Education funds 853.6 full-time teaching equivalents (FTEs) for schools' guidance staffing component across 438 schools, to the sum of more than 57 million dollars. This funding is based on the school's enrolment figures; however, it is designated for the “schools' guidance staffing component” and not specifically for school counsellors (Besley, 2002; Crowe, 2014; Education Review Office, 2013b). Crowe (2014) explains that the funding can be utilised to “employ a full-time guidance counsellor, provide deans with a time allocation to carry out their guidance role, or provide the guidance coordinator with some allocated time to oversee the school's guidance provision” (pp. 211–212). Thus, the guidance provision in schools may, but does not necessarily, lie

with a counsellor. It may be managed by a senior staff member and a “guidance team”. This guidance team usually includes a counsellor and can also be comprised of deans, the heads of learning support, career counsellors, tutors, Māori, Pasifika, international and English-language-learning student representatives (Crowe, 2006, 2014).

The funding for schools is allocated as follows:

- Enrolments of 200 or fewer students in years 9 to 13 receive less than the full entitlement.
- Enrolment of more than 200 students in years 9 to 13 receive the full entitlement of 2.3 FTEs (ERO, 2013b).

This would mean that a school with 3000 students would get the same guidance funding as a school with 300 students, which is discriminatory. Considering this, the ERO (2013b) recommended a review of the funding provided for the guidance staffing component so that it is in alignment with a school’s enrolment numbers. This would ensure that there are more counsellors in schools with higher student enrolments. The NZAC (2017a) recommends a ratio of one counsellor to 400 students. In addition to the ambiguity of the allocation of guidance staffing funds, there has also been some contention as to the qualities and background a school counsellor should have, which is discussed next.

#### ***4.2.2.5 Teacher-qualified versus non-teacher-qualified school counsellors***

Unlike counsellors who work outside of education, most school counsellors in New Zealand have the distinction of being registered teachers (Crowe, 2006, 2014). Many counsellors are required to contribute to co-curricular activities of the school and some are required to teach in some capacity daily, often receiving little recognition for the guidance and counselling work they do in the school (Barclay et al., 2013; Crowe, 2006, 2014; Stanley & Manthei, 2004).

School counsellors who do not teach may feel devalued by the dominant teaching culture where more credibility is given by teaching staff to those counsellors who teach subjects and contribute to co-curricular activities (Hughes, 1996, 2009, 2012). However, Hughes cautions that where counsellors also hold teaching responsibilities this results in them not necessarily being easily available for students who require counselling. Furthermore, school counsellors then assume a dual role which may detract from the ability of the counsellor to be impartial.



There is some tension then regarding the employment of non-teacher-qualified counsellors versus teacher-qualified counsellors (Crowe, 2014). However, according to Crowe this tension has now abated and teacher-qualified guidance counsellor positions are no longer threatened by teacher registration issues. Schools have the option to employ teacher-qualified or non-teacher-qualified counsellors.

#### **4.2.3 Is counselling in a school context important?**

The (ERO,1994) describes a safe emotional school environment as one that provides a positive atmosphere, a warm and settled tone, a safe emotional environment, a nurturing of caring attitudes, warm relationships between staff and students, good systems of student support, comprehensive guidance and counselling systems, and a commitment to promote the welfare of students. The ERO (2000) subsequently added that “providing a safe emotional environment involves supporting students, valuing their differences and promoting positive attitudes and behaviour” (p. 18).

School counsellors play an important role in promoting a safe emotional environment, and counselling children in schools can be remedial, specialist, developmental and preventative (Crowe, 2014; Education Review Office, 2013a, 2016; Webb, 1999). Secondary school counsellors can nurture adolescent connectedness by establishing positive relationships with them during the counselling process (Education Review Office, 2016; Hoffnung et al., 2016; Ministry of Health, 2016; Musa et al., 2016; New Zealand Association of Counsellors, 2017a; Seligman et al., 2009; Straus, 2017; Winslade & Monk, 1999).

Indeed, counsellors are often the first avenue through which student problems can be identified (Hoffnung et al., 2016; Ministry of Health, 2016; New Zealand Association of Counsellors, 2017a; Ponec, Poggi, & Dickel, 1998; Ritchie & Partin, 1994; Straus, 2017; Whiteside, 1993). In most cases school counsellors have the potential to be visible and accessible to young people and may be the first adults they confide in about their troubles which could in turn lead to early interventions (Lambie & Rokutani, 2002; Manthei, 1999; Ministry of Health, 2016; Straus, 2017). Lambie and Rokutani (2002) also report that counsellors can monitor students for extended periods as they work towards completing their schooling and in so doing may be able to maintain a foundation of support for them within the school system. They are also in the best position to initiate student referral

(McLaughlin & Vacha, 1993; Musa et al., 2016; Ritchie & Partin, 1994; Straus, 2017; Whiteside, 1993). Because of the nature of their role, counsellors can act as a liaison between families, community agencies, the school, and students. Hobbs and Collison (1995) note that research shows that there are positive outcomes from a collaborative relationship between school counsellors and community agencies although in this research I recognised developing such a relationship as a challenge.

It is necessary to continually instruct all stakeholders in education about the role of the school counsellor and the importance of counselling in the educational context (Crowe, 2006, 2014; Education Review Office, 2013a, 2013b, 2013c, 2016). Its significance has already been explained above under schools' legislative and policy requirements. In addition to educating stakeholders,

there is a need for the constant education of the whole school community and beyond about the role of the school guidance counsellor, the counselling process, its validity in an educational setting and its value and significance in assisting today's adolescents with the many challenges and issues they may face. These challenges and issues can be barriers to their learning. There is a need for an external educational authority to advocate on behalf of guidance counsellors, and for guidance and counselling in schools. (Crowe, 2006, p. 19)

This is particularly significant in terms of supporting adolescents with the numerous challenges they face, challenges which may negatively impact on not only their present learning, but also their future lives.

To assist in supporting counsellors in their work with students the NZAC developed a School Guidance Counsellor Appointment Kit that goes to all schools that advertise school counsellor positions (NZAC, 2016e). The Kit provides guidelines for principals, boards of trustees, teachers and guidance counsellors on the school guidance counsellor's role, the employment of a guidance counsellor, suggested staffing for guidance counselling, where the counsellor fits in the school, and the principal/counsellor relationship. It explains why a school counsellor should be a member of the NZAC and PPTA. Finally, it provides a sample job description for a school counsellor and the NZAC's (2016e) Code of Ethics. Another resource for high schools' board of trustees and principals is "Do they make a difference? YES" (NZAC, 2017a), which was funded by the Ministry of Education. The resource explains how safe and effective counselling can be supported within schools. The

ERO (2013b) survey found that the student to counsellor ratio, counsellors' appraisals, and certain policies and procedures around counselling in several schools were inadequate and wanted to create an awareness of the importance of counsellors in schools. The benefits of counselling in schools listed in this resource are that school counselling:

- Increases student engagement across ethnicities
- Improves attendance and retention
- Improves student achievement and progress
- Increases self and peer referral
- Reduces stand downs and suspensions
- Reduces significant incidents.

The resource also explains that counsellors actively improve both student wellbeing and education outcomes. Research shows that improving student wellbeing is an important in developing students' social, emotional and academic competence and a contributor in preventing youth depression, suicide, self-harm, anti-social behaviour (including bullying and violence) and substance abuse (NZAC, 2017a). The NZAC recommends that the "Do they make a difference? YES" resource be used with the School Guidance Counsellor Appointment Kit.

#### **4.2.4 Challenges of counselling in a school context**

The workloads of counsellors have increased as the demand for counselling in schools has become greater (Crowe, 2006, 2014; Education Review Office, 2013a; Manthei, 1999; Stanley & Manthei, 2004). The ERO (2013b) survey on counselling services in secondary schools showed that across all schools there was an increase in the number of students seeking counselling, and that these students were presenting with increasingly complex problems. This in turn further increases a school counsellors' workload and heightens the pressure of accountability in high-stress situations, especially when resourcing is limited.

School counsellors may also spend more time on non-guidance administration than on doing crisis work in schools. In addition, the pressure for accountability has intensified the challenges faced by school counsellors (Crowe, 2014; Education Review Office, 2013b, 2016; Hermansson & Webb, 1993; Stanley & Manthei, 2004).

The complex issues faced by school counsellors include family problems, sexual abuse, depression, and suicide attempts (Crowe, 2006, 2014; Hughes, 2012; Hughes et al.,

2013; Manthei, 1999, 2006). School counsellors also recognised social and economic issues outside of the scope of their practice and beyond the control of their clients as putting pressure on their caseloads. These social and economic factors included household poverty, severely disturbed young people with poor mental health, lack of employment, family dysfunction and an increasingly violent community, bullying, relationship difficulties, and drugs and alcohol problems (Crowe, 2006, 2014; Hughes, 2012; Hughes et al., 2013; Manthei, 1999, 2006). School counsellors sought support from various external agencies, however this support was not highly regarded as it showed a lack of expertise and resources (Crowe, 2006; Education Review Office, 2013b; Manthei, 1999).

Some of these challenges are reflected in the PPTA (2004) survey of secondary school guidance counsellors, which suggested that many counsellors were under tremendous pressure. Counsellors expressed concern that there were fewer counsellors in lower-decile schools where the socioeconomic status was low and the need for counselling high. Overwhelmingly, secondary school guidance counsellors asked that the PPTA advocate on their behalf to stakeholders in education regarding the need for counsellors in schools and the need for additional support. The survey reflected that school counsellors felt undervalued and unsupported.

In addition to all these challenges, counsellors have had to battle to maintain their role and status in schools (Crowe, 2006, 2014; Hooper, 2009; Hughes, 1996; Stanley & Manthei, 2004). The lack of clear guidelines regarding counselling in schools and the absence of an external educational authority may be compounding factors in the sometimes disparaging way in which school counsellors are viewed. This may be one of the reasons school counsellors continue to aspire to establish a distinct identity for themselves (Crowe, 2014; Education Review Office, 2013a; Hooper, 2009).

The challenges face by school counsellors can be summed up as follows:

The increasing and diverse workload in guidance and counselling; increasingly complex mental health needs of students and the wider community, particularly in low income communities; not being able to be as proactive as school leaders and guidance counsellors would like due to increased reactive counselling and crisis management; poor and limited access to, and response from, external agencies and support services; [and]the stigma attached to mental health that inhibited young people from seeking appropriate help. (Education Review Office, 2013a, p. 12)

Other challenges highlighted by the ERO (2013b) survey on counselling services in secondary schools were:

- The screening process as to who gets access to counselling
- Lack of visibility of counselling services offered
- Lack of protocols to guide practice particularly with regards to student confidentiality
- Need to review and update policies, procedures, and job descriptions.

The same survey found that professional practice needed to improve by:

- Facilitating professional learning and development for counsellors and deans
- Encouraging counsellors to become qualified
- Ensuring access to professional supervision
- Undertaking robust appraisals of both deans' and counsellor's guidance roles
- Developing partnerships with Māori parents
- Shifting from a reactive/punitive model to a preventative/pastoral model of counselling especially in boys' schools. (Education Review Office, 2013b)

ERO's main concerns were:

- Counsellors' workloads
- Lack of resources dedicated to counselling provision and lack of accountability for the use of the Guidance Staffing Entitlement
- Lack of support from external agencies. (Education Review Office, 2013b)

Crowe (2014) states that overcoming these challenges is

dependent upon a whole school ethos of care that values positive and caring relationships, has strong leadership, a shared understanding of guidance, and counselling that is incorporated into a schools' strategic plan. Further, policies, guidelines, appraisal and review processes, adequate and appropriate resourcing of physical spaces, well-qualified and competent staff, ongoing funded PLD for guidance and counselling staff (including paid supervision for the guidance counsellor), and the building of positive relationships with external agencies are necessary components of strong counselling services. (p. 213)

### 4.3 Adolescents and the school context

Adolescence can be a challenging phase developmentally for many young people. The Youth '12 national youth health and wellbeing involved 8500 New Zealand secondary school students and yielded the following statistics on young people:

- 6%–7% of students are bullied at school at least weekly
- 1 in 6 girls (16.2%) and 1 in 12 boys (8.6%) show significant depressive symptoms
- 29.1% of girls harm themselves (up from 26% 2007) and 17.9% of boys (up from 15.5% 2007)
- 6.2% of girls and 2.4% of boys had attempted suicide
- 29% of students live in more than one home
- 69% of parents did not have enough money for food
- 25% of girls have been touched in a sexual way or made to do unwanted sexual things
- 23% of boys and 22.2% of girls binge-drink
- 50% of all students use alcohol
- 14% use cannabis. (Clark et al., 2013)

While the 2012 survey reported a marked reduction in tobacco, alcohol and drug use by young people since the previous survey in 2007, it also showed that a large proportion of adolescents are emotionally distressed, bullied, using contraception inconsistently, exposed to violence and/or are overweight (Clark et al., 2013).

The ERO's (2013b) national evaluation of counselling services in secondary schools identified the most significant issues impacting our youth in New Zealand. These issues were found in all deciles and school locations and included poor mental health, relationships issues, family difficulties, bullying, drugs and alcohol, and household poverty. More students are regularly exposed to adverse experiences than most realise. Some will come to school preoccupied by the impact of current distress, trauma or fear, which can often sabotage their ability to hear and understand a teacher's positive messages, to perform well academically, and to behave appropriately (Education Review Office, 2013b).

In the Youth '07 national youth health and wellbeing survey schools were identified as playing a significant role in helping young people address substance abuse, mental health, violence and bullying issues (Denny, Robinson, Milfont, & Grant, 2009; Helu S L, Robinson E, Grant S, Herd, & Denny, 2009). Crowe (2006) suggests school attendance and

feeling safe at school impacts positively on adolescent development. Connectedness to other adults, school and the community can have a protective factor for adolescent health (Adolescent Health Research Group, 2003; Clark et al., 2013; Denny et al., 2009; Masten, 2001). Crowe (2014) explains that adolescent wellbeing is strongly correlated with an ability to learn. The need for counselling in a school context is thus apparent and is the focus of the next section.

#### **4.3.1 Adolescents and counselling at school**

The adolescent population can be one of the most difficult client bases to work with in a counselling setting (Bromfield, 2007; Church, 1994; Geldard et al., 2016; Rickard et al., 2016). Some adolescents can be antagonistic towards the counsellor when they start the counselling process and can also be resistant to building a productive counselling relationship (Bromfield, 2007; Hanna, Hanna, & Keys, 1999; Lambie & Rokutani, 2002; Musa et al., 2016; Straus, 2017). Many adolescent students are ambivalent and unmotivated to change their behaviour, and this may result in a challenging counselling setting (Bromfield, 2007; Lambie, 2004; Musa et al., 2016; Rutter & Rutter, 1993; Sommers-Flanagan & Sommers-Flanagan, 1995; Straus, 2017). These difficulties have led many counsellors to avoid counselling adolescents (Biever, McKenzie, Wales-North, & Gonzalez, 1995; Geldard et al., 2016; Hanley, Humphrey, & Lennie, 2012). It is important to be mindful that adolescents who seek help with certain issues or, more commonly, who are sent for help, are often undergoing developmental change (Bromfield, 2007; Hanley et al., 2012; Hoffnung et al., 2016; Jaffe, 1997). Counsellors should be aware that adolescents are honing their cognitive skills, developing new intimate relationships and becoming better at identifying and reflecting on their feelings, and should thus be considered partners in the counselling process (Geldard et al., 2016; Hanley et al., 2012; Hoffnung et al., 2016; Straus, 2017; Vernon, 1993; White & Epston, 1992; Whiteside, 1993; Winslade & Monk, 1999, 2001).

The ERO (2013b) report reflected that students were likely to seek assistance from people in their lives in the following order: parent or caregiver, school counsellor, and then from a dean, friend or another student. In addition, students primarily sought out school counsellors specifically for “mental health issues, sexuality or gender identity, family issues, drug and alcohol issues, racism, sexual harassment, grief, family violence, self-

harming, body image, issues with friends, issues with boyfriend/girlfriend, and financial issues (p. 31). Students were equally likely to speak to a school counsellor or dean regarding bullying, while deans were the most consulted school staff for learning concerns and conflict with teachers. Form teachers were asked for assistance with goals and learning, and careers counsellors were asked for career advice and further education. The outcomes of the ERO report reflect the importance of the counsellor role in schools, and also the importance for schools to have a variety of suitable persons in guidance and counselling roles.

Consequently, a workable school counselling approach should offer strategies that in a short time span can help adolescents who are possibly poorly motivated to change (Crocket, Kotzé, & Peter, 2015; Lambie, 2004). Establishing rapport and trust in the counselling relationship is imperative if it is to be successful (Rogers, 1995; Wampold & Imel, 2015). This can be challenging with adolescents, who tend to question the mores of society (Geldard et al., 2016; P. Katz, 1997; Musa et al., 2016). Lambie (2004) argues that, given the nature of adolescents and a mistrust of counsellors an adverse reaction to the counselling process is not surprising. To minimise potential mistrust, it is useful to inform students that trust is earned over time and it is therefore appropriate not to disclose and trust right away; rather counsellors should allow trust to develop gradually (Geldard et al., 2016; Hanley et al., 2012; Musa et al., 2016; Sadock & Kaplan, 2007; Straus, 2017). Lambie (2004) does not propose that one-on-one counselling is necessarily the best way to support change in a school environment. Rather, it is the counsellor's responsibility to find the best fit between students' needs and the existing resources.

Establishing rapport with adolescents needs to be done with care since adolescence is a time of striving for autonomy and independence, and many adolescents are extremely resistant to those who attempt to dominate them (Church, 1994; Geldard et al., 2016; Lambie & Rokutani, 2002). An adolescent's resistance to counselling may be part of the normal developmental process of striving for autonomy or a reaction to a directive and confrontational therapist (Hoffnung et al., 2016; W. R. Miller & Rollnick, 1991; Straus, 2017). As Church (1994) states, "because of their desire for autonomy, adolescents may be very sensitive to situations where they believe others are asserting their power or authority" (p. 105). The need for autonomy may cause adolescents to experience ambivalence between seeking help and refusing help. This ambivalence, if not carefully managed by the



counsellor, can impact the counselling relationship negatively. Church (1994) further adds that autonomy is adolescents' assurance that they have the independence to act for themselves while at the same time maintaining relationships with significant adults in their lives. In this way adolescents can embrace a sense of self while receiving the necessary support.

However, Murphy (1997) reports that adults tend to deal with adolescent resistance through confrontation, which in turn produces further resistance. In the counselling setting this confrontational style is especially ineffective because when an adolescent perceives their personal freedom to be threatened, they resist change and become defensive (Fisher & Harrison, 1997; Hoffnung et al., 2016; W. R. Miller & Rollnick, 1991; Straus, 2017). If, however, adolescents perceive themselves to be doing something in their own best interest they can be highly motivated. McCoy (1995) suggests that counsellors refrain from using statements that are undermining, ambiguous and prescriptive. By avoiding such detrimental statements counsellors may enable students to feel safe and less resistant to the counselling process. Lambie (2004) suggests that one way of managing this challenging interaction is to accentuate the positive. By accentuating adolescents' strengths and reframing or relabeling their behaviour in a positive fashion the issue at hand may be less threatening (Bryan & Henry, 2008; Franklin, 2015; Galassi & Akos, 2007; Lambie, 2004; E. J. Smith, 2006; Winslade & Monk, 1999).

Lambie (2004) further claims that the focus needs to be on facilitating future change rather than on past behaviours or experiences. In addition, counsellors concerned with decreasing the likelihood of inciting resistance in adolescents can use a list of suggested approaches from the literature on positive psychology, developed by Peterson (1995). These suggestions include letting adolescents know you are willing to listen, being accessible, using few questions, not being defensive, being empathetic, giving positive feedback and praise, and transferring responsibility to the adolescent.

These are among the strategies that help ensure that students are given a voice in the counselling relationship. Adolescent students who feel that school counsellors listen to and understand them receive the message: "You are a person of worth. Your feelings are important and worthy of attention" (Wexler, 1991, p. 21). Once adolescents understand that this is how they are perceived they may be more willing to adopt new skills and more accepting of their shortcomings.

Several counselling approaches that are workable within a school counselling setting, and which follow some of the guidelines discussed above, include narrative counselling, solution-focused counselling, and positive psychology counselling. This is not to imply that these are the only approaches that are workable within a school counselling setting, but since these approaches are among those that share the common metanarrative (discourse) of empowering adolescents, which is an essential characteristic of the nature of this research, they are the approaches that will be explored here. A brief definition of strength-based counselling and then an overview of these approaches will be given in the next chapter.

In terms of adolescents' perception of counselling in schools, the ERO (2013b) report on the efficacy of guidance and counselling in secondary schools suggests that student feedback regarding counselling in schools is favourable:

Many students commented that guidance counsellors were able to help them and provided practical and useful advice and guidance. Over two-thirds of students surveyed said it was socially acceptable at their school to see someone about guidance and counselling, but commented that assurances about confidentiality and privacy, and ease of access made it easier to seek help. (Education Review Office, 2013b, p. 4)

The counselling of adolescents in schools is complex and several factors, already discussed, need to be considered. Of paramount importance is the assessment of adolescents at risk. This will be covered next.

#### **4.3.2 Adolescents at risk**

An important part of a school counsellor's role is the assessment and management of adolescents who may be at risk of suicide (Crowe, 2006, 2014; Geldard et al., 2016; Hanley et al., 2012; Musa et al., 2016; Stiglbauer et al., 2013; Straus, 2017). With regard to adolescents at risk, the NZAC's (2016b) Code of Ethics offers school counsellors guidance as to how to manage safety concerns. Section 5.1(d) of the Code of Ethics states that "counsellors shall warn third parties and appropriate authorities in the event of an imminent threat of serious harm to that third party from the client" (New Zealand Association of Counsellors, 2016b, p. 4). Section 6.2 refers to exceptions to confidentiality and reads as follows:

(a) Counsellors shall only make exceptions to confidentiality in order to reduce risk.

(b) When counsellors need to pass on confidential information, they should provide only the minimum of information necessary and only then to those people to whom it is absolutely necessary.

(c) Exceptions to confidentiality occur when:

- There is serious danger in the immediate or foreseeable future to the client or others,
- The client's competence to make a decision is impaired,
- Legal requirements demand that confidential material be revealed,
- Responding to a complaint about counselling practice.

(d) Wherever possible, the decision to make an exception to confidentiality is made

- After seeking the client's co-operation, unless doing so would further compromise the safety of the client or others.
- After consultation with a supervisor (p. 8)

The role of the school counsellor is imperative in managing adolescents at risk, especially given the high incidence of suicide in New Zealand. The Ministry of Health reports that in 2011, the youth suicide rate in New Zealand for both males and females was the second highest in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (Ministry of Health, 2016). The Ministry further reported that in 2014, the suicide rate was the highest in the OECD within the age range of 25–44 years (age standardised rate 16.2 per 100,000). In 2014 the rate of youth suicides dropped below the rate of suicide among people aged 25–44 years for the first time since 2007, continuing the decreasing trend for this age group since in 2012 (age standardised rate 13.9 per 100,000 in 2014) (Ministry of Health, 2016). However, in 2016, New Zealand's youth (15–24 years) suicide rate was the highest among the 34 OECD countries (Ministry of Health, 2016). Furthermore, provisional statistics for 2017 reflect the highest number of suicide deaths since the provisional statistics were first recorded for the 2007/2008 year (Mental Health Foundation, 2017).

In 2013 the Ministry of Education designed a resource kit providing guidelines for guidance staff in New Zealand schools on suicide prevention and the action they should take in responding to suicidal behaviour (Ministry of Education, 2013b). Further resources to be used in conjunction with the resource kit are:

- the document titled *Updated Evidence and Guidance Supporting Suicide Prevention Activity in New Zealand Schools 2003 to 2012* (Te Pou, 2013); and
- The New Zealand Suicide Prevention Strategy 2006–2016 (Ministry of Health, 2006).

The first document focuses on suicide prevention and postvention and explains the role that schools play. The importance of the school counsellor's role and the need for sufficient training, professional development and supervision is highlighted in this document. The second document lists seven goals that outline the strategy for suicide prevention in New Zealand between 2006 and 2016. These goals are to promote mental health and wellbeing; prevent mental health problems; improve the care of people experiencing mental disorders associated with suicidal behaviour, including those who make non-fatal suicide attempts; reduce access to the means of suicide; promote safe reporting and portrayal of suicidal behaviour by the media; support families/whānau, friends and others affected by a suicide or suicide attempt; and expand the evidence about rates, causes and effective interventions (Ministry of Health, 2006).

Suicide rates in New Zealand reflect the poor mental health of adolescents, with the risk factors for suicide being childhood adversity and trauma, socioeconomic and educational disadvantage, mental health disorders, and exposure to recent stress or life difficulty (Clark et al., 2013; Ministry of Social Development, 2008, 2010, 2016). It was reported by the Ministry of Social Development (2016) that healthy relationships and a sense of connection are mitigating factors in suicide prevention. Furthermore, mental health issues like depression, anxiety and stress have been linked to loneliness (Ministry of Health, 2006, 2016; Ministry of Social Development, 2010, 2016). Parental relationships that are nurturing and close were found to be an important predictor of wellbeing for adolescents (Ministry of Social Development, 2010, 2016). High self-esteem, productive coping skills, solution-focused behaviour and positive connections at school were also protective factors against suicide (Ministry of Social Development, 2010, 2016).

The school counsellor is ideally situated to implement most of the goals that are outlined in the strategy for suicide prevention (Ministry of Health, 2006). School counsellors are also able to facilitate the protective factors for adolescents mentioned above. Furthermore, I would argue that a strength-based counselling approach is particularly relevant in this regard. Strength-based counselling will be discussed in the next

chapter. In this section I have focused on adolescents and the school context. In the next section I look more broadly at the metanarratives that can be recognised within the school context in which both school counsellors and adolescents are situated.

#### **4.3.3 Metanarratives of adolescence as reflected in schools and counselling**

Since schools are distinctive social contexts, they have their own set of metanarratives that shape experiences of what happens in schools (Barclay et al., 2013; J. Bruner, 2002; Drewery & Winslade, 2005; Rickard et al., 2016; Winslade & Monk, 1999, 2001). As these metanarratives are taken-for-granted, it is difficult to discern how these assumptions structure relationships between people and shape the functioning of institutions (see section 3.3). Winslade and Monk (1999) propose that these assumptions might come to be expressed in a set of assertions about what is considered to be normal. They give the example of adolescent discourses that suggest “it is normal for teenagers to go through a period of rebellion and to seek to separate themselves from their parents” (p. 23). The influence of an assumption like this can be traced through professional family therapy literature, political rhetoric about provision of youth services, parent-teacher interviews at school, and peer conversations among adolescents (Winslade & Monk, 1999). Such a discourse (metanarrative) has tangible and material effects in people’s lives. It shapes their choices, values, feelings, and actions. It is not a false assumption, because its “reality” is evident through many interactions in many families every day. Because of this, it is hard sometimes to see it as a cultural assumption rather than as something hardwired into the psychology of adolescents. School counsellors frequently make this assumption and talk to students about their development in a way that emphasises this dominant discourse (Winslade & Monk, 1999).

In addition, because of the development of educational and psychological means of evaluation and measurement there has been an increasing exactness applied to the interpretation of what is considered “normal” (Barclay et al., 2013; Dahir & Stone, 2012; Rickard et al., 2016; Winslade & Monk, 1999). At the same time, in the psychology profession there has been an increase in the use of language which implies deficit conditions in psychological discourse (Jerome Bruner & Kalmar, 1998; Fowler, Levy, & Brown, 1997; Gergen, 1990, 1994; McFadden, 1991; Robichaud, Giroux, & Taylor, 2004). Given the propensity towards diagnosing deficit conditions and the range of deficit

descriptions available to professionals and laypersons, it is likely that behaviour that is not considered “normal” will be assigned a deficit condition.

Winslade and Monk (1999) warn that these deficit descriptions become part of the language used in schools and are expressed through terms such as “maladjusted, remedial reader, behaviour problem, underachiever, learning disabled” (p. 60). However, if deficit descriptions describe a problem so that it can be dealt with, why are they problematic? The authors argue that it would not be problematic if all deficit descriptions led to favourable changes for those to whom they were given. They further suggest that the issue lies in the ease with which we can access deficit descriptions that “direct us to look for pathology rather than for competence or health” (p. 60).

Another important consideration in the use of deficit descriptions according to Winslade and Monk (1999) is counsellors’ “power to name and the authority behind their naming rights that make the deficit descriptions they use hard to ignore” (p. 60). The knowledge base on which counsellors’ professional role is founded lends credence to the deficit descriptions they use and, when made, these descriptions appear as if they are impervious to social and cultural influences. Hence, descriptions given to young people by counsellors and teachers are difficult to refute (Winslade & Monk, 1999).

Given the potential impact of deficit descriptions and the position held by school counsellors to give them, it is imperative that we are aware of the consequences of what we say and the effect that this can have in another person’s life. According to Winslade and Monk (1999), “this means letting go of the temptation to know best about another person, even when we are invited into such knowing by expectations of us as professionals” (p. 59). Strength-based counselling approaches, which are the focus of this research, are based on metanarrative or discourses that relinquish the temptation of knowing what is best and focus instead on client empowerment (Bryan & Henry, 2008; Harris, Thoresen, & Lopez, 2007; Jones-Smith, 2014; Park & Peterson, 2008; Sharry, 2004; Sharry, Madden, & Darmody, 2012; Sheridan, Warnes, Cowan, Schemm, & Clarke, 2004). As already mentioned, this research will explore the metanarratives or discourses reflected in the narratives of school counsellors who use strength-based counselling approaches to see what can be recognised within them. In this chapter I discussed the literary context to counselling in secondary schools. In the next chapter, I present a literary context of secondary school counsellors’ strength-based practices.

## **Chapter 5: Literary context to secondary school counsellors’ strength-based counselling practices**

The science of psychology has been far more successful on the negative than on the positive side. It has revealed to us much about man’s shortcomings, his illness, his sins, but little about his potentialities, his virtues, his achievable aspirations, of his full psychological height.

—Maslow (1954, p. 354)

In this chapter I explore the literary context of secondary school counsellors’ strength-based practices. I ask the question “What is strength-based counselling?” and provide an overview of strength-based counselling practices covered in this thesis, which include positive psychology counselling, narrative counselling and solution-focused counselling. I examine the use of these counselling modalities within the school context and explore the implications for school counselling. I include a section on countering the “positive” in positive psychology where I explore the benefits of negative emotion and post-traumatic growth. This is followed by a discussion of existing strength-based initiatives in the health and education sectors in New Zealand, and a discussion on the limitations of strength-based counselling.

### **5.1 What is strength-based counselling?**

Strength-based counselling draws from positive psychology (discussed below) and focuses on promoting a client’s strengths to enhance their wellbeing rather than focusing on a clients’ limitations and problems (Burt, Resnick, & Novick, 1998; Franklin, 2015; Galassi & Akos, 2007; Jones-Smith, 2014; Sharry, 2004; Sharry et al., 2012; Ungar, 2006).

The strength-based counselling approach represents a paradigm shift from a deficit-based medical model, which focuses on pathology, to a model which focuses on promoting wellbeing (Boniwell & Ryan, 2012; A. Carr, 2004; Compton & Hoffman, 2013; Franklin, 2015; Jones-Smith, 2014; Park & Peterson, 2008; Seligman, 2006, 2011; Seligman et al., 2009; Stiglbauer et al., 2013; Walsh, 2004). This approach endeavours to understand individuals’ strengths and virtues and poses the questions “What are people’s primary strengths?” and “What strengths has someone used to overcome adverse life

circumstances?” (Franklin, 2015; C. Peterson & Seligman, 2004; E. J. Smith, 2006). This approach assumes that individuals are resilient and can overcome life’s adversities, despite odds that appear to be overwhelming (Jones-Smith, 2014; M. Katz, 1997; Kozol, 1998; Sheridan et al., 2004; Snyder, Lopez, & Pedrotti, 2011; Ungar, 2006; Wright & Lopez, 2002). The strengths perspective incorporates the values of a humanistic approach to psychology, providing a context for solving problems that draws on a clients’ resources and their social environment. The focus is on “goals, creating a hopeful future, personal choice, and a collaborative, empowering relationship” between counsellor and clients” (Franklin, 2015, p. 73).

According to Galassi and Akos (2007), “the strength-based counsellor’s primary role then, is to promote and advocate for positive youth development for all students and for the environments that enhance and sustain that development” (p. 2). This may include assisting significant adults in recognising adolescents’ innate strengths and potential and their capacity to be “self-righting” so that adolescents can develop favourably towards adulthood under all except the most severe life circumstances (Galassi & Akos, 2007; Geldard et al., 2016; Musa et al., 2016; Rickard et al., 2016; Sharry, 2004; Sharry et al., 2012; Straus, 2017; Werner & Smith, 1992). Strength-based counselling approaches therefore teach young people to recognise their own strengths and to harness them in times of adversity. Specific strength-based counselling approaches are discussed in the next section.

## **5.2 Overview of strength-based counselling practices focused on in this thesis**

Strength-based counselling practices relevant to this thesis include positive psychology counselling, narrative counselling and solution-focused counselling. These are outlined individually below.

### **5.2.1 Positive psychology counselling as strength-based counselling**

Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) argued that traditional deficit-orientated psychology was not producing sufficient “knowledge of what makes life worth living” (p. 5). The predominately negative focus of psychology originated in a major historical event, World War II (Seligman, 2011; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Seligman et al., 2009; Seligman & Pawelski, 2003). Seligman and colleagues state that prior to World War II



psychology had three directives: to heal mental illness, improve the lives of ordinary people, and identify and nurture talent. Following the war, the authors suggest that the focus narrowed because of human necessity and the economic imperative to heal mental illness. All available resources were thus poured into learning about psychopathology and treatment, and hence the deficit-orientated disease model of psychology gained momentum.

This emphasis led to some gains in that 14 mental illnesses (including depression, personality disorders and anxiety attacks) previously considered virtually impossible to treat can now be treated with much greater success (Seligman, 1994, 2011; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Seligman et al., 2009; Seligman & Pawelski, 2003). In addition, gains have been made in the understanding of and therapeutic approach to mental illness. However, the emphasis on mental illness and its treatment has led to a lack of focus on improving the lives of ordinary people and identifying and nurturing talent, which has contributed to the image of psychologists as victimologists and pathologists (Boniwell, 2008; Boniwell & Ryan, 2012; Hefferon & Boniwell, 2011). Positive psychology seeks to restore the balance in favour of the positive by incorporating these neglected aspects of psychological science and practice.

In endeavouring to achieve this, positive psychology tends to distance itself from its historical roots and positions itself as an emerging and progressive discipline. While it is indeed progressive, it is not entirely original. The question of improving people's lives has been explored by many theories, including utilitarianism which seeks the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people and hedonism, which seeks to maximise pleasure and minimise pain (Boniwell, 2008; Boniwell & Ryan, 2012; Hefferon & Boniwell, 2011). Boniwell (2008) notes that the Greek philosopher, Aristotle spoke of a spirit (daemon) we each possess which encourages us to pursue things that are right for us – if we pay attention to this spirit, we will be happy. Renowned psychologists that subscribe to a more positive view of human nature include B. F. Skinner (1962), who wanted to employ operant conditioning in the creation of a utopian world; Carl Jung (1959), with his concept of individuation and his belief that individuals possess the capacity to strive to be all that one has the potential to be; and Carl Rogers (1995), with his concept of unconditional positive regard and the effect of this regard on positive change. Issues of flourishing and wellbeing have also been raised in work on promoting wellness and prevention (Cowen, 1994). Research with a positive focus has explored the concept of thriving (Epel, McEwen, &

Ickovics, 1998), positive aspects of mental health (Jahoda, 1958; Ryff & Singer, 1998) and robustness (Maddi, 2002). What then is positive psychology?

### ***5.2.1.1 What is positive psychology?***

Positive psychology is the scientific study of optimal human functioning that seeks to determine, promote and strengthen the factors that allow individuals, communities and institutions to thrive and flourish (Boniwell, 2008; Boniwell & Ryan, 2012; Compton & Hoffman, 2013; Gable & Haidt, 2005; Ivtzan, Lomas, Hefferon, & Worth, 2016; Jones-Smith, 2014; C. Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Seligman, 2003, 2011; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Seligman et al., 2009; Tugade et al., 2014). According to Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000), “the aim of positive psychology is to begin to catalyse a change in the focus of psychology from preoccupation only with repairing the worst things in life to also building positive qualities” (p. 5).

Proponents of positive psychology further argue that the discipline is “simply psychology” (Sheldon & King, 2001, p. 216) and, as such, uses the same scientific methods as psychology (Boniwell, 2008; Boniwell & Ryan, 2012; Hefferon & Boniwell, 2011; Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, & Schkade, 2005). While positive psychology is not “psychology as usual”, it is “a supplement, another arrow in the quiver, and not a replacement for this endeavour” (Seligman & Pawelski, 2003, p. 159). Boniwell (2008) agrees that “positive psychology is still nothing else but psychology” (p. 4); it merely explores different topics and asks different questions (Boniwell, 2008; Boniwell & Ryan, 2012; Hefferon & Boniwell, 2011).

Positive psychology initially consisted of three pillars of study: Positive emotion/experience, Positive individual traits and Positive institutions/environments. A fourth pillar was later added: Positive relationships (Quinlan, 2009; Seligman, 2003, 2011; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Seligman et al., 2009). Martin Seligman (2011) subsequently introduced the PERMA (Positive emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning and Accomplishment) model of wellbeing with five core pillars or elements that constitute a positive psychology approach to psychological wellbeing and happiness. However, the PERMA model was considered to be too cognitively based and did not account for more physical and sensual aspects of life (Boniwell & Ryan, 2012; Hone, 2015). The Vitality pillar, which includes aspects such as to eat, sleep and move, was

therefore added to create a comprehensive model of human flourishing – the acronym is now PERMA-V (Boniwell & Ryan, 2012; Hone, 2015).

The vitality component aside, Seligman (2011) reflects that the first pillar of PERMA, Positive emotion, is more than just feeling good; it is the ability to have an optimistic outlook regarding the past, present and future. Engagement is having activities in our lives that bring us meaning and that are important for our growth and personal happiness. The third pillar, Relationships, reflects that we are social animals that thrive on connection, love, intimacy and a strong emotional and physical interaction with other humans. Meaning in life is further imperative to happiness and fulfilment. Finally, a sense of Accomplishment in life allows us to push ourselves to thrive and flourish.

Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) explain that these pillars correspond to three different levels of positive experience: the subjective level, individual level and group level. They indicate that at the subjective level the positive experience is about feeling good and experiencing the positive emotions of wellbeing, satisfaction, contentment (about the past), optimism (for the future), and happiness and flow (in the present). The individual level looks at what constitutes a good life and examines the individual traits that are needed to be a good person. This level focuses among other things on human strengths and virtues, future mindedness, capacity for love, courage, spirituality, and wisdom. Finally, at the level of the group, the focus is on relationships, civic virtues, social responsibility and the positive institutions/environments (such as schools) that nurture and promote these relationships, virtues and responsibilities (Geldard et al., 2016; Hone, 2015; Ministry of Education, 2015; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

Gable and Haidt (2005) show that while there has been much research conducted into positive subjective emotion and experience and positive individual traits, research into positive institutions has been somewhat lacking. The authors believe that positive psychology theory and interventions can “improve the functioning of schools, workplaces, and even governments” (p. 108). Similarly, the elements/pillars of psychological wellbeing, can assist individuals in achieving lives of fulfilment, happiness, and meaning (Seligman, 2011) and may also be applied to institutions to develop programmes that assist people in developing cognitive and emotional tools (Boniwell & Ryan, 2012; Geldard et al., 2016). In educational settings school counsellors can use the PERMA-V model to create an awareness for adolescents of how to apply each aspect of the model to their lives (Akin-

Little, Little, & Delligatti, 2004; Boniwell & Ryan, 2012; Chafouleas & Bray, 2004; Clonan et al., 2004; Hefferon & Boniwell, 2011; Hone, 2015; McLoughlin & Kubick Jr, 2004; Seligman, 2011; Seligman et al., 2009; Sheridan et al., 2004; Terjesen, Jacofsky, Froh, & DiGiuseppe, 2004).

### ***5.2.1.2 Positive psychology and humanism***

The idea of exploring the positive side of human functioning is not new to psychology, as noted above. Humanistic psychologists, for example, not only cast off the negative focus of psychology but also call for a more qualitative approach to research (Boniwell, 2008; Boniwell & Ryan, 2012; Hefferon & Boniwell, 2011; Rogers, 1995; Taylor, 2001). Conversely, positive psychology, while sharing an emphasis on the positive, embraces the dominant scientific paradigm and considers humanism as somewhat lacking in empirical grounding (Compton & Hoffman, 2013; Seligman, 2011; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Snyder et al., 2011). Advocates of humanistic psychology strongly contest positive psychology's assumptions that psychology's primary focus has been on pathology (Boniwell, 2008; Boniwell & Ryan, 2012; Hefferon & Boniwell, 2011; Resnick, Warmoth, & Serlin, 2001; Rich, 2001; Rogers, 1995; Taylor, 2001).

Rich (2001) argues that humanistic psychologists focus on the positive side of human functioning, emphasising growth and the authentic self and are critical of pathology-oriented approaches. Indeed, humanistic psychologist Abraham Maslow (1999) spoke of self-actualisation, argued for a growth-oriented theory of motivation and advocated studying healthy people instead of sick people as early as 1968. Maslow (1954, 1999) was in fact the first psychologist to use the term positive psychology. Indeed, Rich (2001) portrays Maslow and Rogers as “seminal thinkers in the humanistic psychology movement whose works on topics such as creativity, self-actualization, and ‘utopian’ society informs positive psychology” (p. 9). Taylor (2001) further reminds us that Rogers introduced the concepts of empathy and unconditional positive regard with reference to the therapeutic relationships and focused on normal rather than neurotic subjects, in so doing de-pathologising counselling and psychotherapy. Other humanistic psychologists who focused on the positive aspects of human functioning prior to the inception of positive psychology include Viktor Frankl (1967), who emphasized human strengths, and Gordon Allport (1955), who was interested in individual maturity and recommended exploring people's

positive qualities. Taylor (2001) also draws attention to the work of Rollo May, who encouraged psychologists to focus on the existential nature of the psychotherapeutic hour.

Seligman and Csikzentmihalyi (2000) recognize humanistic psychology's conception of positive mental health but comment that humanistic psychology can be located in the section of bookstores that include "at least 10 shelves on crystal healing, aromatherapy, and reaching the inner child for every shelf of books that tries to uphold some scholarly standard" (p. 7). To which Taylor (2001) responds:

Seligman mistakes transpersonal psychologies who do fall under the broad umbrella of humanism for the original personality theorists who led the humanistic movement for more than a quarter of century in the academy and were concerned with generating a rigorous research tradition – variously called personality, personology and a science of the person. (p. 23)

Taylor (2001) suggests there are at least two obstacles for positive psychology. At the one end of the spectrum, he argues, are traditional scientists who are likely to assert the superiority of scientific determinism, despite Seligman urging experimental psychologists to emphasise the positive by choosing different scientific evidences, hypotheses, interpretations, and applications. Taylor argues that Seligman correctly puts the discerning person above scientific directive, but in so doing he contravenes the basic rule of reductionist determinism, the supposed neutrality of science. At the other end of the spectrum Taylor talks about "people of the heart – therapists, teachers, counsellors, seekers, and even more liberal scientists in psychology" (p. 26) who will find that Seligman's message resonates with them, but will ultimately be unable to reconcile themselves to the limitations of reductionist epistemology. It is clear, then, that positive psychological interventions are thus not new and have their origins partly in humanistic psychology.

### ***5.2.1.3 The broaden-and-build theory of positive emotion***

Positive emotions, the first pillar of PERMA-V, traditionally indicate wellbeing and can, as with negative emotions, be said to motivate us to act. However, Barbara Fredrickson's (2001) broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions sees the function of positive emotions as more than just generating good feelings. According to the theory, positive emotions broaden our thought-action repertoires, undo negative emotions, and build resilience. The broadening experience of positive emotions, such as joy, love, contentment, interest and happiness, opens the mind and expands our inventory of thoughts and actions.

While experiencing positive emotion, the theory posits that we think outside the box, see the bigger picture, and are more creative. This in turn enhances our emotional wellbeing and builds our personal resources (intellectual, physical, social and psychological) which we can then access during times of trauma (Catalino et al., 2014; Fredrickson, 1998, 2001, 2013; Hogan, Catalino, Mata, & Fredrickson, 2015; Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004).

Fredrickson, Tugade, Waugh and Larkin (2003) suggest that in the aftermath of a crisis positive emotions can assist in the short term by improving “subjective experiences, undoing physiological arousal, and enhancing broadminded coping, and in the long-term, by minimizing depression and building enduring resources” (p. 374 ). To cultivate positive emotion during a crisis the authors suggest finding positive meaning, be it through drawing on spiritual and/or religious beliefs, or appreciating the philosophical meaning of life. However, the authors reflect that people can also find positive meaning by “reframing adverse events in a positive light, infusing ordinary events with positive value, and pursuing and attaining realistic goals” (p. 374).

Fredrickson et al. (2003) suggest that in terms of therapeutic interventions clinicians can instil positive emotions in clients through relaxation techniques, getting them to engage in pleasing activities and asking clients about their past best times. This aligns with the narrative approach discussed below, whereby clients are asked to find an alternative story to their problem story (Jerome Bruner & Kalmar, 1998; Goldstein, Kielhofner, & Paul-Ward, 2004; Ruthellen Josselson, 1998; Monk, 1997; M. Payne, 2006; Piehl, 1999; White & Epston, 1992; Winslade & Monk, 1999). The benefit of positive emotions may be difficult to see since these emotions can be subtle and fleeting, however several authors have argued that the benefits of positive emotion are cumulative and need not be intense to be of benefit (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2003; Fredrickson, 2001; Fredrickson et al., 2003; Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004; Tugade et al., 2014)

Since positive emotion broadens thinking, the more positive emotion we experience the more positive emotion we are likely to experience in future. Fredrickson and Joiner (2002) explain:

The psychological broadening sparked by one positive emotion increases the odds that an individual will find positive meaning in subsequent events and experience additional positive emotions. This upward spiral can, over time, build

psychological resources and optimize people's live, increasing longevity.

(Fredrickson & Joiner, 2002, pp. 174-175)

In contrast, depression and narrow pessimistic thinking influence one another and cause an ever-increasing downward spiral of negative emotion which may ultimately lead to clinical depression (Fredrickson & Joiner, 2002). Garland et al. (2010) explain this emotion-related dynamic as a downward spiral of negative emotion:

Sadness stemming from loss tends to co-occur with rumination on that loss coupled with behavioural withdrawal and fatigue, and these components can interact dynamically to produce subsequent sad feelings, leading to further rumination, withdrawal, and fatigue. Sadness can become further entrenched by spawning emotion-consistent appraisal tendencies to interpret new experiences in terms of loss and lack of control, a cognitive bias that may ultimately produce lasting negative beliefs about self and world. (Garland et al., 2010, p. 851)

Given the possibility of this downward spiral of negative emotion, the creation and experience of positive emotion is imperative. A study conducted by Stiglbauer, Gnambs, Gamsjager and Batinic (2013) demonstrated the relevance of Fredrickson's broaden-and build model of positive emotions for students' experiences at school. The study shows that positive school experiences promote happiness over time and, in turn, happiness facilitated positive school experience, resulting in an upward spiral of happiness in students' lives (Stiglbauer et al., 2013). These results further highlight the importance of creating positive school environments as they play an essential part in students' overall happiness and levels of academic achievement. The difference that can result from students' positive school experiences also occurs very quickly, meaning that any intervention programme in schools, be it at an individual or group level, may show beneficial effects within a short time. According to the authors, positive school environments are those that satisfy students' needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness. This bodes well for the use of strength-based counselling within schools. While positive emotion includes feeling good, our signature strengths, which are discussed in the next section, reflect what we are good at and, when utilised, can create positive emotion.

#### ***5.2.1.4 Positive psychology and signature strengths***

Traditionally psychology has aligned with the disease model and has sought to treat and manage mental illness (Seligman, 2003, 2011, 2017). The *Diagnostic and Statistical*

*Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-5)*, published by the American Psychiatric Association (APA, 2013), is used by clinicians to classify mental disorders and according to standard diagnostic criteria. As discussed above, the concern of positive psychology is not to discount the importance of treating mental illness but to focus on what causes people to flourish and thrive to enhance positive emotion and facilitate wellbeing (Compton & Hoffman, 2013; Diener & Seligman, 2002; Seligman, 2003, 2011; Tugade et al., 2014).

The Values in Action (VIA) Survey of Character Strengths, known as the “un-*DSM*”, aims to classify human strengths rather than looking at weakness (Aspinwall & Staudinger, 2003; A. Carr, 2004; Franklin, 2015; Fredrickson, 2009; Gelso & Woodhouse, 2003; Jones-Smith, 2014; Park & Peterson, 2008; C. Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Sapp, 2006; Snyder et al., 2011; Wright & Lopez, 2002). These authors argue that nurturing and using our strengths in our daily activities promotes positive emotion, flow and wellbeing. The Survey of Character Strengths is a 240-item face-valid self-report questionnaire. The measure uses 5-point Likert-style items to measure the degree to which respondents endorse items reflecting 24 character strengths (A. Carr, 2004; Fredrickson, 2009; Gelso & Woodhouse, 2003; Park & Peterson, 2008; C. Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Seligman, 2003; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Snyder et al., 2011).

The VIA Classification of Character Strengths is comprised of six broad virtue categories: Wisdom and Knowledge, Courage, Humanity, Justice, Temperance and Transcendence, and the 24 character strengths fall under each virtue as follows:

- Wisdom and Knowledge: Cognitive strengths that entail the acquisition and use of knowledge – the signature strengths under this virtue include: creativity, curiosity, judgment (critical thinking), love of learning and perspective (wisdom).
- Courage: Emotional strengths that involve the exercise of will to accomplish goals in the face of opposition, external or internal – the signature strengths under this virtue include: Bravery, perseverance, honesty and zest.
- Humanity: Interpersonal strengths that involve tending and befriending others – the signature strengths under this virtue include: Love, kindness and social intelligence.
- Justice: Civic strengths that underlie healthy community life – the signature strengths under this virtue include: Teamwork, fairness and leadership.



- Temperance: Strengths that protect against excess – the signature strengths under this virtue include: Forgiveness, humility, prudence and self-regulation.
- Transcendence: Strengths that forge connections to the larger universe and provide meaning – the signature strengths under this virtue include: Appreciation of beauty and excellence, gratitude, hope, humour and spirituality (Park & Peterson, 2008; C. Peterson, 2006; C. Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

The proponents of positive psychology suggest that in completing the VIA Character Strengths survey and in practising our signature strengths, we can promote the experience of more positive emotion in our lives (Compton & Hoffman, 2013; C. Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Seligman, 2011; Snyder et al., 2011). The relevance of positive psychology to the school context is discussed next.

#### ***5.2.1.5 Positive psychology in a school context***

The high incidence of mental health issues among adolescents, the low levels of life satisfaction, and the link between learning and positive emotion support the argument that the skills for happiness should be taught in school (Seligman et al., 2009). According to the authors positive education can thus be seen as education for both traditional skills and skills for happiness. Furthermore, according to Seligman et al., there is evidence from well-controlled studies that skills that increase resilience, positive emotion, engagement and meaning can be taught to schoolchildren.

Furthermore, positive psychology aims to identify the features of enabling institutions, including exploring the core factors of what makes a “good” school (Gomez & Mei-Mei Ang, 2007; Larson, 2000; C. Peterson, 2006; Seligman et al., 2009; Steinberg, 2007; Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004; Tugade et al., 2014). The authors suggest that in identifying these features positive psychology can provide strategies for positive institutional change at both the individual and systems levels. C. Peterson (2006) claims that at the individual level one of these strategies is to promote existing student strengths. He argues that “as our attention turns to certain character strengths we should be as concerned with how to keep certain strengths from eroding on the journey to adulthood as with how to build others from scratch” (p. 154). Schools can be very influential in this process by establishing programmes that promote students’ strengths and connect positive emotions to learning (Dawood, 2014; Seligman, 2011; Seligman et al., 2009; Stickel & Callaway, 2007).

The school counselling setting may be a good entry point for establishing a programme that promotes students' strengths and connects positive emotions to learning (Dawood, 2014). As such, the current research remains open to the possibility of introducing positive psychology into schools using school counsellors as an initial point of entry. All six pillars of positive psychology in the PERMA-V model may be embraced within the counselling setting. The counselling setting could potentially provide a positive environment for students by building a positive relationship between counsellor and student. This relationship is in turn conducive to promoting the positive emotion of student wellbeing by helping students embrace their positive traits and nurturing their strengths and virtues.

#### ***5.2.1.6 Positive psychology and the implications for school counselling***

Stickel and Callaway (2007) argue that part of the school counsellor's role is to collaborate effectively with the multiple stakeholders in education in order to effect positive change within the school system, so as to promote successful outcomes for all students. The authors suggest that the theoretical underpinnings of positive psychology can serve as a tool, on several levels, to accomplish these positive outcomes. Nominal research findings support this notion and show that school counsellors can use positive psychology strategies in their counselling practice with students to promote healthy development and can assist teachers in their understanding of what emotional connections encourage intrinsic motivation (Akin-Little et al., 2004; Chafouleas & Bray, 2004; Clonan et al., 2004; Harris et al., 2007; Snyder & Lopez, 2001; Stickel & Callaway, 2007).

Thus far, however, only minimal consideration has been given to the use of positive psychology within counselling practice (Boniwell & Ryan, 2012; Harris et al., 2007; Park & Peterson, 2008; Seligman et al., 2009). Counselling psychology is concerned with the problems of adjustment and development rather than psychopathology, and like positive psychology is deemed to focus on the strengths and assets of the individual during short counselling interventions (Gelso & Woodhouse, 2003; Hanley et al., 2012; Kaczmarek, 2006; Ungar, 2006). However, according to Harris et al. (2007), this focus on strengths may not occur in practice as many counsellors work in deficit-orientated settings where the biomedical model is dominant and the effectiveness of strength-based interventions is called into question. Furthermore, the authors report there is little research evidence that links strength-promoting interventions to common counselling goals, such as the treatment

of substance abuse, depression and anxiety. Further research into positive psychology may provide this link.

Positive psychology can subtly be introduced into counselling practice, including in deficit-orientated settings, by infusing a strength orientation into some aspects of the counselling process (Boniwell & Ryan, 2012; Brzycki, 2009; Dawood, 2014; Harris et al., 2007; Kaczmarek, 2006; Park & Peterson, 2008; Seligman et al., 2009; Sharpy, 2004; Steinberg, 2007; Ungar, 2006). A simple way to do this is to first identify clients' character strengths via one of the positive psychology strength inventories (Aspinwall & Staudinger, 2003; Franklin, 2015; Jones-Smith, 2014; Lopez & Snyder, 2003; C. Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Sharpy et al., 2012; Snyder et al., 2011).

Park and Peterson (2008) explain that in schools certain character strengths beyond intelligence influence a student's academic success and this has important implications for school counsellors and others concerned with advancing positive youth development. They believe that character strengths – especially gratitude, hope and perseverance – should be identified and nurtured. The authors further indicate that increased student popularity, and lower measures of psychopathology, can be attributed to certain character strengths. In particular, “the strengths of hope, zest, and leadership were substantially related to fewer internalizing problems such as depression and anxiety disorders, whereas the strengths of persistence, honesty, prudence, and love were substantially related to fewer externalizing problems such as aggression” (Park & Peterson, 2008, p. 89)

Building certain character strengths would therefore not only act as a buffer against problems experienced by our youth but could also lead to increased wellbeing and improved academic success.

Considering this protective role played by character strengths, Park and Peterson (2008) advocate that school counsellors should be concerned not only with alleviating students' deficits but also with measuring and building on students' character strengths. To do this, they suggest counsellors use the VIA Classification of Strengths measure described above. The VIA measures can be scored to identify student's signature strengths in relation to their other strengths. The authors believe each student has strengths irrespective of where they stand comparatively to others and that by using the information obtained from a student's character strengths profile, counsellors can tailor interventions to fit the lives of each student. At school, students who have the necessary strengths should be encouraged to

incorporate them into their schoolwork and into their lives, and for students who need to enhance their strengths; counsellors should conduct interventions at group and individual level to build these strengths (Park & Peterson, 2008).

School counsellors can build on existing client strengths and resources by using positive language (Harris et al., 2007; McFadden, 1991; Robichaud et al., 2004). Counsellors already use reframing of language, called cognitive restructuring in some therapeutic modalities, to help people with their problems. Where this reframing of language or “re-languaging” is strength-based, counsellors may be able to help clients acquire more constructive ways of thinking (Harris et al., 2007, p. 5). In this manner, client strengths can be supported without conducting specific strength promoting interventions. Harris et al. propose that by promoting growth and maintenance of positive characteristics and behaviours, counsellors may ensure the absence of their negative counterparts and in so doing counsellors can simultaneously achieve their goal of reducing negative states.

Beck (1995) supports the view that the way we use language about ourselves and others makes a difference to the way we conceptualise our reality and suggests that strength-based language may encourage a more positive outlook. Furthermore, by using language to focus on positive emotional states that increase satisfaction it follows that dissatisfaction will decrease (Catalino et al., 2014; Fredrickson, 2001, 2009; Garland et al., 2010). Raven and Johnson (1999) agree, stating that we cannot become more upset and more relaxed simultaneously as the nature of the autonomic nervous system makes this physiologically impossible.

Another area in which positive psychology can subtly be introduced is with client intake and assessment. In various counselling settings client intake and assessment is conducted according to the biomedical model where problems are framed in the negative as residing within the individual client (Hanley et al., 2012; Wright & Lopez, 2002). This negative assessment of clients partly explains the focus of counselling interventions that are aimed at eradicating the negative. To integrate positive psychology perspectives into counselling practice, assessment and history-taking procedures need to be expanded, including “not only the liabilities to be reduced” but also “the absence of skills or knowledge to be developed, and the presence of strengths and resources to be supported and maintained” (Harris et al., 2007, p. 5). Harris et al. caution, however, that positive

psychology is not intended to be prescriptive and, as such, strength promotion is to be used only in those instances where it would prove optimal to do so.

Several authors (Freedman & Combs, 1996; Gelso & Woodhouse, 2003; Hanley et al., 2012; Harris et al., 2007; Ivey & Ivey, 1998; Lambie, 2004; Masters, 1992) support the positive reframing of perceived client weaknesses as strengths. Furthermore, they agree that asking preliminary screening questions about strengths can be helpful and bring relevant information to light. Yet, Harris et al. (2007) stress that the concepts of strength and weakness are “personally and culturally constructed” (p. 10) and as such must be situated within client-specific contexts. The authors advocate that embedding clients’ problems within their developmental history and socio-cultural context may result in more positive stories and favourable outcomes.

Harris et al. (2007) note, however, that more research is needed into the extent to which a change from a deficit-based to a strength-based focus will result in more favourable outcomes. To be successful a strength-based approach will need to demonstrate its advantages over more pathology-focused approaches, and the way in which we view problems will need to be reconceptualised. Another strength-based approach that also views the problem a client presents with from a positive perspective is narrative counselling, which is discussed next.

### **5.2.2 Narrative counselling as strength-based counselling**

Narrative counselling is founded on poststructuralist ideas and as a psychological approach gives people new ways in which to look at their problems (White & Epston, 2002).

Narrative counselling holds that all people have a story to tell (Bleakley, 2005; J. Bruner, 2004; Clandinin, 2007; Clouston, 2003; Lee, 2004; M. Payne, 2006; Stephens & McCallum, 1998; Winslade & Monk, 1999; Zilber et al., 2008). The stories we tell about ourselves, and that others tell about us, shape our reality (E. Bruner, 1986). They not only *express* what we see, they *construct* what we see. Further, the stories we live by are not produced in a vacuum, in that we are not the sole authors of our stories (Winslade & Monk, 1999). Instead, many of the dominant stories that govern our lives were generated in our early experiences of childhood at home, at school, at church, and in the neighbourhood. These local institutions are in turn given shape by the stories that are current in the wider social contexts in which we live. In this way the narrative perspective locates problems in

the *cultural landscape*, which implies that counsellors need to consider their own as well as the client's cultural positioning (Winslade & Monk, 1999, p. 3).

#### **5.2.2.1 What is narrative counselling?**

Weisenburger (2004) explains that narrative counselling recognises people's competencies and endeavours to augment personal strengths instead of focusing on correcting personal deficits. In narrative counselling clients are seen as separate from the problem, and counsellors aspire "to help people see problems as the product of circumstances or interpersonal processes" (M. Payne, 2006, p. 12). According to Winslade and Monk (1999), the narrative counsellor listens to the client's problem story but also looks for information that is not bothersome. In some brief therapies this is referred to as "looking for exceptions to the problem story" and may form the foundation of a preferred story for the client – the counter-story. When people first attend counselling, they tend to begin by telling a problem story. In narrative counselling, these initial stories are called "thin descriptions" (Freedman & Combs, 1996; Lee, 2004; Monk, 1997; Morgan, 2000; M. Payne, 2006). According to Payne, they are problem-focused descriptions that become the dominant plot of a person's life story. He describes these thin descriptions as partial maps that reflect only a portion of a person's reality.

Morgan (2000) argues that thin descriptions permit "little space for the complexities and contradictions of life and little room for movement" (p. 12) as they are often based on other people's judgements about a person's actions, and these so-called experts (e.g., parents, teachers and health professionals) "hold the power of definition" (p. 12) over many of us. Since thin descriptions reflect only a portion of a person's story they give way to thin conclusions about a person's identity and tend to dis-empower and label people. As the problem-saturated story is repeated, it gains momentum and has more power to negatively influence people's lives (Morgan, 2000).

According to Weisenburger (2004), a narrative counsellor will hone in on the problem-saturated story in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of a problem's influence and to create a rich description of the problem. Once a rich description has been obtained, the client will be asked to name the problem as naming is a useful strategy for externalizing problems (e.g., "negativity" becomes "the negative voice", "jealous" becomes "the jealousy").

In externalizing conversations the counsellor persistently “uses language embodying an implicit assumption that the problem is having an effect on the person rather than existing within or being intrinsic to him” (M. Payne, 2006, p. 12). These conversations allow the person to be separated from the problem. Morgan (2000) clarifies that:

When people are separated from the problems, their skills, abilities, interests, competencies and commitments become more visible. The more visible these skills become, the more available they are for people to access. Externalizing conversations reduce guilt and blame and yet leave room for responsibility. (p. 24)

In externalizing conversations counsellors may ask the client “How long has the jealousy been trying to get between you & your friends? Or “How has the negative voice tried to convince you that you can’t do anything?” During externalizing conversations, the relationship between the person and the problem is explored to re-author or re-story the relationship (Weisenburger, 2004; White & Epston, 1992; Winslade & Monk, 1999). Morgan (2000) explains that through externalizing conversations the problem is placed in a specific context; it is seen as changing and less static or fixed. Moments of greater or lesser influence can be identified. People often feel relieved to discover that the problem has changed at different times in their lives: “When times of lesser and greater influence are discovered, new or different stories may emerge. As soon as these conversations are taking place, re-storying work has begun” (pp. 36–37).

According to Weisenburger (2004), these counter-stories or “unique outcome stories” emphasise the instances where a person was able to face up to the problem or dominant story. Payne (2006) explains that:

When a person has mentioned aspects of her experience which appear to deny, contradict or modify her dominant problem-saturate story, the counsellor, through questioning, invites her to expand on the circumstance and nature of these unique outcomes and, by asking questions, focuses attention on how these do not fit with the story-as-told”. (p. 14)

As with the dominant problem story, the counsellor explores a person’s counter-story to trace its effects on the person’s life. The counsellor assists the client in creating a map of the counter-story which can then be considered alongside the map of the dominant problem story.

These two maps are explored with the client by asking questions such as:

Where will this problem take you? What designs does it have for your life? How could the story change if you reposition yourself and act against the problem? What ending do you want to your story? Who would support you in your choice of positive action? Whose presence would empower you for such a change of direction?”. (Weisenburger, 2004, p. 22)

These questions help clients choose a new direction and identity for their lives. However, according to Winslade and Monk (1999), narrative counselling does not end with the development of this new direction and identity. As the authors reflect narrative counsellors being social constructionists do not see identity as “the sole property of the person to whom they are attached” (p. 15).

Thus, the final stages of narrative counselling are described by White and Epston (1992) using a reincorporation metaphor, which involves “re-joining of the person with others in a familiar social world, and encouraging the recruitment of others in the celebration and acknowledgement of the person’s arrival at a preferred destination or status in life” (p. 5). Winslade and Monk (1999) suggest this reincorporation anchors the revised story into the society in which the client lives. To do this, the counsellor “asks questions about the management of the client’s reputation” (p. 15). Furthermore, they suggest that “an appreciative audience to new developments is deliberately sought out. For most of us, it is not possible to make radical changes in our lives without somebody cheering us on” (p. 15). Thus, significant people in the client’s life are asked to witness the testimony of this new direction or counter-story of life which is documented through letter or ritual (Weisenburger, 2004). Counselling concludes when the client feels their counter-story can support their chosen direction.

#### ***5.2.2.2 Narrative counselling in a school context***

Power-based relationships and the authority they have over us are important considerations in narrative counselling. Traditionally, adolescents have been the focus of study by adults who often hand them expedient solutions to their problems without getting them to reflect on their behaviours and the implications that these behaviours have on others (Winslade & Monk, 1999). M. Payne (2006) suggests that narrative counsellors will “recognise that persons sometimes ascribe the distressing and unjust results of social factors to themselves, as personal failures, shortcomings or faults, and that they are implicitly encouraged to do so



by those who hold power” (p. 12). According to Winslade and Monk (1999), “in schools, stories about what constitutes a successful member of the school community (and just as powerfully, stories of failure) do not just describe children’s lives. They actively shape children’s experiences of themselves and of school” (p. 22).

Winslade and Monk (1999) suggest that “the modern world is characterized by societal norms that are kept in place by surveillance and scrutiny” (p. 24). Foucault (1973) called this effect “the gaze”, whereby we are subject to comparative and evaluative inspections and learn to see ourselves through the eyes of others. Winslade and Monk (1999) comment that at school children often develop a strong awareness of how they appear to others, which is due to this scrutiny. The authors explain how the gaze operates in schools:

Through the systems of evaluation and assessment, which serve to classify and categorize young people according to their intellectual performance or their social acceptability. Out of these evaluations, young people construct their beliefs about who they are and what they are capable of. In some counselling theories, this discovery of self emerges from within. From a narrative perspective, what lies within is constructed from without. (p. 25)

Winslade and Monk (1999) reflect that since the scrutiny of the self influences all aspects of our lives, narrative counsellors should be aware of the power of discourse to persuade us to accept certain things about ourselves. Counselling can facilitate the deconstruction of discourse to reveal its influence on a person’s life (White & Epston, 1992).

### ***5.2.2.3 Narrative counselling and the implications for school counselling***

According to Winslade and Monk (1999), the way in which students are portrayed is frequently part of the problem that leads to counselling. Language shapes children’s experiences of schools and we should therefore consider the words we use and how they affect others. For example, “deficit language”, even when it is intended to assist in addressing problems, often hampers the counselling process by inducing helplessness in the client (Winslade & Monk, 1999).

Winslade and Monk (1999) argue that a young person who is in trouble with school authorities tends to attract a totalizing deficit description. They ask, “How can counsellors engage with young people who are in trouble? How can they provide them with challenges that help them make changes to their behaviour, and still treat them with respect, rather

than colonize them against their will as objects of punishment or behaviour modification?” (p. 67). Furthermore, the authors assert that traditional approaches to counselling do not equip counsellors in being able to do this adequately:

Client-centred listening is not likely on its own to be effective in producing enough leverage for change, even if it establishes a strong relationship with troubled young people. Psychodynamic approaches are not speedy enough in producing change in often volatile situations. Approaches that rely on cathartic expression of feelings may sometimes inadvertently support behaviour that is abusive of others. (p. 67)

Winslade and Monk (1999) remind us that the narrative approach allows counsellors to reflect on the power of discourse to name people and thus to shape their identity. The authors suggest it enables counsellors to step outside of deficit discourses and to question their so-called inevitability and their effects. They reflect that as counsellors express this stance to students, they “open up enough space from them to contest these descriptions in their deeds as well as in their words and to shape their own identities deliberately” (p. 68).

Finally, a narrative approach can offer school counsellors a counselling perspective that is distinguished by its unique conversational approach which “young people experience as calling forth their best selves, rather than dwelling on, or disparaging, their worst selves” (Winslade & Monk, 1999, p. 68). Solution-focused brief counselling (SFBC) as strength-based counselling is discussed next.

### **5.2.3 SFBC as strength-based counselling**

According to Ventura (2010), SFBC is founded on a social constructionist philosophy. The solution to a client’s presenting problem is co-constructed between the client and counsellor during the counselling process. SFBC concentrates on a client’s present and future and the past is only discussed with respect to how it may assist the client now (Franklin, Zhang, Froerer, & Johnson, 2017; Lovarco & Csiernik, 2015; Sharry et al., 2012; Ventura, 2010; Witte, 2015). Ventura (2010) explains that during counselling the counsellor asks the client to visualise his or her ideal future and focuses on what the client wishes to achieve through counselling instead of on the problems that initially brought the client to counselling. This is achieved by asking questions about “the clients’ story, attending to their strengths, resources and abilities and highlighting exceptions to the problem” (Ventura, 2010, p. 3). In

this way, the counsellor assists the client in constructing a new preferred story. Ventura clarifies that “by bringing small successes to a client’s awareness and helping them to repeat those things they are doing when the problem is not dominating them or is not there, the clients moves toward the preferred future they have identified” (p. 3). This is not unlike the narrative counselling process discussed above.

#### ***5.2.3.1 What is SFBC?***

According to Hubble, Duncan and Miller (1999), SFBC focuses on small obtainable goals set by the client. Ventura (2010) argues that these small changes are considered “generative and will lead to larger changes over time” (p. 4). He explains that

the process of listening for exceptions to the problem and developing goals that are mutually acceptable and motivational will direct the process of therapy in a more positive direction. Focusing on the solution and on the positive behaviours necessary to obtain that solution is seen as a distinguishing feature of solution-focused brief therapy. (p. 4)

SFBC assumes clients are already aware of how to solve their own problems (Ventura, 2010). It regards clients as merely stuck and looking for a variety of alternatives for solutions, and SFBC techniques are intended to assist clients in looking to themselves for solutions. Various techniques are employed by SFBC, for example, Ventura’s (2010) “miracle question”, which asks clients to imagine a miracle has taken place and their problems have been resolved. They are asked “In what way would your life have improved?” once this miracle has taken place. The miracle question shifts a client’s focus away from his or her problems and towards a preferred future.

Secondly, the counsellor may ask the “exception question” to seek instances when the client is not overwhelmed by the problem and endeavours to emphasise these exceptions, as well to identify the client’s strengths, resources, and abilities (Franklin et al., 2017; Lovarco & Csiernik, 2015; Ventura, 2010; Witte, 2015). A counsellor may ask the client “Is there a time when the problem is not present for you or does not trouble you?” In answering the exception question problems are reframed and weaknesses can be seen in a new light as sources of strength that bring clients hope. This is reminiscent of externalising the presenting problem in narrative counselling.

Thirdly, the “scaling question” helps the counsellor observe clients’ view of themselves in relation to their problems. The counsellor then follows on with several

questions encouraging clients to highlight the positive. For example, the counsellor may ask, “On a scale of 1 to 10 how in control of life are you? If the client responds 5, then the therapist would follow with another question – How can you move from a 5 to a 6?” (Ventura, 2010, p. 5).

Ventura (2010) stresses that in accordance with the social constructionist model, in SFBC the client and counsellor work together to co-construct a treatment plan that they both believe will be effective. “The focus in SFBC is on the client as expert, not the counsellor. It involves using positive language and highlighting clients’ resources, strengths and abilities in pursuit of a goal or area they choose to change” (p. 7). Ventura emphasises that in SFBC the source of change lies within the client and not in the techniques themselves.

To summarise, SFBC, according to Walter and Peller (1992), is based on five basic assumptions:

1. Focusing on successes results in beneficial change and instigating “solution talk” rather than “problem talk” supports this process.
2. All problems have exceptions that can be sought out and used to develop solutions. Clients tend to see their problems as constant, when in fact there are times when their problems are momentarily absent. Counsellors need to establish “where, when, and how exceptions occur as a step in helping clients develop solutions” (Sklare, 2005, p. 11).
3. Seemingly insignificant changes have a snowball effect that develops into significant changes.
4. All clients are able to overcome their problems. Instead of focusing on clients’ deficits, by illuminating clients’ strengths changes occur more rapidly.
5. Clients’ goals are seen in positive terms, “reflecting what clients want to do, rather than in negative terms, reflecting the absence of something they don’t want to do” (Sklare, 2005, p. 11). To accomplish this, clients visualise what they do want and counsellors assist them in co-constructing positively worded goals that reflect this.

In addition to these five basic assumptions, DeShazer (1985) and Berg and Miller (1992, p. 17) have proposed three basic rules for counsellors using SFBC:

1. If it is not broken don’t fix it. When counsellors focus on certain areas of a clients’ life that are not an issue for them difficulties can arise in these areas where

previously there were none. Counsellors should instead focus on creating solutions, not on generating further concerns.

2. When you know what works, do more of it. Clients often overlook what is working in their lives and focus instead on what is wrong. For example, “students aren’t always tardy for class, always disturbing the teacher, or never doing homework” (Sklare, 2005, p. 9). By identifying those strategies that are successful the counsellor can get clients to replicate them.
3. If it doesn’t work, don’t do it again. Do something different. Using this rule the counsellor can reconsider their ideas around resistance, since when clients show unwillingness or are uncooperative they are revealing to counsellors what does not work for them.

#### ***5.2.3.2 SFBC in a school context***

According to Sklare (2005), the majority of students who see school counsellors are referred by teachers or parents. Parents and teachers who want the student to change are the real clients of counselling. Sklare explains that students are only visitors to counselling, abiding by the wishes of authority figures, and hence do not commit to the counselling process. Furthermore, school counsellors who are highly motivated to effect change in students are also at risk of becoming more focused on this change than the student is (Franklin et al., 2017; Kral, 1995; Sharry et al., 2012; Witte, 2015). (See section 4.3.1 on ways in which these issues can be ameliorated.)

In addition to these challenges, Sklare (2005) explains that school counsellors are encumbered by the expectation for immediate and tangible results. He suggests that teachers who are challenged by students’ academic and behavioural shortcomings send them to the counsellor as a cure all. Furthermore, he argues that perceived failure on the part of the school counsellor to affect the desired change in students’ means teachers have less confidence in the counselling process. The SFBC model focuses on achieving tangible outcomes by using language that directs students to take positive actions, which suits students well (Franklin et al., 2017; Lovarco & Csiernik, 2015; Sharry et al., 2012; Sklare, 2005; Witte, 2015). The goal of abstaining from certain behaviours is not easy to achieve since to envision themselves refraining from certain behaviours, students need to replace them with a concrete alternative. By focusing on solutions students become aware of what they can do to change.

SFBC places the responsibility of establishing the outcome goals for counselling with the student. Students are seen as their own experts who know what is best (Franklin et al., 2017; Lovarco & Csiernik, 2015; Sharpy et al., 2012; Sklare, 2005). Trusting students' ability to establish their own goals communicates confidence and respect, and when students can design their own map for counselling, resistance is reduced. Sklare (2005) concludes, "Effectiveness in using this method depends on the willingness to embrace this belief in the client's abilities; to allow clients to do all the work and assume all the responsibility; and to recognise that regardless of clients' past experiences or background, change for the better is possible" (p. 6).

### ***5.2.3.3 SFBC and the implications for school counselling***

Weiner-Davis, De Shazer and Gingerich (1987) and De Shazer and Molnar (1984) established that in counselling, whatever is discussed – positive or negative – is amplified, and in SFBC honing in on students' assets rather than their deficits changes the focus in school counselling from problems to solutions, increasing the chances that solutions will be achieved.

Sklare (2005) stresses that while it is essential for school counsellors to grasp the "theoretical underpinning of psychoanalytic, psychodynamic, gestalt, behavioural, transactional analysis and person-centred counselling, expecting school counsellors to apply these models in a school setting is unrealistic" (p. 1). He contends that most counselling modalities used in counsellor training programmes focus on deficits, thereby suggesting that the client is somehow lacking. Sklare adds that the importance placed on deficits in school counselling results in all-encompassing, time-consuming examinations of "problems, aetiology, histories and causes" (p. 2). SFBC eliminates the necessity for an in-depth examination of the causes and origins of clients' problems and thus greatly shortens the time needed for counselling (De Shazer, 1985; Franklin et al., 2017; Hubble et al., 1999; Kral, 1995; Lovarco & Csiernik, 2015; Sklare, 2005; Walter & Peller, 1992; Witte, 2015). In addition, because the focus in counselling changes to solutions, actions become more significant and insight much less so. Kral (1995) suggests that since insight is not essential in SFBC, this approach offers a good fit for students who do not have the capacity to understand the nature and origins of their problems.

Moreover, the expertise required in SFBC is shared by other counselling modalities, including "listening, responding with empathy, asking open-ended questions, supporting,

reinforcing, identifying goals, and applying scaling methods” (Sklare, 2005, pp. 6-7). These commonalities mean it is easier for school counsellors to adopt a solution-based approach. However, Sklare (2005) cautions that, as with any counselling approach, SFBC will not necessarily be successful with all students and needs to be viewed as another feather in the quill of counselling approaches that may be effective with students.

All the counselling practices described in this section direct the focus of counselling towards the positive. In the next section I explore the notion of countering the “positive” in positive psychology and look at trauma, negative emotion and post-traumatic growth.

### **5.3 Countering the “positive” in positive psychology**

Positive psychology is identified as focusing on the positive facets of life and the so-called negative facets of life are viewed as being undesirable and regarded by the uninitiated as having no part in positive psychology. However, this is not accurate since positive psychology does focus on the more difficult and painful of human experiences (Ivtzan et al., 2016; Parrott, 2014). Indeed, Parrott (2014) suggests that the so-called dark side of life, including difficult circumstances, thoughts, emotions and actions which lead to discomfort, is important to the positive aspects of our growth and development.

While the outcomes of positive psychology theory and research are intended to be positive, the process of achieving these outcomes may be difficult, and traumatic experiences can lead to growth and flourishing. In fact, it is argued that the dark side of life may in its own unique way be paramount to our ultimate flourishing (Ivtzan et al., 2016).

In addition to the beneficial aspects of the dark side of life, there is research to suggest that “positive” aspects of life may at times be to our detriment. Traditionally happiness is seen as giving us an evolutionary advantage since happy people are more likely to be social, exploratory, inventive, and healthy (Kashdan & Biswas-Diener, 2014). However, positive emotions can be counter-productive to our wellbeing in certain situations (Ivtzan et al., 2016; Kashdan & Biswas-Diener, 2014, 2015a, 2015b; Parrott, 2014). For example, according to Kashdan and Biswas-Diener (2014), being too carefree or happy can make one less detail-orientated, less conscious of risk, more gullible, less persuasive, and unaware of the negative impact one’s behaviour has on others. Unhappy people, in contrast, tend to focus more on details, are less likely to be deceived and can be more persuasive. Thus, the authors explain that being slightly negative can enhance our performance as we

are able to discern whether someone is trustworthy and are better able to focus on details in a crisis:

When emotions can lead to a better outcome, it's helpful to focus on what you want to accomplish rather than what you feel. It turns out that people have an intuitive grasp of the function of negative emotions, and sometimes choose these psychological down-states over happiness to achieve a goal. (p. 20)

Kashdan and Biswas-Diener (2014) also talk about the “contrast effect”, where an emotional high can make other good events in your life seem less significant. In addition, people who place a lot of emphasis on the positive aspects of their lives might suffer from the “carryover effect”, where they also place a lot of emphasis on the negative aspects of their lives.

Another important distinction regarding happiness is between wanting something and liking it once we have it (Kashdan & Biswas-Diener, 2014). We may think that if we want something badly enough we will like it once we get it, however this is not necessarily the case. We can make erroneous decisions that we think will support our happiness but may in fact be detrimental. In these instances, the pursuit of happiness may be counter-productive to our wellbeing. In addition, the pursuit of happiness may actually interfere with being happy in the moment and may preclude us from the pleasure, engagement and meaning we would otherwise find in our lives (Kashdan & Biswas-Diener, 2014). Yet, what is perceived as happiness? According to Kashdan and Biswas-Diener, people often misconstrue the potential causes of happiness as being happiness. The authors explain that happiness is a feeling and given that it has an emotional basis, it is experienced subjectively. A happy person then is described by the authors as someone who has more positive emotions than negative ones, but it is up to the individual as to what is considered either a positive or negative emotion.

I have discussed how certain “positive” aspects of life can have a detrimental impact in various ways. By the same token “apparent” negative life events can have a positive impact. This is not to say that negative experiences are in and of themselves “good”, however we can find value in them that can then result in a positive influence (Ivtzan et al., 2016; Parrott, 2014). There is a further argument for allowing ourselves the experience of negative emotions. Negative emotions are a normal counterpart to positive emotions and are a natural consequence of daily life. Suppressing our feelings and forcing



ourselves to be positive when we are feeling sad, anxious or stressed can in the long run negatively impact our psychological wellbeing and make us feel incongruent with the messiness that is normal life (Hefferon & Boniwell, 2011; Ivtzan et al., 2016; Kashdan & Biswas-Diener, 2014, 2015a, 2015b). Furthermore, trying to suppress negative emotions may result in feeling them more intently. Kashdan and Biswas-Diener (2014) advise that instead of shying away from negative emotions we should acknowledge how we feel without pushing to alter our emotional state. In accepting our thoughts and feelings, we can view our difficulties with greater clarity and then take the appropriate action.

Kashdan and Biswas-Diener (2014) also believe that negative emotions have value in that they protect us, make us less complacent, and give us an awareness of what isn't working in our lives. They suggest that negativity can act as a motivator since we are unlikely to change when everything is going well. Negative emotions, when they reach critical mass, spur us to action and can result in positive change (Kashdan & Biswas-Diener, 2014, 2015a, 2015b; Parrott, 2014). Negative emotions signal to us when something in our lives is not working and can assist us in attending to the changes we need to make in our lives.

Another area of positive psychology that addresses the positive side of negative emotion is post-traumatic growth. Post-traumatic growth is regarded as the positive consequence that results in the aftermath of a trauma (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2013; Tedeschi, Park, & Calhoun, 1998). Post-traumatic growth is divided into five domains: personal strength (where people report becoming stronger and more authentic after trauma), relating to others (where people suggest they become closer to certain people in their lives), appreciation for life, new possibilities and spiritual change (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2013; Tedeschi et al., 1998).

There is some debate as to whether post-traumatic growth exists, as some researchers believe that what is being experienced is a form of cognitive dissonance, whereby a person rationalises what has happened to gain acceptance (Hefferon & Boniwell, 2011; Ivtzan et al., 2016). However, the authors explain further that if the perception of growth after trauma assists one in healing and coping with the trauma, in the absence of any pathology, then it may be beneficial.

The message of positive psychology then is to embrace both the so-called positive and negative aspects of our lives, because in acknowledging the intricacy of life we can more fully enhance our psychological wellbeing. This applies to positive psychology but

also to strength-based counselling in general. Strength-based counselling, like positive psychology, has been criticised for focusing excessively on the positive and these limitations will be discussed next.

#### **5.4 Limitations of strength-based counselling**

Like positive psychology, strength-based counselling has been criticised for focusing on the positive aspects of a client's experience while minimising the impact and importance of a client's negative experiences. Held (2002) asks:

What happens to profound feelings of hopelessness? As a therapist, I wonder if people are allowed to feel hopeless (or to feel bad in any sense) for at least a little while, if that is what they are honestly feeling. Can those real feelings be tolerated, explored, and empathically or therapeutically contained by therapists inclined to push ahead full force in their uncritical quest for positivity? If therapists cannot tolerate the expression of pain or negativity, and if, as a result, they cannot provide real empathy in their rush to crush negative thoughts and feelings, then where will people go to reap the empirically demonstrated benefits of opening up productively? If we can't be real – if we can't be ourselves – in therapy of all places, then where? (p. 986)

Wong (2006), however, argues that strength-based counselling “should not be viewed merely as a therapeutic approach to help the client feel and think more positively” (p. 143) and that it should not be construed as an approach that dissuades clients from discussing their negative experiences, as Held (2002) suggests. Instead, Wong (2006) explains, venting negative thoughts and emotions to the counsellor may assist the client in building “the strengths of authenticity, humility and help seeking” (p. 143).

Additionally, it must be stressed that strength-based counselling, while focusing on the positive aspects of the human condition, is not an easier therapeutic option for clients and still requires hard work and can be painful (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2013; Galassi & Akos, 2007; Jones-Smith, 2014; Park & Peterson, 2008; C. Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Sharpy, 2004; Tedeschi et al., 1998; Ungar, 2006). As explained in the previous section, adverse life circumstances often result in positive character development and should thus be explored by the counsellor to enable this development. Therefore, when honing in on clients' character strengths, the counsellor must not discount the clients' subjective

experience of suffering (Galassi & Akos, 2007; Jones-Smith, 2014; Park & Peterson, 2008; Sharry, 2004; Ungar, 2006; Wong, 2006). Instead, the counsellor should allow clients sufficient time to express their negative thoughts and emotions and show genuine empathy for the clients' predicament.

Thus, strength-based counselling may incorporate both the positive and negative aspects of a client's experience. However, strength-based counselling is not necessarily the best approach to use in every situation and will depend on the needs of each individual client. For strength-based counselling to be successful the client must be self-aware and have the capacity for self-reflection. Some authors suggest that in certain cases, where clients present to counselling with severe psychopathology and are experiencing great distress, the psychological capacity to reflect on their strengths may not be present (Jones-Smith, 2014; Wong, 2006). These authors suggest that in these instances strength-based counselling may not be appropriate or will need to be supplemented by counselling approaches that provide additional client support and promote emotional stability. For instance, Linehan (1987) suggests that with clients who are suicidal a dialectical behavioural counselling approach should be used alongside a strength-based counselling approach. Furthermore, Winslade and Monk (1999) indicate that under certain adverse life circumstances, such as a bereavement or parental divorce, it is not suitable to use a strength-based counselling approach immediately following the adversity as clients may not yet be ready to tap into their strengths. In the next section I discuss existing strength-based initiatives in education and health in New Zealand.

### **5.5 Existing strength-based initiatives in education and health in New Zealand**

Since the inception of this study, certain strength-based initiatives, funded by the Ministry of Education, have been introduced into several schools in New Zealand. Two of these strength-based initiatives include the school-wide programmes Positive Behaviour for Learning (PB4L) and Restorative Practices (RPs) (Ministry of Education, 2015). School counsellors are ideally placed to support these positive initiatives in schools, which again lends support to a strength-based approach to counselling.

PB4L is based on the premise that positive behaviour can be learnt and that school environments can be altered in order to support this learning (Ministry of Education, 2015). Furthermore, this initiative holds that schools play an important part in nurturing wellbeing

and in creating safe and healthy communities. Introducing PB4L into schools fosters “positive behaviour, strengthens relationships, and increase student wellbeing by creating caring, inclusive learning environments” (Ministry of Education, 2015, p. 6). According to this initiative, “inclusive learning environments have a beneficial impact on adolescents behaviour, resilience, learning, and achievement” (p. 6).

The Gluckman (2011) report showed a high incidence of bullying, fighting, vandalism and substance abuse among children and adolescents in New Zealand. The report suggests that these behaviours result in barriers to learning and wellbeing and may have long-term social and economic consequences. The report further indicates that in New Zealand “one in five young people are likely to be affected by anxiety or depression by the age of 18 years” (p. 191) and that the youth suicide rates are some of the highest in the world (see section 4.3.2).

According to the 2015 “Positive Behaviour for Learning Overview” pamphlet, educational success is the strongest protective factor for young peoples’ life outcomes, impacting on their “future employment, income, health, and wellbeing” (Ministry of Education, 2015, p. 6). The Prime Minister’s Youth Mental Health Project was recently initiated to assist youth people who battle mild to moderate mental health issues (Education Review Office, 2016). There are three PB4L projects that form part of the Youth Mental Health Project. These include PB4L School-Wide, the My Friends Youth Resilience Programme, and Check & Connect (Education Review Office, 2016; Ministry of Education, 2015). A full synopsis of these initiatives is beyond the scope of this thesis; to access further information on these initiatives please see the referenced documents.

The New Zealand Curriculum necessitates that teaching and learning recognises, supports and builds on all students’ identities, languages, cultures, and abilities (Ministry of Education, 2007). According to “Positive Behaviour for Learning Overview”, wellbeing, learning, and behaviour are interlinked. PB4L helps to develop inclusive learning environments that enable all children and students to participate, to be engaged, to achieve and to belong (Ministry of Education, 2015, p. 7). The New Zealand Curriculum also promotes the development of social and emotional competencies. The key competencies, including relating to others, managing self, and participating and contributing, are fundamental to learning in all areas (Ministry of Education, 2007). PB4L helps to create a

learning environment where all students can experience success by developing and using these key competencies.

As part of the PB4L initiative, RPs are used to address poor behavioural issues in students. Instead of punishment, a RP is used to make amends and to restore balance in relationships (Ministry of Education, 2015). RP is “a relational approach, grounded in beliefs about fairness, dignity, mana, and the potential of all people” (Ministry of Education, 2015, p. 15). There are four key principles that underpin RPs: “Positive interpersonal relationships are a major influence on behaviour, a culture of care supports the mana (authority) of all individuals in the school community, cultural responsiveness is key to creating learning communities of mutual respect and inclusion, and a restorative approach leads to individuals taking responsibility for their behaviour” (p. 15).

Feedback from schools suggests that PB4L restorative practice has had the following benefits:

- A calmer school environment, with improved classroom behaviour and more time for teaching.
- Improved engagement and learning for students in the classroom.
- Growth in relational and problem-solving skills across the whole school community, for both adults and students.
- Improvements in attitudes and relationships across the whole school community
- A consistent best-practice approach that aligns with the school’s shared values.

(Ministry of Education, 2015, p. 15)

The purpose of PB4L and RPs is to enhance the achievement of all students. These programmes are not guidance programmes per se but they do impact on the wellbeing of students. As such, counsellors are often part of the PB4L team in schools and are trained in using RPs in their engagement with students (Ministry of Education, 2015).

The Ministry of Health has also introduced several health models which promote a strength-based approach and which could also potentially be incorporated in schools and school counselling. These models include the Māori health models of Te Whare Tapa Whā, Te Wheke, and Te Pae Mahutonga (Durie, 2004; Pere & Nicholson, 1997; Rochford, 2004) (see also chapter 9). Traditional Māori health acknowledges the link between the mind, body and spirit and highlights the importance of our connection with family (whānau). This

is unlike the biomedical approach, which tends to create a division between mind, body, spirit and family connection.

The Te Whare Tapa Whā model considers health as having four cornerstones (or sides) to wellbeing: Taha tinana (physical health), Taha wairua (spiritual health), Taha whānau (family health) and Taha hinegaro (mental health) (Rochford, 2004). This model is often represented as the four walls of a building requiring a strong foundation. If one wall is missing or weakened, the structure (person) cannot remain upright. This model is reminiscent of a holistic approach to wellbeing and incorporates both spirituality and the inclusion of family connections and their impact on health.

The Te Wheke model uses the metaphor of the octopus to describe family health (Pere & Nicholson, 1997). The head of the octopus represents the family (whānau), the eyes of the octopus are viewed as the complete wellbeing of the individual and the family (waiora), and each of the eight tentacles represents a certain aspect of health. The dimensions are interconnected and represent the close relationship between the tentacles of the octopus. The head, eyes and eight tentacles are:

- Te whānau – the family
- Waiora – total wellbeing for the individual and family
- Wairuatanga – spirituality
- Hinengaro – the mind
- Taha tinana – physical wellbeing
- Whanaungatanga - extended family
- Mauri – life force in people and objects
- Mana ake – unique identity of individuals and family
- Hā a koro ma, a kui ma – breath of life from forbearers
- Whatumanawa – the open and healthy expression of emotion (Pere & Nicholson, 1997).

The Te Pae Mahutonga model is represented by the Southern Cross star constellation. This metaphor brings together aspects of modern health promotion (Durie, 2004). The four central stars of the Southern Cross represent the four key tasks of health promotion:

- Mauriora (cultural identity)
- Waiora (physical environment)
- Toiora (healthy lifestyles)

- Te Oranga (participation in society) (Durie, 2004).

The two pointers represent Ngā Manukura (community leadership) and Te Mana Whakahaere (autonomy) (Durie, 2004).

In addition to these holistic, strength-based health models, the New Zealand Mental Health Foundation has introduced the Five Ways to Wellbeing model. This model was the result of a research report by New Economics Foundation's (2008) Foresight Project on mental capital and wellbeing. The report gathered the latest evidence and established that introducing five actions into our daily routine is imperative for the wellbeing of individuals, families, communities and organisations (Aked & Thompson, 2011; New Economics Foundation, 2008). The five actions considered to be imperative to wellbeing are:

- Connect, me whakawhanaunga
- Give, tukua
- Take notice, me aro tonu
- Keep learning, me ako tonu
- Be active, me kori tonu

The Mental Health Foundation printed a series of posters, a postcard and a bookmark that can be printed or ordered free of charge to promote and encourage people to take these five actions. The posters are available in various languages including English and te reo Māori. The Five Actions to Wellbeing model is reminiscent of the positive psychology model to psychological wellbeing and happiness discussed above (PERMA-V).

These initiatives and models are by no means the only models available but are the ones that fit most closely with this thesis. They provide positive steps towards promoting health and wellbeing. In the previous chapter schools' legislative and policy requirements regarding outcomes for young people were discussed. These outcomes can be facilitated by a strength-based approach to school counselling that has its philosophical underpinnings in the field of positive psychology. This makes a strength-based counselling approach and positive psychology valuable tools for school counsellors and schools. With the literary context of school counsellors' strength-based practices established, the next chapter explores the research context of this thesis.

## **Chapter 6: Research context: Researcher as co-constructionist – A narrative of becoming**

The self is only a threshold, a door, a becoming between two multiplicities.

—Deleuze (2004b, p. 275)

As discussed in chapter 2, this thesis takes a social constructionist position. The narrative of this thesis is thus a co-construction between myself, as the researcher, and my participants as they tell me their stories about strength-based counselling. Within such a co-construction between researcher and participants, it is important that the researcher is aware of the influence of his or her assumptions, biases and metanarratives on the research process. The research question that eventuated from this co-construction is thus:

*What influence do my assumptions, biases and metanarratives (discourses) as researcher have on the research process?*

I reflected briefly on my background in section 1.5 where I discussed the relevance of this research area to me personally. In this chapter I take a reflexive look at the interview process, and point to the intersubjective context between researcher and participants, including a discussion of my assumptions and biases (Zilber et al., 2008).

This chapter is in part about my engagement as researcher with my participants to co-construct the narrative categories and contexts that form the results chapters of this thesis (chapters 9–12). My narrative is inexorably co-created and embedded within the narratives of my participants and their stories have become mine and my story has in part become theirs. To this end, I reflect on the narrative of my “becoming” as a researcher within my engagement with the narratives of counsellors in a school context (Deleuze, 2004b).

### **6.1 An introduction to my “becoming” as a researcher**

As a social constructionist, it was through the process of engagement with my research participants’ transcripts that I constructed a method of narrative analysis for interpreting these transcripts. In addition, it was during this engagement with participants’ narratives that my own narrative of “becoming” as a researcher evolved. As a researcher, I started with a clear idea of the method I was to use in this research, however, ultimately the



exploration of the method of doing narrative research became in itself a progressive narrative of my ways of seeing, knowing and learning as a researcher (see chapters 7 and 8). As part of this exploration, I had to become aware of and reflect on my own assumptions, biases and metanarratives in relation to the research area that could potentially influence the research process.

In this process my perceptions shifted, my thinking developed, and my learning evolved as I became more embedded within my research. Gilles Deleuze (2004b), in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* says the self in such a process “is only a threshold, a door, a becoming between two multiplicities” (p. 275). During the research process, I stepped across the “threshold” of “becoming” and, in alignment with a social constructionist positioning, became a part of the creative process of the unfolding story. My engagement with participants’ narratives constructed the way in which I storied their narratives. As Josselson and Lieblich (1995) state, “Narrative research is a voyage of discovery – a discovery of meanings that both constitute the individual participant and are co-constructed in the research process – researchers cannot know at the outset what they will find” (p. 260). In the next section, I discuss the evolving of the research process and my thinking in relation thereto.

## **6.2 The evolving of the research process**

My engagement with my participants and the process of listening to and interpreting their stories have allowed me to claim the title of researcher. Yet, this becoming is not solely about my role as researcher. It is more significantly about my becoming in a larger and grander sense the person I am today.

As already explained, this thesis explores, in evolving ways, the narratives of secondary school counsellors who use strength-based counselling approaches as part of their counselling practice. But why choose to explore school counsellors’ narratives as a research topic? I believe we all choose a research area or a research area chooses us because something in our “hi-story” or narrative draws us to it. To become researchers, we must not only tell but also understand our own story. McAdams (1993) puts it thus:

If you want to know me then you must know my story, for my story defines who I am. And if I want to know myself, to gain insight into the meaning of my own life, then I, too, must come to know my own story. (McAdams, 1993, p. 11)

I have already given a brief snapshot of my story in chapter 1, where I explained my background in education and my time as a secondary school counsellor. I chose my research area because I had a vested interest in showing that a strength-based approach to counselling adolescents is “better than” more deficit-based counselling approaches. I saw school counselling and its outcomes for adolescents through a rose-tinted lens.

Yet, as Massumi (2004) warns, “A concept is a brick. It can be used to build a courthouse of reason. Or it can be thrown through the window (Massumi, 2004, p. xiii). My “courthouse of reason” was my belief in the superiority and efficacy under all circumstances of using a strength-based counselling approach with adolescents. However, my engagement with school counsellors and my exploration of their narratives gave me an awareness of my beliefs and thus became the metaphorical “brick” “thrown through the window” of my thinking.

During the process of my “becoming” as a researcher, then, I had to confront my own metanarratives (discourses) of what I supposed the nature of strength-based counselling to be and I had to question many of my well-worn narratives. Davies (1993) explains: “[We] disattend the pane of glass to look at the view out the window, so we generally disattend discourse. It is not until the glass fractures or breaks, for example, that we focus differently” (p. 153). My focus during the process of my “becoming” as a researcher did indeed shift and in so doing shifted my representation of school counsellors’ stories. Yet, my metanarrative and the metanarrative of the counsellors I interviewed remain significant irrespective of where the focus lies. Dewey’s (1997) conceptualisation of this change in focus or movement when looking at research data is instructive here:

There is thus a double movement in all reflection: a movement from the given partial and confused data to a suggested comprehensive (or inclusive) entire situation; and back from this suggested whole – which as suggested is a meaning, an idea – to the particular facts, so as to connect these with one another and with additional facts to which the suggestion has directed attention. (p. 79)

Foucault (1971), meanwhile, explains the significance of narratives in our society and reiterates the idea that narratives in society are pervasive irrespective of where the focus lies:

There is barely a society without its major narratives, told, retold and varied; formulae, texts, ritualised text to be spoken in well-defined circumstances; things

said once, and conserved because people suspect some hidden secret or wealth lies buried within. (p. 12)

Indeed, I embarked upon this research journey to complete a thesis as I too suspected “some hidden secret or wealth” would be discovered during this process. The buried treasure as such was not so much in striving for the end-point in attaining a doctorate (although this is an end I aspired to) but lay more in the gift of learning and in the art of “becoming” as a researcher.

Giddings and Grant (2002) suggest that as social beings we cannot separate ourselves from the traditions or discourses (metanarratives) of our time. Both I as researcher and the school counsellors as participants form a part of a larger narrative and this narrative is situated within a particular cultural context. Foucault (1970) explains: “There was a time when archaeology, the study of mute monuments, lifeless vestiges, unrelated objects and the remains of the past, inclined towards history and only the restitution of historical narrative gave it sense.” However, Foucault adds that “it might be said that there is a tendency today for history to become archaeology and to consist of the intrinsic description of the monument” (p. 179). What Foucault alludes to here is that we excavate our past from the position of the present and that this past or hi-story becomes embedded in and a part of our present narrative. In so doing it also shapes all our future narratives.

Deleuze (2004b) views this pursuit for an “intrinsic description of the monument” as not being about meaning as such: “It has to do with land surveying and cartography, including the mapping of countries yet to come” (p. 5). As my research journey progressed I did my own form of “land surveying” and became increasingly interested in the metanarratives (discourses) school counsellors’ narratives reflect, and the role these play in school counsellors’ professional practice with adolescents in a school context (see section 3.3 for my interpretation of metanarratives within this thesis).

As these metanarratives (discourses) may be taken for granted, they can be difficult for those embedded within the discursive context to discern (Winslade & Monk, 1999). Winslade and Monk suggest that interpretation is thus from the researcher’s perspective. In this regard, it was in my engagement with school counsellors’ stories that I too excavated my history and looked at these stories from my perspective of wanting to promote strength-based counselling as a panacea that could fix all ills. However, in “surveying” school

counsellors' stories I discovered a different route and have mapped a possible way forward to new countries, new ideas and alternative metanarratives for those researchers yet to "become".

Denzin and Lincoln (2000) see the "intrinsic description of the monument" somewhat differently as the search for "small-scale theories". These authors explain that "the search for grand will be replaced by more local, small-scale theories fitted to specific problems and specific situations" (p. 11). According to the authors, research will always be one-sided and subjective because meanings are manifold, unstable and open to interpretation.

My research began as a "monument" erected in the honour of strength-based counselling. I, too wanted to come up with a "small-scale theory" fitted to the problems adolescents experience (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). A theory that would alleviate mental health issues that adolescents experience by focusing on positive outcomes. Instead, what I unearthed had more to do with the challenges and triumphs of strength-based counsellors attempting to work within schools dominated by deficit-based metanarratives. My interpretation of school counsellors' stories thus shifted from looking only at the form and content (see chapter 7) of their strength-based narratives to include the embedded narratives (metanarratives or discourses) and context in which school counsellors' narratives occurred, including examining the tensions inherent in these contexts.

In focusing on embedded narratives and context I drew extensively from the work of Zilber, Tuval-Mushiach and Lieblich on interpreting the embedded narrative and navigating through multiple contexts (Zilber et al., 2008)) (see chapter 8). In the same way that our narratives and personalities are constantly shifting, so too is the context in which these shifts occur, and in turn this context is influenced by and influences the stories we tell (Zilber et al., 2008). Researchers play an active role in the shaping of this context. As we interpret and present our interpretation of narrative text, "we re-contextualize the text" we have repeatedly scrutinised and position this text in "a new context and hence change it" (Zilber et al., 2008, p. 1050). Zilber et al. (2008) stress that "the challenge for interpreters of stories is to balance between the contexts mentioned in the text (explicitly or implicitly) and the contexts that we create and bring into the story in the act of interpretation" (p. 1050).

Zilber et al. (2008) suggest that the researcher and the participants co-construct the context that results from the research process. It is thus important to understand that the context perceived by the researcher and the context perceived by the participant may differ. This is taken into account during the interpretation of the text using a process of reflexivity (see below) to “substantiate a specific reading embedded in different social fields (time periods, age cohorts, socioeconomic status, and family conditions)” (p. 1064). The notion of the “social fields” in which the embedded narrative (metanarrative or discourse) is situated is discussed in chapter 8.

Giddings and Grant (2002) say of discourses (embedded narratives or metanarratives) that they “are interrelated systems of social meaning” (p. 20). The school counsellors I interviewed told the stories of this interrelated system of meanings, and these stories contained aspects of both deficit and strength. Giddings and Grant’s view of metanarratives as “interrelated systems of social meaning” is supported by social constructionism, which argues that the world rather than being foisted upon us is constructed by people, the language they speak and the resulting interaction between them (Burr, 1995). My reality and those of the school counsellors were co-constructed in relation to each other and in relation to the educational and therapeutic metanarratives (discourses) which shape us. Giddings and Grant (2002) agree and suggest that “language is not a stable, transparent representation of reality. It is rather an historical (therefore social and political) and unconscious (and so also individual) force that structures the realities we experience and the self that does the experiencing” (p. 21).

We can never be completely free from the accumulative power of narratives, for we cannot stand outside language or the community of which we are apart (Lee, 2004). Thus, I as researcher cannot stand outside of my narrative, the narrative of the counsellors’ I spoke with or the metanarrative of the culture within which I live. In “linguaging” our stories and in speaking our “truth” these narratives become in a very “real” sense who we are. The truth and reality referred to here, in accordance with the social constructionist perspective, are subjective, not objective, constructions. However, critical realism, which forms the ontological foundation of this thesis, holds that our stories and experiences do have a tangible quality to them and can be observed by others and by ourselves as “true” and “real” for those interpreting these constructions, however subjective they may be. These constructions after all support our way of being.

It is thus that these “narratives”, “discourses”, and “realities” that have been constructed within a societal context, are defended from scrutiny and upheld at great cost by those that support them. Foucault (1970) explains:

Cries of indignation ... will ... be raised when historical analysis, especially if concerned with thought, ideas or knowledge, makes too obvious use of categories of discontinuity and disparity, concepts of thresholds, rupture and transformation or the description of series and limits. They will be denounced as an outrage against the infeasible rights of history and the foundation of any possible historicity. (p. 184)

I too attempted to uphold my hi-story, the protagonist of which at the onset of my thesis presented as “Pollyanna” and strove to see the world and all in it through a “positive” lens. This in and of itself is not “wrong”. Yet, one must not discount the perceived “negative”. It is in rupture and in pain that some of our greatest learning occurs (Kashdan & Biswas-Diener, 2015b). This notion is supported within strength-based counselling (see chapter 5).

It could further be argued that people need to experience negative emotions and process trauma before they are ready and able to embrace the positive aspects of experience and the potential learning they have gained. If people are pushed towards a solution and positive reframing too soon the trauma may not be sufficiently addressed to enable them to build resilience (Kashdan & Biswas-Diener, 2015b).

Foucault (1970) also cautions that in spite of the rupture that may be caused by questioning the underlying metanarratives (discourses) of a society or a profession, “We must not be led astray. What is deeply mourned is not the disappearance of history but the obliteration of that type of history which is secretly but entirely derived from the synthesizing action of the subject” (p. 185). Foucault believes that this resistance to scrutinising the popular narrative or discourse is a defence mechanism against questioning our current reality. If we were to question our reality, we may have to embrace alternative possibilities, which could potentially threaten our current belief systems.

Deleuze (2004a) agrees with Foucault’s (1970) notion of “rupture” caused by questioning the underlying metanarratives (discourses) of a society. He believes that “real” thinking is a violent skirmish with reality, an unintentional rupture of established categories. Deleuze (2004a) suggests that “reason is always a region carved out of the irrational – not sheltered from the irrational at all, but traversed by it and only defined by a

particular kind of relationship among irrational factors. Underneath all reason lies delirium, and drift” (p. 262). Engaging with my research data did indeed result for me in “delirium and drift” as I shifted my world view and my perspectives on strength-based counselling.

Foucault (1970) and Deleuze (2004a) thus argue that we construct our reality and then defend that which we have constructed from “rupture and transformation” until such time that our defences are penetrated and new metanarratives (discourses) emerge to take the place of past metanarratives (discourses) and outmoded ways thinking. Foucault (1971) describes the research process thus:

Nowadays the quest is directed towards discovering the incidence of the interruptions beneath the long continuities of thought, the massive and homogenous manifestations of a collective mentality, beneath the stubborn development of a science struggling to exist and to attain maturity from the outset, beneath the enduring quality of a style, a form, a discipline or a theoretical activity. But the status and nature of these interruptions differ widely. (p. 176)

My narrative of “becoming” as a researcher was fuelled by such an interruption and it is continually evolving. Foucault (1970) continues:

It is no longer a question of tradition and outline but simply of setting limits and boundaries; it is no longer a problem of self-perpetuating foundations but that of transformations acting both as the foundation and as the renewal of the foundations. (p. 177)

My interpretation of what Foucault is saying here is that metanarratives do provide a context for becoming but that this context comes with limits and boundaries. Yet, transformation is possible and in transforming we lay the foundations for new “becoming” metanarratives.

In my process of “becoming” as a researcher and in exploring school counsellors’ narratives I had to scrutinise my conception of reality and the metanarratives of my existence. In doing so I allowed myself to embrace the possibilities of other ways of viewing the world. Foucault (1970), views this questioning and rupturing of discourses as inevitable:

Tears are shed for that process of becoming which would furnish, for the sovereignty of the conscious mind, a safer, less exposed shelter than myths, systems of kinship, language, sexuality or desire. ... All the treasures of yore were

accumulated in the ancient citadel of this history. It was believed secure, it was sacralised, it was the last refuge of anthropological thought. It believed it could capture those most active in attacking it and convert them into watchful guardians. But historians have long since abandoned this aged fortress. They have left to work elsewhere. (p. 185)

I too during the research process “left to work elsewhere” in a metaphorical sense and in doing so my thesis is more robust for this leaving.

In this section I have outlined how my ideas and assumptions regarding strength-based counselling were challenged and how this occurred as the research process evolved. In the next section, I reflect on the interview process and look more reflexively at the assumptions, bias and metanarratives that I brought to the research process.

### **6.3 Reflexivity: Reflections on the interview process**

As T. Miller (2005) observes, “In contexts where individuals are faced with greater uncertainty and more choice, reflexivity can become an important aspect of making sense of experiences” (p. 18). As already discussed, after the initial interviews were conducted, and throughout the collection and interpretation process, the possible biases and assumptions of strength-based counselling I held as researcher were acknowledged. During the interpretation process I kept coming back to these biases to ensure I had an awareness of them, but I also recognised the limits of this process. In bringing my possible biases to the foreground, reflecting on them and my beliefs in relation to the research area allowed me to approach the research process more responsibly.

After examining any possible biases or assumptions regarding the research area as well as those that I brought to the interview process, I could reflect on the strengths and weaknesses that I brought to the interview process. Having my own narrative as a school counsellor, I could identify with what the participants were saying, which gave us some common ground. Hollway and Jefferson (2004) argue commonalities between researcher and participants, and identifying with participants, may be advantageous to the interview and research process. “Points of identification” (p. 45) make researchers informed listeners and enhances their listening skills. In this research, being able to identify with participants resulted in a depth of connection despite our differences.



While my narrative as a school counsellor and teacher gave me a sense of relatedness towards the participants, at the same time I had a vested interest in this research. I was interested in exploring certain themes in the narratives related to strength-based counselling in New Zealand secondary schools. As I discuss in chapter 7, it is appropriate to use predefined categories as a guide for narrative research before the interview process begins, but I had to prevent myself from focusing on these to the exclusion of other categories that could be recognised. I was sometimes tempted, despite having an awareness of my potential bias, to steer the interviews in the direction I wanted them to go by listening for responses I considered relevant to my research and then encouraging these with affirming comments and gestures.

Similarly, I had to be aware not to brush over responses which appeared irrelevant. Mishler (1986) and Wengraf (2001) describe such a reaction as one of the obstacles to listening; one needs to be aware of this to ensure careful attention is given to each person's story. In addition, as I could identify with the participants I was tempted to share my own experience and on occasion used comments such as "I understand" or "me too". Having acknowledged this, I emphasise again that as a social constructionist researcher the participants' stories that resulted are a co-construction between myself and my participants. Zilber et al. (2008, p. 1051) refer to the relationship between researcher and participant as the "intersubjective context", which they explain as "the immediate relations and the interaction" within which the story is told by the narrator. The intersubjective context is discussed further in chapter 8. Being drawn into conversation is something else I had to watch for – as a narrative researcher, I was first and foremost there to listen. It was also easy to become anxious when there was a lapse in the participants' narratives and I had to be mindful of allowing silences.

Narrative interviews have the potential to be emotionally draining for both researcher and participants as they can involve discussion about experiences that may be upsetting. I discussed issues that I found challenging with my supervisor. Furthermore, I had arranged access to counselling for the participants (see section 3.11) however, none availed themselves of this opportunity. Another possible bias I had to consider was my belief that focusing on the positive aspects of a situation is "more beneficial" than delving into the negative aspects. This tendency of viewing the world through rose-coloured glasses meant I was tempted to focus only on the positive aspects of participants' stories while

discounting the negative. My position shifted, however, as the research process continued and I came to see the value of so-called negative experiences (see section 5.3).

I did have a vested interest in the benefits of school counselling and in any positive approaches that the school counsellors used, however I allowed participants to set the agenda for the stories they wished to tell. To this end, I explored both positive and negative aspects of the counselling experience. In doing so, and during the active process of constructing a method of narrative analysis for interpreting participant's transcripts, I realised the importance of metanarratives and the context of the story, and of going beyond focusing solely on the form and content of the story (see chapters 7 and 8).

Being aware of these obstacles to listening early in the research process allowed me to manage them and to improve on them by continually focusing back on the participants' narratives. Hollway and Jefferson (2004) suggest that reflecting on the dynamics of the relationships with each participant assists the researcher in making good interpretations and guards against making bad ones. To assist me in this endeavour, I kept a reflective journal of the research process and completed a post-interview log after each interview. A reflective journal helps ensure rigour in qualitative research by making the research process transparent (Lieblich et al., 1998). Furthermore, I used my supervisors as a sounding board to discuss my interpretations of text. As Flick (2009) contends, "researchers' reflections of their actions and observations in the field, their impressions, irritations, feelings and so on, become data in their own right, forming part of the interpretation" (p. 6).

The process of my "becoming" as a researcher, the evolving of the research process and the reflexive nature of my engagement with the participants all align with and support my positioning as a social constructionist researcher. Finally, I would also like to comment that for me the research process was not a comfortable journey but rather one filled with growth and broadening of outlook. It challenged and stretched me and pushed me to elevate my thinking to a new level. My research abilities have developed and my point of view has evolved throughout this process. Completing my thesis and gaining my doctoral qualification, while of great satisfaction, will not be the only prize. The self-discovery and self-knowledge that the research journey has opened for me have been invaluable. The discomfort I have experienced throughout the research process has made me a better researcher and a different person. I believe that as researchers, educators and counsellors we reach a threshold within the process of our practice that we need to step across to leave

behind our preconceptions. It is in this process of leaving, that we, as Deleuze (2004b) says, are becoming.

In this chapter I have provided a philosophical and reflective narrative of my own journey as a researcher. In the next two chapters I describe in detail the construction of the method of narrative analysis for interpreting transcripts used in this research. These chapters take the reader through a co-construction process and show how my method of analysis and interpretation shifted as I became more embedded within my participants' narratives. This co-construction and shifting of analysis and interpretation aligns with the social constructionist positioning of this thesis. Chapter 7 presents stage one of this analysis and interpretation – narrative storyboards for form and content. Chapter 8 presents stage two of this analysis and interpretation – narrative storyboards for metanarratives and context.

## **Chapter 7: Construction of a method of narrative analysis – stage one: Narrative storyboards for form and content**

There is thus a double movement in all reflection: a movement from the given partial and confused data to a suggested comprehensive (or inclusive) entire situation; and back from this suggested whole – which as suggested is a meaning, an idea – to the particular facts, so as to connect these with one another and with additional facts to which the suggestion has directed attention.

—Dewey (1997, p.79)

I have already introduced the methodology and methods of this thesis in chapters 2 and 3, and in section 3.7 I briefly introduced the construction of a method of narrative analysis. The process of construction of a method of narrative analysis was to evolve as I engaged with participants' transcripts, and this evolution is presented in this and the next chapter as a co-construction between myself and the participants.

In the previous chapter I explained how my engagement with participants' narratives became part of the narrative of my "becoming" as a researcher and part of the counselling narrative that is storied within this thesis. This and the next chapter present, in two stages, the process I went through in engaging with participants' transcripts and in constructing a final method of narrative analysis for interpreting these transcripts. The process of working through which method of narrative analysis is most suitable for interpreting participants' transcripts is reflective of my positioning as co-constructionist referred to in chapter 6 and aligns with the social constructionist epistemology of this thesis. The evolution of the method of narrative analysis also shows part of the reflexive process that I underwent as a researcher.

The construction of a method of narrative analysis underwent several iterations before reaching a final method of narrative analysis. I called these different iterations narrative "storyboards". There are six storyboards in total. In this chapter, I explain stage one of this process of working towards a method of narrative analysis. I present the evolution of the interpretation process in three iterations or narrative storyboards drawing largely from Lieblich et al.'s (1998) four modes of reading a narrative for form and content. In chapter 8 I present stage two of the process. I outline the evolution of narrative storyboards four, five and six, introducing context and metanarratives to the interpretation

process. Chapter 8 also introduces Zilber et al.'s (2008) three-sphere model for analysing external context.

Combined, the six storyboards in chapters 7 and 8 provide the reader with a reflexive map of my process of interpreting transcripts and of working towards and constructing a final method of interpretation for my participants' narratives (presented in chapter 8 as storyboard six). Storyboards one through five are part of the progression of my method of narrative analysis, and storyboard six presents the final method of narrative analysis for interpreting participants' transcripts. The six storyboards are titled:

- Storyboard one: A holistic-form construction to introduce the story
- Storyboard two: A move to a holistic-content construction
- Storyboard three: Reading across counsellors' narratives – introducing a categorical-content construction
- Storyboard four: A categorical-content construction
- Storyboard five: A categorical-content construction revisited
- Storyboard six: A categorical-content construction and exploration of context and metanarratives

I discuss the evolution of my method of narrative analysis within each of the six storyboards using primarily the following indicative headings:

- Indicative headings for each storyboard
  - Process of interpretation
  - Thesis title
  - Research questions
  - Story-map grid
  - Heuristic device
  - Re-storying (looks at how the mode of reading counsellor's narratives shifted).

I would like to note that during the process of constructing a method of narrative analysis the title of my thesis and the content of the research questions shifted. This is again in alignment with the co-constructing nature of social constructionism.

Storyboards one, two and three are discussed in this chapter but first I address the importance of having a process of interpretation for narrative research. I then review Crossley's (2000) six-step process on how to analyse a narrative and discuss the use of story-map grids and heuristic devices in research. Lieblich et al.'s (1998) four modes of

reading a narrative for form and content are then presented. Finally, I unpack my process of constructing a method of narrative analysis in storyboards one, two and three.

### **7.1 Importance of a process of interpretation – narrative analysis**

Riessman (1993) stresses the importance of interpreting data because without interpretation the inquiry becomes no more than storytelling. According to Smith (1996), meaning is not “transparently” available in the interview or transcript; it has to be achieved through a “sustained engagement with the text, via a process of interpretation” (p. 18).

“Understanding is not a matter of trained, methodical, unprejudiced technique, but an encounter ... a confrontation with something radically different from ourselves” (Elliott, 2005, p. 37). Elliott (2005) warns however, that the researcher who wants to produce a convincing interpretation that improves on the understanding of a layperson needs some basic tools.

While the unfolding of the broader metanarratives (discursive form) of school counsellors’ stories is important, the categorisations of themes, narrative threads of emerging contrasts and comparisons between the individual narratives was also important to me because I wanted to uncover possible commonalities or differences between school counsellors’ narratives. Elliot (2005, p. 38) suggests it is unlikely that any researcher in social science would study the discursive form (metanarratives) or “social function” of the narrative without also paying attention to its content. Thus, as part of my method of interpretation I choose to explore both the metanarratives recognised in the school counsellors’ transcripts as well as the narrative threads and themes that form part of these.

As I was unsure as to the actual process of discerning school counsellors’ metanarratives and the narrative themes and threads inherent in their narratives, I turned to the literature on narrative analysis for guidance. I explored a range of ways of doing narrative analysis by drawing on the work of several authors (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Crossley, 2000; Lieblich et al., 1998; Polkinghorne, 1988; Riessman, 1993; Zilber et al., 2008). Of these, I found Crossley’s (2000), six-step process on how to read and analyse a narrative most useful in initiating my analyses of school counsellors’ transcripts. Lieblich et al.’s (1998) analytical model of four modes in which narratives can be read – holistic-form, holistic-content, categorical-form, and categorical-content – was the approach I used to interpret my transcripts for form and content. Finally, I used Zilber et al.’s (2008) three-

sphere model of external content to analyse the context of school counsellors' narratives including the metanarratives they draw upon. Crossley's and Lieblich et al.'s methods of interpreting narratives are presented in this chapter, while Zilber et al.'s three-sphere model of external content is discussed in chapter 8.

## **7.2 Crossley's (2000) six-step process of how to analyse a narrative**

Crossley's (2000) six-step process on how to analyse a narrative involves reading each transcript about five or six times to become familiar with them (step one). During this process, it is important to pay attention to narrative tone (step two), imagery (step three), and themes (step four). Crossley then constructs tables (story-map grids) for categories suggested from the literature or apparent from the transcripts, focusing on imagery and themes. These tables provide a "rough map" of each transcript, which can then be translated into a meaningful narrative (step five) that can be included in the research report (step six) (p. 93). Smith (1995) underlines that in this kind of qualitative interpretation there is little distinction between the interpretation and writing up, as interpretation continues during the writing-up process.

## **7.3 Story-map grids and heuristic devices**

Initially, to assist with the interpretation of the participants' narratives I drew up a table (story-map grid) based on the categories I had recognised in the transcripts to represent the process. As already mentioned, these story-map grids provide a rough map for the interpreting of each transcript, which can then be translated into a meaningful narrative (step five above) (Crossley, 2000, p. 93). This story-map grid was amended and simplified several times during the interpretation process before I arrived at the final story-map grid. In addition to the story-map grids, and after spending some time in interpreting school counsellors' transcripts, I drew on several heuristic devices which assisted me with the interpretation process. Heuristic devices are used in qualitative research to aid in organising information and for providing structure and guidance during the interpretation process (Crossley, 2000).

The story-map grids and heuristic devices I used during the interpretation process are presented in both this chapter and the next. Lieblich et al.'s (1998) four modes of reading a narrative for form and content are introduced next.

#### **7.4 Lieblich et al.'s (1998) four modes of reading a narrative**

Lieblich et al.'s (1998) analytical model is based on four modes in which narratives can be read: holistic-form, holistic-content, categorical-form, and categorical-content (p. 13). The holistic modes preserve the integrity of the entire narrative while the categorical modes segment the original narrative, assigning sections of the narrative to various categories. The form modes look at matters such as the plot structure, style of the narrative and the choice of metaphors and words. The content modes look at "what happened, or why, who participated" and "the meaning that the story conveys" (p. 12). The four modes are described individually below.

##### **7.4.1 Holistic-form mode**

The holistic-form mode of narrative inquiry explores the plot structure of each narrative in its entirety (Lieblich et al., 1998). This mode of reading a narrative assumes that the structure of the story, not only its content, "express[es] the identity, perceptions, and values of the storyteller" (p. 88). The holistic-form mode thus explores the discursive form of the narrative and identifies how an individual constructs his or her experience. This approach is inherently qualitative (Lieblich et al., 1998).

##### **7.4.2 Holistic-content mode**

As with the holistic-form mode, Lieblich et al.'s (1998) holistic-content mode also looks at each participant's narrative in its entirety. However, instead of focusing on plot structure this mode focuses on the content inherent within the narrative, as the researcher looks for general themes and emerging foci across each entire narrative.

##### **7.4.3 Categorical-form mode**

The categorical-form mode of reading a narrative looks at "stylistic or linguistic characteristics of defined units of the narrative" across participants' narratives (Lieblich et al., 1998, p. 13). According to Lieblich et al., these units of analyses focus on the emotional and/or cognitive content reflected in the telling of a person's narrative.



#### **7.4.5 Categorical-content mode**

Lieblich et al.'s (1998) categorical-content mode is a form of content analysis. Narrative categories within the research topic are named and sections of transcripts from all the participants' narratives are assigned to these categories. In this way, the narratives are processed analytically by dividing the text into "small units of content and submitting them to either descriptive or statistical treatment" (p. 112).

#### **7.5 An interpretative lens**

After studying Crossley's (2000) six-step process, I noted parallels between Lieblich et al.'s (1998) modes of reading a narrative and Crossley's discussion of imagery and themes. Both Lieblich et al.'s form modes and Crossley's steps two and three pay careful attention to the language used and look at images, symbols, and metaphors for patterns or emerging narrative threads. The complementary nature of these two theories made their use in the interpretation of transcripts viable.

In approaching the interpretation of my interview transcripts, I used Crossley's (2000) process of interpreting a narrative and considered each of Lieblich et al.'s (1998) modes of reading, deciding initially on a holistic-form approach. However, as I explored each school counsellor's narrative further my interpretative lens aligned more fully with my research topic. Thus, my chosen mode of reading each narrative shifted from holistic-form (see appendix I, L and M) to holistic-content (see appendix O and P), and finally to the categorical-content mode (see appendix Q to V). Lieblich et al. (1998) emphasise that the different modes of reading a narrative have no rigid boundaries. Reading the transcripts both holistically and categorically for form and content are therefore not separate and distinct processes; they intertwine, connect and complement each other.

Although it is important to have a clear method with which to interpret school counsellors' narratives, the significance in narrative research of allowing each individual narrative to "speak" for itself is emphasised (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Categories and exploratory questions were used to guide the inquiry, but as noted above the direction of an inquiry comes from reading the transcripts and research assumptions may then be produced from them. According to Lieblich et al. (1998), researchers should be able to reach interpretive conclusions and alter them when necessary from further readings. Thus, while this research had a certain focus and relied on

exploratory questions to guide the research process, the study is an interpretative one and alternative themes and categories were recognised during the interpretation of school counsellors' transcripts.

Therefore, although I started with a clear and structured method ultimately the method through which I chose to interpret school counsellors' transcripts became in itself a progressive narrative of my experiences as a researcher as I engaged with the transcripts. As discussed in chapter 6, in alignment with a social constructionist positioning I became a part of the research process. My engagement with school counsellors' narratives constructed the way in which I interpreted their narratives. The remainder of the chapter presents the first stage of the construction of a method of narrative analysis (storyboards one to three).

### **7.6 Storyboard one: A holistic-form construction to introduce the story**

On first considering which mode of reading I would choose for my narrative analysis, I became enamoured with the holistic-form mode. Storyboard one sets out the holistic-form construction as the starting point of the interpretation process I undertook in reading school counsellors' narratives.

Lieblich et al. (1998) define the holistic-form mode as interpreting the structure or plot of the whole narrative for each participant. This approach is not about linguistic and stylistic features, but rather has to do with the narrative style or the genre reflected in school counsellors' stories. In narrative inquiry, the narratives told are unique reflections of each individual narrator. According to Clandinin and Connelly (2000), qualitative researchers must take care not to label these narratives or make them fit into a particular frame. Rather each narrative, needs to stand alone and should be read for the story it wants to reveal.

To assist me in the interpretation process, the holistic-form of each participant's narrative was divided according to the themes suggested by Clandinin and Connelly (2000) of *narrative essence*, *narrative voice* (including metaphors) and *narrative significance* before the interpretation began. Narrative essence goes to the heart of each narrative and explores taken-for-granted assumptions and the way in which each narrator chooses to present themselves as the central character or protagonist in their story. To get to the heart of each participant's narrative, additional guiding questions such as "What is the story

about?” and “What are the narrator’s assumptions?” were asked to assist with the interpretation process. The guiding question “What can we learn from this story?” was asked to help highlight the core message of each participant’s narrative to reflect the significance of each narrative.

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) see the voice of a narrative as belonging to the narrator for whom a text speaks. They suggest the narrator’s voice is more than just the audio recording of the interview. It conveys a sense of the narrator’s identity through the assumptions he or she makes, the tone of the narrative and the type of language used. The tone conveys emotions and gives some insight into the person behind the words. The researchers asks the guiding question “Who is telling the story?” to guide the interpretation process when exploring narrative voice.

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) further suggest that images, symbols and metaphors used as part of the spoken word give us a further understanding of the narrator’s voice and add a greater depth of meaning to each narrative. They recommend that to ensure the researcher has fully accessed the voice of the narrator the questions should be not so much:

Have I got it right? Is this what you said? Is this what you do? Rather, it is something much more globally human: Is this you? Do you see yourself here? Is this the character you want to be when this is read by others? (p. 148)

These are not so much questions of whether or not what a participant has said or done has been correctly reported, but are more questions of identity and narrative essence. The next section explains how I interpreted school counsellors’ transcripts from a holistic-form perspective.

### **7.6.1 Process of interpretation**

As already explained, initially I was interested in exploring Lieblich et al.’s (1998) holistic-form of each narrative. This mode of reading a narrative is interested in the structure of the whole story. I used Clandinin and Connelly’s (2000) themes of narrative essence, narrative voice and narrative significance, the guiding questions described above, and the metaphors that could be identified as the basis for the initial story-map grid. I then used this story-map grid to guide my interpretation process (see appendix I).

Having set up the initial story-map grid to guide the process of holistic-form interpretation, I decided to use the NVivo software package to organise my interview

transcripts to help streamline the process. All the interview transcripts were imported into NVivo and the initial holistic-form story-map grid (see below) was used as a guide to set up themes in NVivo. During this process I listened to the audio recording of each transcript several times while following the written version in NVivo to ensure interviews had been correctly transcribed and to become aware of any nuances I may have missed.

While doing the holistic-form interpretation I found the process to be somewhat different from interpreting an entire life story. Each story school counsellors told was but a segment of his or her life story and related specifically to their counselling practice. My interpretation of plot structure was thus limited to this segment of each counsellor's life story. Initially I focused more on the core message of the plot, with a limited focus on plot structure. Some of the sub-themes that had been listed in the initial story-map grid were moved and placed under different themes where there was a better fit, and some themes were added and some deleted if they were not relevant.

Again, as the counselling narrative focused on the participants' counselling practice and not on their entire life stories, their life story was not the focus. Instead, I decided to focus on key events during their counselling practice in the past, present and future and to look at the overall genre of each story. Looking at the narrative voice, the guiding questions was "Who is telling the story?" and the focus was on the tone of the narrative, the metaphors used in the narrative, and the personal ideology the narrative displayed.

For each of the different sub-themes certain interview questions were directly pertinent and were used to assist with coding. The answers to each relevant question were looked at in relation to the sub-themes. Interpretation happened at two levels – one by reading the entire transcript and applying sections of the transcript to themes and another by looking at each individual question asked in the interview and applying these to the chosen themes. The answers to each question was pasted under the appropriate theme during interpretation. The rough draft of the interpretation document was read through several times and quotes with similar meanings were grouped together.

I then went back and read what I had coded in NVivo for each theme to see if it did in fact apply to that theme and if it did not I coded that segment of the transcript to another theme (node) in NVivo. The story-map grid used to guide the interpretation process was updated and amended as needed and the order in which the themes from literature of

narrative essence, narrative voice and narrative significance were explored and interpreted was changed to make the interpretation read more smoothly.

After going through the lengthy process described above to code my interviews for holistic-form using NVivo, I realised that this process was not allowing me to focus fully on the holistic nature of each school counsellor's narrative. As explained, I had transferred all the interview transcripts to NVivo before reading through the interviews. My initial thoughts were that I would be reading the interviews a number of times in NVivo, following Crossley's (2000) method of interpretation detailed above, and that this would save time. However, I still spent a lot of time on the first interview, and using the holistic-form story-map grid I created I attempted to fit segments of the participants' transcripts into themes obtained from the literature, which I had set up as codes in NVivo.

However, in doing this I felt that I was being hindered by the process and was not allowing myself to fully explore each transcript. My interpretation of the first interview based on the holistic-form mode of reading gave some insights. However, these did not fit within the research areas I wanted to explore and the process was cumbersome. The interview was also segmented according to the theme and sub-themes I had used from the literature. This clashed with the purpose of a holistic interpretation, which looks at each participant's entire story.

I therefore decided to put NVivo aside and go back to the hardcopies and audio recordings of the individual transcripts. I printed out the hardcopies of each interview and went back to a grass-roots level of interpretation. Using Crossley's (2000) method of interpretation, I came up with a new process for reading and interpreting transcripts. I read each transcript six times according to the following procedure:

- First reading: read the transcript silently, highlight anything that stands out, and make comments in the margin.
- Second reading: As above, but use a different colour highlighter and pen. Make notes of any themes or categories that emerge that have not been predefined in the story-map grid.
- Third reading: Read transcript aloud looking for the tone of the narrative. Make notes on skills, tools and modalities used by school counsellors as well as the issues they deal with.

- Fourth reading: Read transcript with the holistic-form story-map grid at hand to see if any of the predefined categories are present. Adjust and update the grid accordingly. Also, get a sense of the archetypal image the participant portrays and the archetypal story form or genre.
- Fifth reading: Listen to the audio of the interview following along with the printed transcript to gain a further sense of narrative tone and to ensure the integrity of each transcript.
- Type up a summary of the comments; include any questions or insights, which arise.
- Sixth reading: Free reading or what Freud termed “free-association” (Freud, Strachey, & Freud, 1962). Read thorough the transcript with an open mind without taking notes to gain any additional insight.

Once this process was complete, I wrote out the core message or narrative significance of each participant’s story from memory. I then looked to see if the themes I had noted down could be found within this core message. I updated the story-map grid and wrote, again from memory, a section for narrative essence, narrative voice and narrative style (genre). With each interview this process became faster until I was able to gain a depth of understanding built upon my previous interpretations and only had to read each narrative three or four times.

At the outset of my research I had a broad idea as to the research areas I was interested in exploring and at first did not have a specific research question. As my theoretical positioning is social constructionist I wanted to co-construct the research questions through my engagement with the transcripts. In exploring the transcripts as described above, I gained a clearer indication of the research areas I wanted to explore, including school counsellors’ stories of context and practice, stories of their interactions within their practice and success stories (see research questions below and appendix J). I amended the title of my thesis to more clearly depict the intent of my research and the research areas more appropriately (see section 7.6.2 and appendix K).

As I clarified the research areas I wanted to explore I felt that while I had made changes to the initial story-map grid its basic structure remained the same and I had kept the themes that I had found in the literature of narrative essence, narrative voice and narrative significance. These themes, while still useful as a backdrop to my interpretation,

were not useful as the primary focus as I recognised other themes within my interview transcripts. These initial themes were removed and a final version of the holistic-form story-map grid was drawn up based on the new themes (see below). This final version of the holistic-form story-map grid was used to interpret two of the participants' interview transcripts for holistic-form: those of Gabrielle and Thomas (see appendices L and M).

### **7.6.2 Thesis title**

The initial working title I chose for my thesis was: "A Narrative Inquiry into the Practice of Promoting Adolescent Wellbeing among Secondary School Guidance Counsellors in New Zealand". After engaging with the transcripts through the holistic-form mode of reading I decided that I was exploring how the school counsellors viewed their practice in terms of what worked with adolescents. My title changed several times until I decided on "New Zealand Secondary School Counsellors: Perceptions of What Works. A Narrative Inquiry into Stories of Practice (title No. 6; see appendix K). My research questions shifted along with my title as my perceptions changed. The research questions for storyboard one are reviewed next.

### **7.6.3 Research questions**

In exploring school counsellors' perceptions of what works within their practice, I felt that this involved school counsellors' philosophical positioning in relation to counselling. My research topic at this point was:

Which philosophies are reflected in the narrative of school counsellors who use strength-based counselling approaches as part of their professional practice?

The initial research areas that I explored included:

#### Stories of context and practice:

- What training do school counsellors receive and what experience do they have?
- In what way, if any, does the educational context in which school counsellor's work influence their practice?

#### Stories of interactions:

- What are school counsellors' perceptions of the reciprocal relationships they have with stakeholders in education?
- How do these relationships influence school counsellors' practise?

Success stories:

- What positive outcomes do school counsellors' experience because of their practise?
- How do school counsellors achieve these positive outcomes? (see appendix J)

These were the initial research areas I focused on in reading each narrative for holistic-form and shifted as the holistic-form interpretation progressed (see appendix J). Below are my initial and final story-map grids for holistic-form which, as I explained above, I used as a guide during the interpretation process. I give examples of my use of these story-map grids in interpreting select participants' transcripts.



#### 7.6.4 Initial version of story-map grid (holistic-form)

➤ Used to interpret Pam's interview (see appendix I)

<b>Holistic-form/Imagery</b>			
<b>Research topic:</b> Which philosophies are reflected in the narrative of school counsellors who use strength-based counselling approaches as part of their professional practice?			
<b>Themes from literature</b> (Clandinin, 2007; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Crossley, 2000)			
*Narrative essence (heart)	*Narrative voice (identity)	*Narrative style (type)	*Narrative significance (message)
<b>Additional guiding questions</b> *Asked of each of the above themes respectively to explore holistic-form and to answer the overarching research question.			
What is the story about? What are the narrator's assumptions?	Who is telling the story?	What kind of story is this?	What can we learn from this story?
<b>Themes recognised in transcripts</b> *For each of the above themes from the literature			
❖ Practice stories <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Relationships</li> <li>○ Counselling outcomes</li> </ul> ❖ Adolescent narratives         ❖ Occupation and training narratives <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ experience</li> <li>○ practice</li> </ul> ❖ Deficit narratives	❖ Archetypal image         ❖ Tone (conveys emotion)         ❖ Metaphors         ❖ Personal ideology	Key events during counselling: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Past experience</li> <li>❖ Present realities</li> <li>❖ Future hopes</li> <li>❖ Plot structure</li> <li>❖ Archetypal story form /genre</li> </ul>	❖ Core message

### 7.6.5 Excerpt from Pam's story interpreted according to holistic-form mode

I used the above story-map grid to interpret participant Pam's transcript using the holistic-form mode before my method of narrative analysis evolved. I give an excerpt of this interpretation here to illustrate the construction process involved in working towards a final method of narrative analysis (see appendix I for the full version).

When looking at the holistic-form of Pam's narrative, initially I explored the themes from the literature of narrative essence, narrative voice and narrative significance. I then explored the additional themes that I recognised in her narrative under the above main themes. It was from these sub-themes that I recognised the archetypal image and archetypal story form (genre), the plot structure and the core message of Pam's narrative.

The plot structure of Pam's narrative was progressive (Gergen & Gergen, 1988). Pam portrayed the archetypal image of the mentor and her narrative echoed the archetypal story forms of rebirth and the quest (Booker, 2010). To represent narrative voice, I selected the metaphors in Pam's narrative that epitomised her story. The core message of Pam's narrative from a holistic-form reading were:

- The necessity of supporting adolescents in a non-blaming way to give hope for the future.
- The importance of the school counsellor having support from colleagues, parents and the community.
- The flexibility required by school counsellors to deal with the unpredictable nature of school counselling (see appendix I).

An excerpt from Pam's narrative that best describes her counselling philosophy is "*It takes a positive village to raise a child.*" After interpreting Pam's narrative using the above holistic-form story-map grid I found areas in the transcripts that I wanted to explore which I felt would add greater depth to my holistic-form interpretation. Consequently, and as mentioned above, the holistic-form story-map grid and the resultant themes in NVivo were changed. A final version of the holistic-form story-map grid was drawn up based on the areas I wanted to explore in the interview transcripts.

### 7.6.6 Final version of story-map grid (holistic-form)

- Used to interpret Gabrielle's and Thomas's interviews (see appendices L and M)

<b>Holistic-form</b> <b>Research question:</b> Which philosophies are reflected in the narrative of school counsellors who use strength-based counselling approaches as part of their professional practice?	
Each transcript was explored for the following areas:	Researcher's notes
Main themes	
Other themes	
Genre	
Archetypal story form/image	
Tone	
Problems dealt with within counselling	
Counselling modalities used	
Tools/resources used	
Qualities of a good counsellor mentioned by participant	
For me to think about and review	
My comments from each transcript to consider	

### 7.6.7 Excerpts from Gabrielle's and Thomas's story interpreted according to holistic-form

The above story-map grid was used to interpret Gabrielle's and Thomas's transcripts using the holistic-form mode. Again, excerpts from this interpretation are given here (see the full versions in appendices L and M). When looking at Gabrielle's and Thomas's transcripts, I explored each for the areas indicated in the story-map grid above and took notes. I then

wrote a story for Gabrielle and a story for Thomas which included the areas in the story-map grid.

The overall title for Gabrielle's narrative was "A Story of Empowerment" and the archetypal image that Gabrielle portrayed in her counselling practice was that of the wise woman. An excerpt from her transcript that best describes her counselling philosophy is "*It felt to me like it brought all the paths of my life together into one place.*" The overall title for Thomas's narrative was "Seeing the Inherent Good in All" and the archetypal image that Thomas portrayed in his counselling practice was that of the sage. An excerpt from his transcript that best describes his counselling philosophy is "*I just see that we're born good and we take on beliefs about ourselves from this field of beliefs around us. The work is to become aware of that process and to separate yourself out from it.*"

#### **7.6.8 Heuristic device**

I discussed above the benefits of using both a story-map grid and a heuristic device as aids during the research process. Since this chapter was written retrospectively, at this stage the value of using a heuristic device as a tool in addition to the story-map grid was not yet apparent to me, and no such device was used for holistic-form interpretation.

#### **7.6.9 Re-storying: A holistic-content construction**

After spending considerable time focusing on the holistic-form of each participant's story, I decided that this mode of reading a narrative was inhibiting me from exploring each narrative fully. As already discussed, Lieblich et al. (1998) define the holistic-form mode as interpreting the structure or plot of the whole narrative. This approach is not about linguistic and stylistic features, but rather is about the narrative style or the genre reflected in counsellors' stories. In focusing on holistic-form and in trying to discern the genre of the story, I found I was stretching the participants' narratives to fit within a mould in terms of an archetypal story form and an archetypal figure. On discussion with my supervisors and upon further reflection, I saw that while I was drawn to the romantic notion of the archetype, it did not fit the story and added no depth to the interpretation process.

Instead, I needed to explore the philosophy of each school counsellor's story further and focus on the tensions and power dynamics therein. In addition, I was also being too interpretative, paraphrasing what participants had said, and was not allowing each

participant's voice to come through. My supervisor suggested I restructure my interpretation to include more participant quotes, thereby giving them more of a voice within the interpretation of their own narratives.

I thus formulated an outline of what my interpretation of participants' interviews could look like and what I should focus on:

- My interpretation could be like an artwork brought about through the quality of my writing and the structure and format of my presentation.
- Get straight to the point.
- Lift the interpretation beyond just paraphrasing. Do not repeat what the participant says but rather ask the question "What is my understanding of what the participant says?"
- Reflect on the participants positioning, philosophy, values and belief systems.
- Examine the philosophy behind participant's answers – recognising the commonalities in what is being said.
- Do not just base my interpretation on the question that I asked in the interview. What is the broader meaning in the participant's words?
- Include and reflect on this meaning in the interpretation.
- Be aware of what the participant is reflecting on and weave it together in a way that fits most comfortably with the bigger story.
- Be more critical and interpretive.

Taking all this into consideration and referring back to Lieblich et al. (1998), I came to the conclusion that in exploring each participant's entire narrative I was looking at the holistic-*content* of the narrative rather than the holistic-*form*. The move to the holistic-content mode of narrative analysis is discussed next.

### **7.7 Storyboard two: A move to a holistic-content construction**

My decision to change to the holistic-content mode of reading school counsellors' narratives was taken because their stories were very specifically about strength-based counselling within the context of their counselling practices. These stories could be viewed as a segment within school counsellors' larger life stories. As such, looking for a plot structure with a beginning, middle and end; trying to identify turning points within the

story; and ascribing a genre to the narratives became problematic. My interpretation was stilted and a depth of understanding of the participants' narratives was lacking.

Lieblich et al.'s (1998), holistic-content mode of reading looks at each participant's narrative in its entirety and focuses on content. Parts of the story are interpreted but they are made sense of within the context of the entire narrative. I was drawn to this mode of reading since at this stage I still wanted to preserve the integrity of each participant's narrative. Furthermore, I felt that this mode of reading each narrative would lead to the identification of their discursive form and the additional meaning with which this discursive form imbues each narrative. The unfolding of the discursive form looks for taken-for-granted assumptions within the narrative and is concerned with the distinctive features of the narrator's voice (including the use of metaphors). The holistic-content mode involves preserving a narrative in its entirety and interpreting, within the context in which they are told, the discourses or clusters of assumptions that these narratives reveal. This knowledge and the process undertaken would later assist me in recognising metanarratives of wellbeing and deficit in school counsellors' transcripts.

### **7.7.1 Process of interpretation**

To re-story my interpretation of school counsellors' narratives to reflect a holistic-content mode of reading, I went back to my interview transcripts and focused on the content rather than the form of each participant's entire narrative. In reviewing my interpretation of interview transcripts I noticed that some of the information was not directly relevant but would assist in my understanding of school counsellors' narratives. I moved this information and put it under the following headings:

- Counselling qualifications
- Counselling modalities trained in during counselling qualification
- Counselling modalities used in counselling practice
- Counselling programmes counsellors have introduced in to schools
- Counselling tools and techniques
- Formal assessments
- Presenting problems and issues (see appendix N for further details).

It was during the process of drawing up these lists that I recognised three "role-players" in each counsellor's narrative that contributed to their overall narrative. At this stage, my

supervisor (without being aware of my recognition of three role-players) suggested that I explore participants' narratives from the perspectives of the three role-players that were apparent in all participants' stories. These role-players included the school context, the counselling practice, and the adolescent student.

In looking at these three role-players I felt that a school counsellor's counselling practice is embedded within the school context in which he or she practices. Similarly, the adolescent student's wellbeing is embedded within the school context. Furthermore, for those students who are part of the counselling process their wellbeing is embedded not only within the school context but also within the counselling practice of which they are a part. To further aid interpretation, and for the purposes of explanation, a heuristic device was used for each participant's entire narrative to illustrate the role-players in the school counsellor's story (see below). This initial heuristic device was used to interpret Abigail's narrative (see section 7.7.5 – figure 7(i) and appendix O).

In exploring each participant's narrative through these three lenses, I decided to look at the interview questions I had asked each participant and divide them according to the role-players in the story. Excerpts from each participant's answers to these questions that reflected the various role-players were inserted under each relevant section for every narrative transcript. However, my interpretation explored the holistic-content of each participant's narrative in its entirety and dividing the story in this way might seem counterintuitive to the purpose of maintaining the holistic nature of the story. In interpreting participants' narratives the researcher is faced with the challenge that the act of interpretation may rupture the complexities of participants' understanding of themselves and their work. The researcher must structure and order the process of interpretation in some way in order to ensure rigour (see chapter 2), hence this division of each participant's entire narrative according to various role-players was appropriate.

In using this heuristic device during the interpretation process, I became aware of a fourth role-player that was also represented in the school counsellors' narratives. The heuristic device thus evolved to include the family and community context. The "counselling practice" role-player was changed to the "counsellor". The order in which the role-players were presented in the heuristic device was also amended so that the counsellor was placed at the central point, reflecting that he or she was at the hub of the story, with all

the other role-players circling outwards from it (see section 7.7.7 – figure 7(ii) and appendix P).

While each of the four role-players – the counsellor, the adolescent student, the school context and the family and community context – were explored within each participant’s story, they were not necessarily equally represented in all participants’ narratives. I realised, however, that I did not have to have a complete picture for all the role-players represented in each of the eight participants’ narratives. Thus, the focal point in each narrative differs.

In focusing on the school counsellor as role-player, I noticed that the counsellors had a definitive way of explaining their practice that included their philosophy, values and positioning; their relationships with students and staff; the counselling modalities used; and their counselling experience, practice and techniques. In observing this, I decided that while the final heuristic device to explore holistic-content (see section 7.7.7 – figure (ii)) I created was useful to gain an overall picture of each participant’s narrative, it would be beneficial to use another heuristic device to further explore and understand each school counsellor’s story.

An additional heuristic device to be used alongside the final heuristic device for holistic-content was therefore designed to explore the school counsellor as role-player. This included their philosophy, values and positioning; their relationships with students and staff; the counselling modalities used; and their counselling experience, practice and techniques (see section 7.7.7 – figure 7(iii)).

### **7.7.2 Thesis title**

Changing my interpretation mode from holistic-form to holistic-content shifted the focus of my thesis. To accommodate this shift, I changed the thesis title several more times (see appendix K):

- Title no. 6: “New Zealand Secondary School Counsellors: Perceptions of What Works. A Narrative Inquiry into Stories of Practice” evolved into
- Title no. 18: “New Zealand Secondary School Counsellors: Reflections on Strength-based Counselling Practices”.



### 7.7.3 Research questions

Given my focus on the four role-players in each school counsellor's narrative I moved away from exploring broad research areas as I had done in the holistic-form mode and asked the following research questions (see appendix J):

1. What theoretical assumptions do school counsellors appear to articulate?
2. How do school counsellors incorporate these theoretical assumptions into their counselling practice?
3. How do school counsellors define, measure and perceive the achievement of "positive outcomes" within their counselling practice?

### 7.7.4 Story-map grid

No story-map grid was used for holistic-content interpretation since I wanted to represent the interrelatedness of the four role-players within the school counsellors' narratives. As discussed above I used heuristic devices to do so and these are presented next.

### 7.7.5 Initial heuristic device to explore holistic-content

- Used to interpret Abbigail's interview (see appendix O)

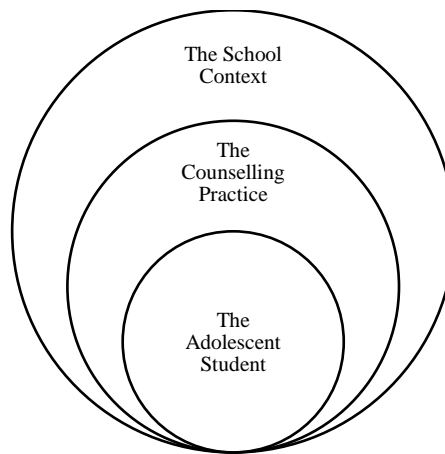


Figure 7 (i): Initial heuristic device to explore holistic-content – Abbigail

### 7.7.6 Excerpt from Abbigail's story interpreted according to holistic-content mode

As I did for storyboard one above, I provide an excerpt from a school counsellor's narrative here. In interpreting Abbigail's narrative using this heuristic device I weaved together numerous excerpts from her transcript and my own interpretation to create a narrative under

the headings of “The School Context”, “The Counselling Practice” and “The Adolescent Student”. The narrative was a holistic one and the overall title for Abbigail’s narrative was “A Story of Cultural Sensitivity and Respect”. An excerpt from her transcript that best describes her counselling philosophy follows:

*I’ve heard it said that the relationship is 80% of counselling and I don’t know how you measure what percentage relationship is, but it certainly feels like the foundations on which everything else is built. You can imagine if something has wobbly foundations then that building isn’t going to stand up anyway. It doesn’t matter whether it’s 20% or 80% it’s vital.*

### 7.7.7 Final heuristic devices to explore holistic-content

- Used to interpret Jessica’s interview (see appendix P)

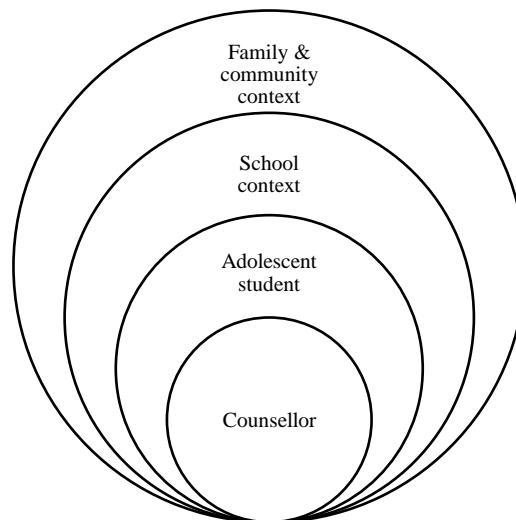


Figure 7(ii): Final heuristic device to explore holistic-content – Jessica

As discussed above in section 7.7.1 the following heuristic device was then used to explore the narrative of the “Counsellor” role-player depicted in the heuristic device above:

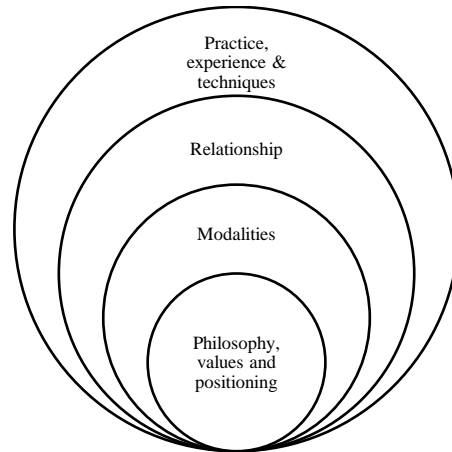


Figure 7 (iii): Heuristic device to explore narrative of the “Counsellor”

#### **7.7.8 Excerpt from Jessica’s story interpreted according to holistic-content mode**

In interpreting Jessica’s narrative using these two heuristic devices I weaved together numerous excerpts from her transcript and my own interpretation to create a narrative under the new role-player headings of “The Counsellor”, “The Adolescent Student”, “The School Context” and “The Family and Community Context”. Under “The Counsellor” I had sub-headings that focused on the themes represented in the heuristic device I designed to explore each school counsellor’s entire narrative. These themes included the school counsellor’s philosophy, values and positing; his or her relationship with students and staff; the counselling modalities used; and his or her counselling experience, practice and techniques. The narrative was, however, still a holistic one and the overall title for Jessica’s narrative was “A Story with Heart”.

An excerpt from Jessica’s transcript that best describes her counselling philosophy is *“I have a real heart for this place ... I think the girls know ... I have a really big heart for them”* (see appendix P).

The heuristic devices were an invaluable guide for the interpretation process. Eventually I could slot different segments from a participant’s entire transcript under the headings for the various role-players from only two readings of their interview. This sped up the process of interpretation considerably.

To further discern these narrative threads, I explored each participant’s story and divided it under sub-headings for the four role-players and then divided this further under

additional sub-headings. These sub-headings were then honed even further; some were discarded and others added by repeatedly reading each section.

#### **7.7.9 Re-storying: A categorical-content construction**

In undertaking this process I discovered commonalities across school counsellors' narratives. This was not surprising. It is feasible that people who have undergone similar experiences would have commonalities as well as differences in their experiences. Thus an opportunity is provided to bring unique narratives together for comparative interpretation or categorical analysis (J. Bruner, 1996; Elliott, 2005; Lieblich et al., 1998). In noticing this opportunity I again decided to amend my mode of reading counsellors' narratives. Instead of focusing on the content for each counsellor's narrative holistically and individually, I would focus on the content categorically across all their narratives. This categorical-content mode of reading across school counsellors' narratives better suited the rationale for my thesis, which focuses on strength-based counselling in secondary school and not on school counsellors' life story narratives.

#### **7.8 Storyboard three: Reading across counsellors' narrative: Introducing a categorical-content construction**

Despite my initial desire to preserve the integrity of the entire narrative by focusing on counsellors' narratives from a holistic perspective, I became aware that universal themes do emerge across narratives (J. Bruner, 1991; Elliott, 2005; Lieblich et al., 1998). Lieblich et al. (1998) suggest that the categorical-content mode of reading is the one to adopt if the researcher's motivation is to look at phenomena shared by a group of people, and in so doing a collective story develops (Elliott, 2005). While I was motivated to look at certain phenomena around strength-based counselling, my approach was still an inductive "not knowing" one. This "not knowing" stance and co-construction of the collective narrative is congruent with social constructionism.

Lieblich et al. (1998) state that the categorical-content mode of reading is a type of content analysis where the researcher may suggest categories from the literature relevant to the area being studied (e.g., strengths, adolescent wellbeing). In addition, categories may be defined from what the researcher identifies from the narrators' transcripts. Content is explored concerning what happens according to the narrator, who is involved, and what

they feel or think about what happens. Segments of the transcripts are drawn together under the particular categories to which they belong. This approach does not attempt to preserve the integrity of the whole account but rather takes a snapshot view of aspects of participants' narratives as they arise (Lieblich et al., 1998).

During the categorical-content interpretation of the narratives, counsellors' perceptions relating to the contribution of strength-based counselling approaches to adolescent wellbeing were explored. Lieblich et al. (1998) says that the transcripts can be searched during interpretation for new categories, and for evidence to either support or refute the predefined categories that were used to guide the interview. McAdams (1993) concurs that the categorical-content mode allows categories to be identified from the narrative, or to be predefined by theory, to guide the researcher during the analysis process. The approach is commonly known as "content analysis", where the researcher knows what the important categories are prior to data analysis (Stewart, Franz, & Layton, 1988). In this mode, "quantitative treatment of the narrative is fairly common", although the overall inquiry is qualitative (Lieblich et al., 1998, p. 13). Thus, while a categorical-content approach may be seen as unconventional, Lieblich et al. (1998) believe that narratives and their interpretation are as "complex and multi-layered as human identity" (p. 167), and consequently conflicts and contradictions are inherent in narrative inquiries. Applying the categorical-content mode of reading in this inquiry should therefore add to the richness of interpretation of the narratives collected.

### **7.8.1 Process of interpretation**

As mentioned, while looking at the four role-players from the school counsellors' perspective – the counsellor, the adolescent student, the school context, and the family and community context – certain narrative threads were recognised across school counsellors' stories. Instead of focusing on individual narratives as in the holistic-content mode, these narrative threads could be interpreted as the categorical-content across narratives. I again set up a story-map grid to guide the interpretation process (see section 7.8.4).

In using the categorical-content mode transcripts were searched for categories suggested by the literature (Elliott, 2005; Lieblich et al., 1998) as well as categories I recognised by using my updated research questions as a guide. I used the word-frequency search in NVivo to assist me in detecting some of these categories but I again found that

working with the transcripts without NVivo yielded a richer understanding. In my initial categorical-content interpretation I decided that, while I was recognising commonalities across school counsellors' narratives, it would be useful to focus on these categories from the perspective of the four role-players I had recognised.

### **7.8.2 Thesis title**

I again amended my title to fit with what I was recognising in school counsellors' narratives and found that they spoke at length about strength-based counselling and adolescent wellbeing. My title at this point was "A Narrative Inquiry into Secondary School Counsellors' Strength-based Counselling Practices in Auckland, New Zealand: Contributions to Adolescent Wellbeing" (title no. 28; see appendix K).

### **7.8.3 Research questions**

I also changed my research questions to reflect my thinking:

1. What are school counsellors' practice experiences of using strength-based counselling approaches with adolescents?
2. How do school counsellors perceive adolescent wellbeing? and
3. How do school counsellors' strength-based counselling practices contribute to adolescent wellbeing? (see appendix J, December 2012).

#### 7.8.4 Initial version of story-map grid (categorical-content)

Categorical-content/Themes		
<b>Research questions:</b> *Asked of each of the categories below to explore categorical-content		
What are school counsellors' practice experiences of using strength-based counselling approaches with adolescence?	How do school counsellors perceive and define adolescent wellbeing?	How do school counsellors' strength-based counselling practices contribute to adolescent wellbeing?
<b>Categories from literature</b>		
Practice experiences of strength-based counselling	Adolescent wellbeing	Strength-based counselling and adolescent wellbeing
<b>Categories from transcripts</b> *For each of the above categories suggested by the literature		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Counselling modalities</li> <li>❖ Practice experiences</li> <li>❖ Providing support</li> <li>❖ Partnership</li> <li>❖ Appropriateness of strength-based counselling</li> <li>❖ Tools</li> <li>❖ School curriculum &amp; positive psychology</li> <li>❖ Significant influences</li> <li>❖ Skills</li> <li>❖ Stresses &amp; problems</li> <li>❖ Triumphs</li> <li>❖ Partnership/openness</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ School counsellors' perceptions</li> <li>❖ Definitions of strength-based counselling</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Adolescent wellbeing</li> <li>❖ Counselling outcomes</li> </ul>

At this stage of my interpretation for categorical-content I was segmenting my transcripts according to the above categories. This gave me an in-depth understanding across all school counsellors' narratives as to their shared and unique experiences regarding strength-based counselling. However, I still had to add my own voice as to my understanding of school counsellors' narratives from a categorical-content perspective. This again led me to adjust my approach. This adjustment involved three further iterations of a categorical-content construction, which are discussed in the next chapter as storyboards four, five and six. Storyboard six presents the final method of narrative analysis I used for participants' transcripts, and in this storyboard there is a shift from focusing solely on categorical-content to include context and metanarratives.

## **Chapter 8: Construction of a method of narrative analysis – stage two: Introducing narrative storyboards for context and metanarrative**

Our subjective experience may often feel like it is ours to own. However, much of it is produced out of the stories that float around in the cultural soup in which we swim.

—Winslade and Monk (1999, p. 23)

The previous chapter charted how my method of narrative analysis shifted during the process of interpreting counsellors' transcripts from an exploration of holistic-form to holistic-content and then to categorical-content. In my initial exploration of categorical-content I recognised narrative categories across counsellors' transcripts (see storyboard three). However, as I explored categorical-content further I became more aware of the context in which counsellors situate their stories and of the metanarratives available to them in support of these stories. I decided to incorporate these aspects of counsellors' narratives more formally into my process on interpretation. This chapter therefore explains how my engagement with context and metanarratives evolved and discusses the theoretical model I used to interpret them as part of the process of constructing a method of narrative analysis.

### **8.1 Storyboard four: A categorical-content construction**

In undergoing the initial interpretation of categorical-content (see storyboard three), I used my research questions to guide me in recognising commonalities across school counsellors' narratives. However, this was still narrowing my focus. I thus decided that it would be useful to focus on the narrative categories/role-players I recognised in the counselling process: the counsellor, the adolescent, the school context and the family and community context. Subsequently I would explore the sub-categories I had recognised under these main categories. I did this for all eight interviews, three of which I present as exemplars in the appendices Q, R and S.



### **8.1.1 Process of interpretation**

Having decided to focus on the four role-players in counsellors' narratives I amended the categorical-content story-map grid several times. I went back to the heuristic devices I had designed for holistic-content analysis and used these heuristic devices to design the fifth version of the categorical-content story-map grid. I used the four role-players as headings for the story-map grid to assist me in my interpretation of categorical-content.

### **8.1.2 Thesis title**

In undergoing the above process I decided that the school counsellors' narratives were not so much about strength-based counselling's contribution to adolescent wellbeing but rather reflected how counsellors saw adolescent wellbeing. I thus amended my thesis title to "Secondary School Counsellors' Strength-based Practices: Constructions of Adolescent Wellbeing" (title no. 34; see appendix K).

### **8.1.3 Research questions: Introducing metanarratives**

In focusing on the four role-players from a categorical-content perspective I changed my research questions to encompass these four areas. In doing this I became more keenly aware of the metanarratives (discourses) constructed within counsellors' narratives. I realised that the four role-players provided a framework or broader context for their practice.

I already had an awareness that my research explored the narrative themes of school counsellors' strength-based counselling stories. Yet, while I was using Lieblich et al.'s (1998) four modes of reading a narrative to explore the form and content of school counsellors' narratives I had no theoretical lens through which to frame the context of school counsellors' practice or the metanarratives that were constructed therein.

This was to come later as the research process evolved. Nonetheless, it is at this stage that I decided to introduce the term metanarrative to my research questions. The overarching research topic became:

In what way, can school counsellors' narratives of strength-based counselling inform and/or restrict counselling practice promoting adolescent wellbeing?

The research questions were:

1. What metanarratives (discourses) shape school counsellors' views about strength-based practice?
2. How do these metanarratives (discourses) promote or restrict a school counsellor's practice?
3. What are school counsellors' constructions of adolescent wellbeing?
4. In what way, if any, do strength-based counselling approaches contribute to adolescent wellbeing?
5. How does the school and/or community context promote or restrict a school counsellor's practice? (see appendix J, February 2014).

In working through this process of interpretation, and after several iterations of the story-map grid, I came up with the fifth version (see below). This story-map grid, along with my use of it, is explained next.

#### 8.1.4 Fifth version of story-map grid (categorical-content)

- Refer to the narratives of Valerie, Hamish and Angus for my first attempt at a categorical-content interpretation using the story-map grid below (appendices Q, R and S)

Categorical-content/Themes			
Research topic			
In what way, can school counsellors' narratives of strength-based counselling inform and/or restrict counselling practice promoting adolescent wellbeing?			
The counsellor	The adolescent student	The school context	The family & community context
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Philosophy, positioning and values</li> <li>Strength-based counselling</li> <li>Modalities</li> <li>Self-awareness and disclose</li> <li>Practice</li> <li>Suicide</li> <li>Safety issues</li> <li>Other issues dealt with</li> <li>Techniques</li> <li>Power Dynamics</li> <li>Referrals</li> <li>Feedback</li> <li>Confidentiality</li> <li>Most proud of/skills</li> <li>Good things about counselling</li> <li>Drawbacks of counselling</li> <li>Relationship</li> <li>Other counsellors in the school</li> <li>Clear boundaries</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>General references by counsellors to adolescents' students</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Tension between teacher and counsellor</li> <li>Fix or help</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>General references by counsellors about family and community context</li> </ul>

Using this updated story-map grid for categorical-content and the heuristic devices I had designed from my holistic-content interpretation I again set out to segment my transcripts according to categories I had recognised in them. I used the four role-players as headings and allocated excerpts from each counsellor's transcript under these headings. At this stage, while I was searching for categories within school counsellors' transcripts I was still presenting each counsellor's entire narrative under the headings in the above story-map grid. I completed this process for all eight counsellors. Appendices Q, R and S present three

of my counsellors' narratives using this process for categorical-content interpretation, respectively.

### 8.1.5 Initial heuristic device to explore categorical-content

The device used to explore holistic-content discussed in chapter 7 was used here for the initial exploration of categorical-content:

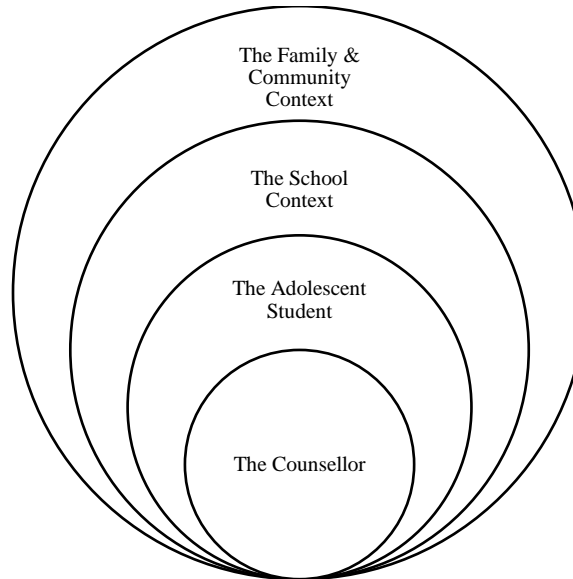


Figure 8 (i): Initial heuristic device to explore categorical-content

### 8.1.6 Re-storying the categorical-content construction

In referring to the heuristic device above depicting the four role-players apparent in school counsellors' narratives, I became aware that it could appear hierarchical. It was not my intention to present the school counsellor in a superior position in relation to the other three role-players and I decided this needed to change. In addition, at this stage my presentation of counsellors' narratives using a categorical-content mode of reading still looked at categories within each individual counsellor's narrative. While I could compare categories across counsellor's narratives, I was still looking at each one separately. I once again decided to adjust my interpretation process.

## 8.2 Storyboard five: A categorical-content construction revisited

### 8.2.1 Process of interpretation

Instead of segmenting my counsellors' narratives according to the categories I had recognised and presenting these separately for each counsellor, I decided to structure my

interpretation by pulling excerpts from across all the counsellors' narratives and placing these quotes under the appropriate category headings (see appendices T, U and V). This resulted in a restructure of my results chapters using the four role-players recognised in counsellors' narratives (the counsellor, the adolescent student, the school context and finally the family and community context) as my chapter headings. At this stage, I combined the school context and the family and community context and called the resulting chapter "The Counselling Context", thus giving me three results chapters (the counsellor, the adolescent student, the counselling context). During this process, I updated the fifth version of the story-map grid for categorical-content and used the categories from transcripts as sub-headings under these three chapter headings.

I also amended my heuristic device to reflect the inter-relationship between role-players within the school counsellors' narrative. Instead of presenting the role-players hierarchically as concentric rings with the counsellor at the base, I changed this to three interlinking rings with the counsellor represented in the centre where the rings intersected. I called these interlinking rings "Rings of Influence" as I felt they represented the influence counsellors have within the school and broader counselling context (see section 8.2.6 – figure 8(ii)). Later I changed the chapter heading "The Counsellor" to "The Counsellor's Practice" since I felt this heading better reflected what the chapter was about.

Having amended my story-map grid and heuristic device for categorical-content, I again went back to my transcripts. I recognised further categories for the four role-players and removed categories that did not apply. Once I had done this I decided I was ready to once again read through school counsellors' narratives. However, as I continued the interpretation process I again decided that the way in which I had structured my results/interpretation chapters was still not completely appropriate.

I then realised that "the counsellor" was a common narrative thread that ran through all of my results chapters and "The Counselling Practice" – the setting within which the counsellors worked – would be an improvement on "The Counsellor's Practice". I also moved the family and community context section from "The Counselling Context" chapter to the "The Adolescent Student" chapter. I decided that the family and community context belonged there since this is the context in which adolescents' metanarratives (discourses) can be recognised. I then renamed "The Counselling Context" chapter as "The School Context".

I also changed the order of the chapters so that the counselling practice came first, the school context next and the adolescent student (including the family and community context) last. I did this since I felt that the school context should be discussed after the counsellor's practice and before the adolescent student, since it is through the school context that the counsellor gains access to the adolescent.

Something was still lacking, however, so I went back to my theoretical positioning as a social constructionist and felt that I needed to represent myself, as researcher, and my co-construction of school counsellors' narratives more overtly. In my positioning as a social constructionist researcher I was directly involved in the construction of the counsellors' narratives and part of the research context. I thus added another chapter to my interpretation: "Research context: The Researcher as Co-constructionist" (chapter 6). This chapter was designed to introduce my role in the construction of a method of narrative analysis in this and the previous chapter.

Given the restructuring of my results chapters I again updated my story-map grid and changed my research questions to reflect my search for the metanarratives (discourses) within the counsellors' practice. I used the chapter headings as headings for the story-map grid. In structuring the chapters and the story-map grid in this way I discovered new questions that I wanted to ask of the counsellors' narratives. These were not my initial research questions but became apparent after my engagement with participants' transcripts. I called them "exploratory questions" and used them as a basis for my story-map grid to guide the interpretation process (see section 8.2.4). I placed the categories I had found for each of the role-players under my chapter headings and the exploratory questions in the story-map grid (see section 8.2.5). This story-map grid was again to provide the outline of my four results chapters.

### **8.2.2 Thesis title**

In undergoing the above process, I realised that the school counsellors' narratives were not so much about secondary school counsellors' constructions of adolescent wellbeing but rather reflected how counsellors constructed their strength-based practice. I thus amended my title to "Secondary School Counsellors: Constructions of Strength-based Practices (title no. 33; see appendix K).

### 8.2.3 Research questions

Having restructured my chapters and changed my title, I altered my research question to:

How do the multiple metanarratives (discourses) which surround school counsellors, construct their strength-based counselling practice?

The exploratory questions I constructed were:

1. What influence do my metanarratives (discourses) as researcher have on the research process?
2. How do the metanarratives (discourses) available to school counsellors construct their thinking concerning their practice?
  - a. How do the metanarratives (discourses) that surround school counsellors influence their use of a strength-based approach to counselling?
3. How do the metanarratives (discourses) of the school context influence a school counsellor's practice?
4. What are school counsellors' constructions of adolescent wellbeing?
5. How do school counsellors perceive their practice as influencing adolescent wellbeing?
6. How do the metanarratives (discourses) of the broader community (within which an adolescent is embedded) influence a school counsellor's practice?

The categorical-content story-map grid now appeared as follows:

### 8.2.4 Sixth version of story-map grid (categorical-content): Exploratory questions

Categorical-content/Themes				
<b>Research question</b> How do the multiple discourses/metanarratives, which surround school counsellors, construct their strength-based counselling practice?				
<b>The counsellor</b>				
<b>Exploratory questions</b>				
<b>*The researcher as co-constructionist</b>	<b>*The counselling practice</b>	<b>*The school context</b>	<b>*The adolescent student/ *The family &amp; community context</b>	
What influence do my discourses /metanarratives as researcher have on the research process?  See chapter 6	How do the discourses/metanarratives that are available to school counsellors construct their thinking concerning their practice?  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How do the discourses/meta narratives that surround school counsellors influence their use of a strength-based approach to counselling?</li> </ul>	How do the discourses/metanarratives of the school context influence a school counsellor's practice?	What are school counsellors' constructions of adolescent wellbeing?  How do school counsellors perceive their practice as influencing adolescent wellbeing?	How do the discourses/metanarratives of the broader community (within which an adolescent is embedded) influence a school counsellor's practice?

I used each of the five role-players in the counsellors' narratives (indicated by an asterisk in the story-map grid above) as my headings for the story-map grid and placed these under my research question. Then, under each of these five headings I added an exploratory question which I had constructed in working through counsellors' transcripts. Finally, under each of the five role-players and exploratory questions I added the categories that I recognised in the transcripts. The headings for the five role-players and the categories under each of them reflected in the story-map grid below became my chapter titles and sub-headings within my results chapters.



### 8.2.5 Sixth version of story-map grid (categorical-content): Categories

Categorical-content/Themes				
<b>Research topic</b> How do the multiple metanarratives (discourses) which surround school counsellors construct their strength-based counselling practice?				
The counsellor				
*The researcher as co-constructionist	*The counselling practice	*The school context	*The adolescent student / *The family & community context	
Reflections on the interview process  See chapter 6	Counsellors' background: A shift to strength-based counselling	School context as ally to counsellors and strength-based counselling	School counsellors' constructions of adolescent wellbeing <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What is adolescent wellbeing?</li> </ul>	Adolescent wellbeing and creating a community of support <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Community support: Parent, teachers &amp; peers</li> <li>Decentred practice</li> <li>Stories about creating a community of support</li> <li>Lack of support for counselling from families</li> <li>Adolescents reluctance to enlisting support</li> </ul>
Observations on materiality	Counsellor's philosophy: A metanarrative of human nature <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Counsellor's view of the person</li> <li>Trip ups and obstacles</li> <li>Re-story: Focusing on the positive</li> </ul>	School context as hindrance to counsellors <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Traditional deficit (metanarrative) discourse dominant</li> <li>Relational &amp; institutional constraints of counselling in a school context</li> <li>Systemic constraints of counselling in a school context</li> <li>Practical constraints of counselling in a school context</li> </ul>	Adolescents and strength-based counselling <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Strength-based counselling's influence on adolescent wellbeing?</li> <li>Counsellor's experiences of using strength-based counselling with adolescents</li> </ul>	The importance of culture and context
Counsellor's becoming	Counsellor's views on strength-based counselling <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What is strength-based counselling?</li> <li>Why use strength-based counselling?</li> <li>How do you do strength-based counselling?</li> </ul> *The counselling relationship	What a counsellor brings to the school context: *School counsellor's working in the school system (sage/mentor) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Advocate</li> <li>*How school counsellors work within the school system</li> <li>Power</li> </ul>	Counsellor's positive reflections on the strength-based counselling process with adolescents <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Doing a "good job" with adolescent clients</li> <li>Making the counselling relationship with</li> </ul>	Parents and strength-based counselling

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Engagement with adolescents</li> <li>- Providing adolescents with support</li> </ul> <p>*Counselling modalities used by school counsellors</p> <p>*Counsellor's passion for strength-based counselling</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Move away from deficit</li> <li>• Relationship</li> <li>• Leadership</li> <li>• Role model</li> <li>• Education</li> </ul>	<p>adolescents "work"</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What adolescents value most about strength-based counselling</li> </ul>	
	<p>Straddling metanarratives: Dominant deficit vs. subjugated strength metanarratives</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Divergent metanarratives: Counsellor as expert or counsellor as facilitator</li> <li>• Power dynamics</li> <li>• When counselling does not work</li> </ul>	<p>Counselling in the school context:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Joining and setting apart</li> <li>• Fitting and integrating</li> <li>• Negotiates/manages</li> <li>• Becoming</li> </ul>	<p>Strength-based counselling with adolescents and suicide risk</p> <p>Adolescents at risk</p>	
	<p>Strength-based counselling as problem-story: Misinterpretation &amp; simplification</p>	<p>Using strength-based approaches in schools</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A strength-based approach within the general school environment</li> <li>• A strength-based model in the classroom</li> </ul>		

### 8.2.6 Second heuristic device for categorical-content: Counsellor's practice:

#### Rings of influence

This heuristic device places the counsellor's practice as the central point interacting with all the other role-players that make up the counselling context and represents the counsellor's influence within this context.

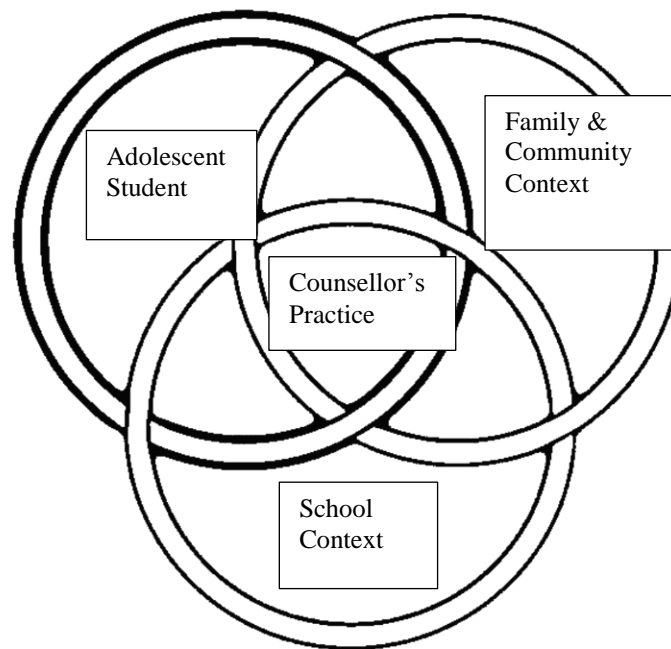


Figure 8 (ii): Second heuristic device for categorical-content: Counsellor's practice: Rings of influence

This heuristic device showing the “rings of influence” of a counsellor’s practice represents all the role-players within the counselling context. I already had an understanding that context was important in positioning counsellors’ narratives but as yet I had no theoretical framework through which to interpret context. This was provided by Zilber et al.’s (2008) three-sphere model of external context, which I present next.

### 8.3 Zilber et al.’s (2008) three-sphere model of external context

As already mentioned, during the process of updating my categorical-content story-map grid I used the four role-players recognised in counsellors’ narratives as my chapter headings. These included the counselling practice, the adolescent and his or her context, the school context and the family and community context. Subsequently, I also added another chapter on researcher as co-constructionist (chapter 6). I had already recognised that the four role-players in counsellors’ narratives provided a framework or broader context for their practice. I also had an awareness that my research explored the metanarratives and narrative themes of counsellors’ strength-based counselling stories.

Up until this point I had been using Lieblich et al.’s (1998) four modes of reading a narrative to explore the form and content of counsellors’ narratives. In searching the literature I came across a more recent article by these authors entitled “The Embedded

Narrative: Navigating through Multiple Contexts” (Zilber et al., 2008). This article assisted me in providing a theoretical lens through which to view the context of counsellors’ practice and the metanarratives therein. A description of this lens, Zilber et al.’s three-sphere model of external context, follows.

### **8.3.1 Embedded narratives and context analysis**

Zilber et al. (2008) suggest that there are three contexts through which narrators situate their narratives. These contexts are “the immediate intersubjective relationship in which a narrative is produced; the collective social field in which one’s story evolved; and the broad cultural meaning systems or metanarratives” (Zilber et al., 2008, p. 1047) that underpin and qualify the narrative. The authors suggest understanding the context within which a story is told is imperative to its interpretation. Gergen and Gergen (1986) earlier suggested that our identity is embedded within our context and that our stories are told within this social relational space. In addition, in constructing their stories people draw not only from their positioning within this social space but also from their positioning in relation to the “cultural stock of stories” and social mores available to them (J. Bruner, 1990, pp. 11, 33, 96; Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 107)

Narrative analysis tends to focus on the text within the story and the context within which the story is told is predominantly ignored or regarded as “self-evident” (Zilber et al., 2008). There is a plethora of literature on methodology in relation to models for form and content analysis (see chapter 7), however few theoretical perspectives explore the context of the narrative. Zilber et al. (2008) state that “context is dynamic, socially and politically embedded, and ever evolving” (p. 1048). Thus, a model for context analysis should “appreciate the fluidity of the very distinction between text and context” (p. 1048).

Zilber et al. (2008) go on to suggest that to differentiate between text and context is one of the challenges in context analysis. This is because “specific discourse” (p. 1049) is seen as being constructed within a fixed context. However, the authors argue that both text and context are constructed within a discourse:

If we see the context as the product of a choice made by the narrator (whether conscious or not), then we may ask, as interpreters, how to identify these contexts, and what is the message conveyed by the ways in which the narrator situated his or her life within specific contexts. (p. 1050)

To assist the interpreter of the narrative with context analysis the authors advocate a three-sphere model of external context. They suggest that context can be voiced by narrators according to three main spheres: intersubjective relations, the social field, and metanarratives. These are discussed next.

### **8.3.2 Intersubjective relations as context**

The intersubjective context refers to “the immediate relations and the interaction” (Zilber et al., 2008, p. 1051) within which the story is told by the narrator. The authors explain that the intersubjective context includes how language is used and understood, the emotional tone conveyed, the purpose of the telling, and the outcomes desired from the telling of a specific story. This also includes the nature of the relationship between the storyteller and the person listening to the story. This is in alignment with the social constructionist epistemology of this study and the co-construction of the narrative of this thesis between me as the researcher and the participants.

Zilber et al. (2008) stress that the intersubjective effects are always there even when “some or all parties are not conscious of them at the time of telling” (p. 1051). The authors state that one of the reasons reflexivity is important is to make the researcher aware of the intersubjective context, and his or her relationship with the participant. They recommend that “we should read the story looking for the assumed context within which the story was constructed” (p. 1053). They go on to explain that in an interview situation

we need to know what the interviewee knew about the aims of the interview; where and when the interview took place and why; who was present; the power relations between the parties, and so forth. (p. 1053)

Therefore, understanding the relationship between the researcher and the participant, and having a knowledge of the immediate context, is important to a comprehension of the story. Both this relationship and the immediate context should be acknowledged within the interpretation of the narrative.

The intersubjective sphere for this research occurred within the interview setting and is the co-construction of the relationships between me and the counsellor. The second sphere for context analysis is presented next.

### **8.3.3 The social field as context**

Zilber et al. (2008) suggest that we all locate our stories “within certain social structures and historical events” (p. 1053). They see an individual’s social field as relating to “the personal depiction of the public time and space” (p. 1053) within which a story unfolds. The authors stress that the social field becomes important in understanding “how certain social rules and institutions” help construct the story the narrator chooses to tell (p. 1053).

In this thesis, the social field is the unique school context that each school counsellor practices in and which comes with its own ethos and agendas. Zilber et al. (2008) explain that the social field relates not only to these symbolic aspects of the institution but also the material aspects. In the context of this thesis this would include the physical school environment and the counselling space (see section 10.1). The authors caution, however, that the social field as seen by those within it is a “personal construction” of what is perceived and not necessarily “objective, factual, depictions of the social sphere” (p. 1053). That is, the social field is constructed by those within it and is not necessarily seen by others in the same way. Furthermore, the authors propose that when people (in this instance the participants and researcher) share the same social space “even though holding different positions within it” (p. 1053), the context may be assumed and not attended to specifically. The researcher must therefore be reflexive in relation to the social field and its implications on the narrative being told. The third sphere of external context is presented next.

### **8.3.4 Metanarrative as context**

The term metanarrative in relation to this thesis has already been defined and discussed in chapter 3. In Zilber et al.’s (2008) three-sphere model, metanarratives form the third sphere of external context. The authors see metanarratives as “the collective web of meanings underlying the story” sourced from “the available cultural forms that can be used by the narrator” (p. 1063). School counsellors’ narratives were thus explored for the story behind the story that they told.

In this thesis, metanarratives of both deficit and wellbeing come into play within the educational, school and counselling contexts. This interplay of contexts, metanarratives and knowledges creates a unique framework for counselling within schools. In exploring this

framework, I hope to gain valuable insights into the ambiguity and complexity of school counsellors' practice.

Zilber et al. (2008) explain that while the three spheres of context are presented separately, they are in fact "interrelated, and the boundaries between them may be quite blurred at times" (p. 1064). In addition, and as already indicated above, the authors argue that the text and context of a narrative are also interrelated. "For that reason, context analysis should be sought in tandem with content and form analysis" (p. 1064). This is the approach I have taken in this thesis.

To conclude this section on context analysis, it is interesting to note that all three spheres of external context are influenced by and have relational characteristics. In storyboard six, which I present next, I outline the final construction of a method of narrative analysis. This is the method of narrative analysis that I ultimately used to interpret school counsellors' transcripts. This narrative analysis uses a categorical-content construction and also explores context and metanarratives. The outcomes of the narrative analysis for storyboard six are presented in chapters 9–12 and make up the results chapters of this thesis.

## **8.4 Storyboard six: A categorical-content construction and exploration of context and metanarratives**

### **8.4.1 Process of interpretation**

Given my discovery of Zilber et al.'s (2008) three-sphere model of context analysis, I now had a theoretical lens through which to view the context of counsellors practice and the metanarratives therein. I became aware that within the categorical-content approach I was taking there was a context to counsellors' stories (see section 8.4.5). I looked at the various role-players within the counsellor's narrative (see section 8.2.6 - figure 8 (ii)) and noticed that I had already framed some of these role-players within contexts. Upon further reflection, I realised that the role-players were *all* part of the context of school counsellors' practice.

Given this reflection I changed two chapter headings: "The Counselling Practice" became "The Counsellor Context" and "The Adolescent Student" became "The Adolescent Context". I also decided that the family and community context should be a separate chapter and I named this chapter "Community Metanarratives, Counselling and the Family

Context” to better illustrate the link between the community, counselling and family and the metanarratives they draw upon.

My chapter headings for the results sections of this thesis now read as:

Chapter 6: Research Context: Researcher as Co-constructionist

Chapter 9: Narrative Category: Counsellor Context

Chapter 10: Narrative Category: School Context

Chapter 11: Narrative Category: Adolescent Context

Chapter 12: Narrative Category: Community Metanarratives, Counselling and Family Context.

While the researcher as co-constructionist chapter is essentially part of the results section, I decided to position it as chapter 6 before I discussed my construction of a method of narrative analysis in chapters 7 and 8. I did this to assist the reader in understanding how the research process developed and to show how I, as a researcher within a social constructionist paradigm, was integral to the counselling narrative that is told within this thesis.

After changing my chapter headings for my results section, I once again updated my story-map grid to reflect these changes (see section 8.4.4). Again, I shifted my research questions to reflect the focus on context and the search for metanarratives (discourses) within a counsellor’s practice. I changed “exploratory questions” to “research questions” and placed them under a main research topic (see section 8.4.3). My new chapter headings remained as headings for the story-map grid. The categories pertaining to each of the school counselling contexts were slotted under the chapter headings and relevant research questions in the story-map grid. This final story-map grid provides the outline of my results chapters.

In changing the layout of my results chapters I again amended my heuristic device. I felt that the central point for counsellors’ narratives was the counselling practice, and all the role-players or contexts (research context, counsellor context, school context, adolescent context and community metanarratives, counselling and family context) circled around it (see section 8.4.5 and figure 8(iii)).



### 8.4.2 Thesis title

During the above process, I again shifted my focus regarding the title of my thesis. I felt that the counsellors' narratives were about counsellors' strength-based practices and how this constructed adolescent wellbeing. I thus amended my title to:

“Secondary School Counsellors’ Strength-based Practices: Constructions of Adolescent Wellbeing” (title no. 34; see appendix K).

However, I again decided that this did not adequately reflect the direction of this thesis. The focus had to be more on the context of strength-based counselling as it is positioned in secondary schools, the metanarratives that this context reflects, and how all of this then constructed adolescent wellbeing. The title thus changed to:

“Counsellors’ Strength-based Practices in Secondary Schools: Context, Metanarratives and Constructions of Adolescent Wellbeing” (title no. 37; see appendix K).

Finally, I decided that both the context and the complexity of a counsellor's practice, including the understanding and construction of adolescent wellbeing, can be recognised in the multiple metanarratives that counsellors engage with. The final title for the thesis is thus:

“Counsellors’ Strength-based Practices in Secondary Schools: Managing Multiple Metanarratives” (title no. 39; see appendix K).

### 8.4.3 Research questions: Shifting towards metanarrative

My research topic was now:

How do the multiple metanarratives (discourses), which are available to school counsellors, construct their strength-based counselling practice?

And my research questions:

- What influence do my assumptions, biases and metanarratives (discourses) as researcher have on the research process?
- Which metanarratives (discourses) are drawn on to construct school counsellors' practice stories?
- How do the metanarratives (discourses) of the school context influence a school counsellor's practice?
- What are school counsellors' constructions of adolescent wellbeing?

- How do school counsellors describe their strength-based practice as co-creating adolescent wellbeing?
- How do the metanarratives (discourses) of the broader community (within which an adolescent is embedded) influence a school counsellor's practice?
- What are school counsellors' experiences of the adolescent's family during the counselling process?

The research topic and research questions are presented in the story-map grid for metanarratives, context and categorical-content presented next. The narrative categories and contexts are the headings of my results chapters (chapters 6 and 9–12).

#### **8.4.4 Final version of story-map grid (metanarratives, contexts and categorical-content):**

This story-map grid provides an outline for the results chapters of this thesis. I included myself as co-constructionist within the research context (see chapter 6) alongside the four contexts of the results chapters (see chapters 9 to 12) that I recognised within school counsellors' narratives (indicated by an asterisk in the story-map grid). These five contexts are the chapter headings for the story-map grid and fall under the overarching research topic for this thesis. I placed the research questions relevant to each of these contexts/chapter headings under them in the story-map grid. Then, under each of these five chapter headings and research questions I added the categories/chapter sub-headings I had constructed in working through counsellors' transcripts.

Refer to the *final A3 story-map grid for metanarratives, context and categorical-content* on the next page.

Final Story-map grid for Metanarratives, Contexts and Categorical-content

Thesis Title: Counsellors’ strength-based practices in secondary schools: Managing multiple metanarratives				
Categorical-content				
Research Topic				
How do the multiple metanarratives (discourses), which are available to school counsellors, construct their strength-based counselling practice?				
The counsellor’s practice: Chapter headings / Narrative categories and contexts				
*Research context: A narrative of becoming	*Counsellor context	*School context	*Adolescent context	*Community metanarratives, counselling and family context
Chapter 6	Chapter 9	Chapter 10	Chapter 11	Chapter 12
Research Questions				
• What influence do my assumptions, biases and metanarratives as researcher have on the research process?	• Which metanarratives are drawn on to construct school counsellors’ practice stories?	• How do the metanarratives of the school context influence a school counsellor’s practice?	• What are school counsellor’s constructions of adolescent wellbeing? • How do school counsellors describe their strength-based practice as co-creating adolescent wellbeing?	• How do the metanarratives of the broader community (within which an adolescent is embedded) influence a school counsellor’s practice? • What are school counsellors’ experiences of the adolescent’s family during the counselling process?
Chapter sub-headings				
An introduction to my “becoming as a researcher”	Final heuristic device to explore categorical-content and context: Revisited  The intersubjective context: The relational space between researcher and counsellors  Counsellor’s background and current positioning: A need for change	The social field: School context, ethos and materiality  School context as ally to counsellors and strength based counselling	Counsellors’ constructions of adolescent wellbeing • A social construction • A holistic construction • A developmental construction • A systems theory construction	Wellbeing metanarratives: What is needed to facilitate adolescent wellbeing? • Community support and decentred practice • Counsellors and cultural awareness
The evolving of the research process	Counsellor’s philosophical positioning: A metanarrative of the human condition • Counsellor’s view of the person • Trip-ups and obstacles: The person is not the problem • Re-storying: Moving away from a problem-focused perspective	School context as hindrance to counsellors • Dominance of deficit metanarrative (discourse) in schools • Institutional, relational and systemic constraints of counselling in schools: Tensions and multiplicities • Practical constraints of counselling in schools  Resisting dominant deficit metanarratives in schools: Acknowledging subjugated strength metanarratives	Strength-based counselling & adolescent wellbeing • Strength-based counselling & focusing on adolescents’ inherent strengths • How does the supportive practice of strength-based counselling shape adolescent wellbeing and strengths? • Strength based counselling and co-constructing confidence in the adolescent • Strength based counselling and adolescent resilience • Strength-based counselling, the teaching of skills & self-regulation • Introducing a strength-based model for co-creating adolescent wellbeing	Stories of creating a community of support: How does community support facilitate adolescent wellbeing?
Reflexivity: Reflections on the interview process	Counsellors’ views on strength-based counselling • Counsellors’ constructions of strength-based counselling • Counsellors’ motivation for using strength-based counselling • Counsellors’ passion for strength-based counselling • Counsellors’ actions around strength-based counselling? *The counselling relationship * Divergent metanarratives: Counsellor as expert or counsellor as facilitator * Power dynamics in the counselling relationship * Counsellors’ positioning and use of counselling modalities: - Social constructionism - Narrative therapy - Humanistic, solution focused, systems theory	Counsellors as part of the school system: What do school counsellors bring to the school context? • Counsellor as an advocate and collaborator • Counsellor and relationship building • Counsellors as leader, role model and educator	Counsellors’ constructions of what adolescents value about strength-based counselling	Deficit metanarratives: What are the implications of pre-existing attitudes of deficit on adolescent wellbeing? • Lack of family support for counselling and pre-existing parental attitudes • Adolescents’ reluctance in enlisting support • The potentially detrimental nature of familial relationships on adolescent wellbeing • The effect on adolescents of how they are “seen” by adults • Counsellors’ pre-existing attitudes and deficit constructs of cultural groups
	When counselling does not work: Reverting to a deficit metanarrative of counselling - where does responsibility lie?	Unique features of counselling in the school context  Strength-based models in a school context	Strength based counselling: Working with adolescents at risk of harm to self • The dangers of lack of support • Ensuring adolescent safety through regular assessment • Resilience based work	
	Strength based counselling as problem-story: Misinterpretation & simplification • Strength based counselling in high risk and crisis situations	A strength-based model in the classroom as part of teaching	Adolescence and a societal metanarrative of deficit	

#### 8.4.5 Final heuristic device to explore metanarratives, contexts and categorical-content:

This heuristic device sees all the role-players, including myself as the researcher, as making up the counselling system. The heuristic device uses both Lieblich et al.'s (1998) categorical-content mode of reading a narrative (to construct narrative categories) and Zilber et al.'s (2008) three-sphere model of external context (to recognise the narrative context, including the intersubjective context, social field and metanarratives) to examine school counsellors' narratives and present visually a storyboard of my research. All contexts/role-players interact with each other and are acted upon by each other. In addition, the metanarratives (discourses) in all these relationships feed back into the counselling practice.

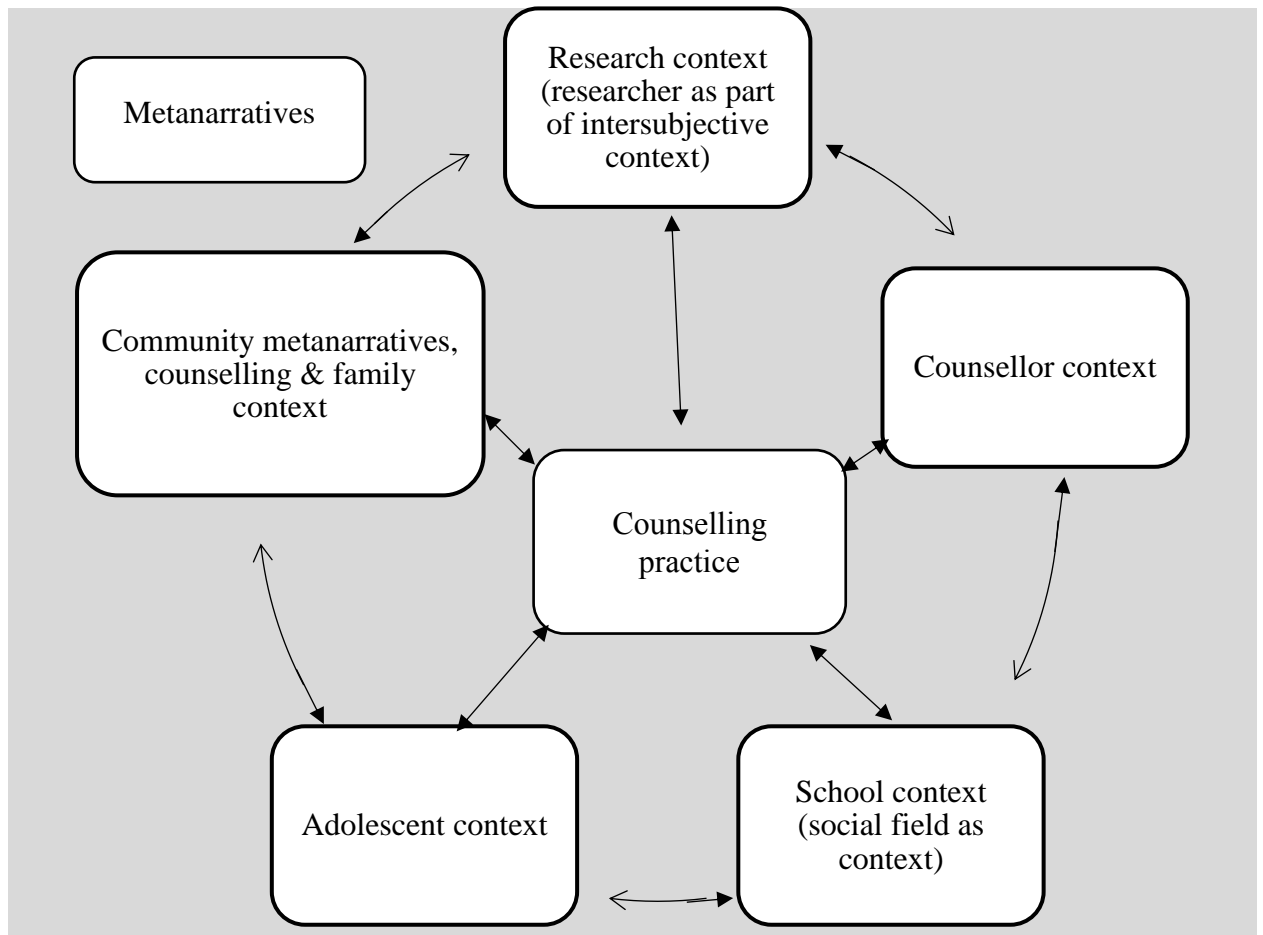


Figure 8 (iii): Final heuristic device to explore metanarratives, contexts and categorical-content: Co-construction of understanding of counsellors' strength-based practices in secondary schools

I used the final story-map grid for metanarratives, context and categorical-content and the above heuristic device to complete my final interpretation of counsellors' narratives. In my results chapters I have included excerpts from transcripts and interpreted them from an etic perspective as a co-constructionist of the overall counselling narrative.

### **8.5 Overview of the final method of narrative analysis for this thesis**

The final method of narrative analysis I used to interpret counsellors' transcripts (the results of which are presented in chapters 9–12) is based on Lieblich et al.'s (1998) categorical-content mode of reading a narrative and on Zilber et al.'s (2008) three-sphere model for context analysis, including metanarratives. Using these complementary methods of narrative analysis, the overarching research topic for this thesis is:

- How do the multiple metanarratives (discourses), which are available to school counsellors, construct their strength-based counselling practice?

The research questions that fall under this research topic, constructed through engaging with participants' narratives (as discussed above), link to the results chapters and are:

#### **Chapter 6: Research Context: Researcher as Co-constructionist**

- What influence do my assumptions, biases and metanarratives (discourses) as researcher have on the research process?

#### **Chapter 9: Counsellor Context**

- Which metanarratives (discourses) are drawn on to construct school counsellors' practice stories?

#### **Chapter 10: School Context**

- How do the metanarratives (discourses) of the school context influence a school counsellor's practice?

#### **Chapter 11: Adolescent Context**

- What are school counsellors' constructions of adolescent wellbeing? and
- How do school counsellors describe their strength-based practice as co-creating adolescent wellbeing?

#### **Chapter 12: Community Metanarratives, Counselling and Family Context**

- How do the metanarratives (discourse) of the broader community (within which an adolescent is embedded) influence a school counsellor's practice? and

- What are school counsellors' experiences of the adolescent's family during the counselling process?

These questions, along with the final version of the story-map grid and final heuristic device for metanarratives, contexts and categorical-content, were used to guide the final interpretation process. However, I reiterate that the process was one of co-construction and the final method of narrative analysis built on what has come before.

I conclude this section by reflecting on my overall experience of the interpretation process. I felt myself stretched to the limit during much of this process and felt that at times the research process was akin to an act of masochism. The interview transcripts were thousands of puzzle pieces that seemed to belong to different puzzles. To mix metaphors, I felt like a fighter wrestling with the innumerable pages of interview transcripts. Just when I thought I understood the core of them some new aspect would put me in a headlock and throw me again. Each time I got back up again and did the next section that needed doing. While the discomfort caused by this process was not pleasant, ultimately it made me more critical of my research and self-reflective. This in turn made me a better researcher and in my humble opinion makes this a more robust thesis.

Chapters 9–12 present the results from my narrative analysis of categorical-content and the exploration of contexts and metanarratives. The first of the four narrative categories, counsellor context, is presented in the next chapter.

## Chapter 9: Narrative category: Counsellor context

*I think I was born to be a counsellor.*

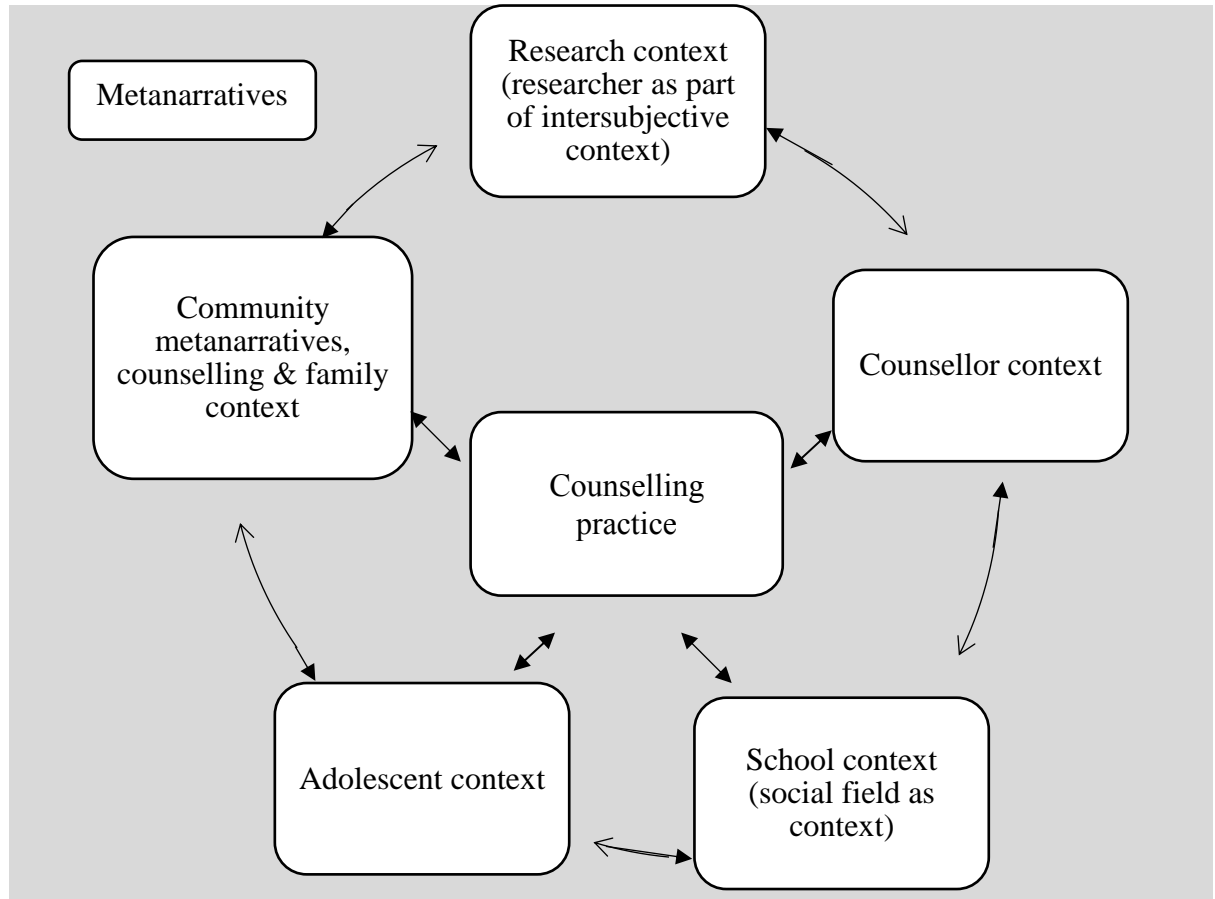
—Valerie

This chapter explores the first of the four narrative categories constructed at the end of chapter 8. The counsellor context looks specifically at a counsellor's practice of counselling within the school. The chapter starts by revisiting the final heuristic device used to explore metanarratives, context and categorical-content that are presented in these results chapters (chapters 9–12). It then provides a brief discussion of the intersubjective context to position the reader and to remind them of the relational context of this thesis. The chapter explores counsellors' background and philosophical positioning and focuses on their constructions of their counselling practice. In particular, it explores counsellors' narratives of strength-based counselling and practice. The chapter ends with a discussion on metanarratives of deficit and strength, as well as a reflection on strength-based counselling and my interpretation of how the counsellors I interviewed view this counselling modality. To maintain the integrity of each results chapter it has been necessary to repeat some of the ideas expressed within school counsellors' narratives across chapters. The research question that frames this chapter is:

*Which metanarratives are drawn on to construct school counsellors' practice stories?*

### 9.1 Final heuristic device to explore metanarratives, contexts and categorical-content: Revisited

As described in chapter 8, the final heuristic device focuses on all the role-players who contribute to the counselling system in schools and myself as researcher. All contexts/role-players interact with each other and are acted upon by each other. In addition, the metanarratives (discourses) in all these relationships feed back into the counselling practice. This heuristic device, and chapters 6 and 9–12 of this thesis, illustrate the multifaceted and complex role of the school counsellor working with adolescents in schools, which are part of the larger community. The results chapters of this thesis weave together and form the intersubjective context of this thesis, which is discussed next.



### 9.2 The intersubjective context: Relational space between researcher and counsellors

The intersubjective context was discussed in chapter 8. To reiterate, the intersubjective context refers to “the immediate relations and the interaction” (Zilber et al., 2008, p. 1051) within which the story is told by the narrator. This includes the nature of the relationship between the storyteller and the person listening to the story. I refer to it again here at the beginning of the results chapters because the intersubjective context forms the basis of the relationship I fostered with the school counsellors. This context influenced counsellors’ telling of their stories and in turn my interpretation of them. This aligns with a social constructionist lens and speaks to the co-construction of the narrative of this thesis between me as researcher and the participants (see chapter 6). The counsellors’ background and current positioning is discussed next.

### 9.3 Counsellors’ background and current positioning: A need for change

Participants in this study did not begin their careers as school counsellors. A variety of factors influenced participants in becoming school counsellors, some of which were



personal. Some decided to change careers or roles within the school context. Others, like Jessica and Pam for example, worked as nurses before training to be school counsellors. Medical practitioners such as doctors, nurses and psychologists working in the health sector work predominately within a biomedical model that is largely deficit-based. The focus is on pathology and the presenting problem or “disease” is located within client who presents to the medical “expert” for a “cure.” The biomedical model is very isolating and aims to remove deficient aspects from the client to make them “well”. The other aspects of the client’s life as they pertain to overall wellbeing are largely discounted (Kashdan & Biswas-Diener, 2015b; White & Epston, 1992, 2002; Winslade & Monk, 1999).

Jessica and Pam felt frustrated by the biomedical model’s focus on deficit and pathology and the notion of prescribing medication as a cure-all. They both identified that they wanted to move away from a biomedical deficit-based metanarrative.

Pam: *I was more interested in the chatting than giving out pills.*

Jessica: *My skills were not behind a mask, gown and operating theatre.*

Both participants reflected that they wished to be more closely engaged with their clients. This is reflective of a strength-based approach that focuses on the client as expert, takes a holistic view to wellbeing and follows a systemic approach. These concepts will be discussed in chapter 10 – the adolescent context.

Gabrielle and Angus were already working within the school context as trained teachers and believed that their time and skills were not being utilised in an appropriate way. Gabrielle had been a dean for 10 years and believed that being responsible for disciplining students did not give her the ability to assist them in addressing the root causes of their issues:

*I was frustrated as a dean wearing the discipline hat. I could only go so far because you can’t develop absolute trust when there’s the discipline-hat. I felt I was not delving into what kids were experiencing. You would deal with the symptoms of bad behaviour but there was something underlying it I was not getting to.*

As with Jessica and Pam, who changed careers to move away from a deficit-based orientation, Gabrielle also changed from being a teacher and dean in a discipline system that she felt was very deficit-based to being a school counsellor. The role of school counsellor better aligns with her values and encompasses a strength-based approach towards working with young people.

*Gabrielle: As a counsellor, I am in touch with my own values and I am acting out my own values, whereas teaching I wasn't always doing that. I think the girls recognise that.*

Angus was a trained primary school teacher who became disillusioned with the lack of contact with students relative to the large amounts of administrative tasks involved in teaching:

*I had some time off teaching and had time to think through where my time would best be served. I was spending four hours on lesson preparation, planning, and setting tests to every-one hour of teaching. I thought things through and was led towards counselling.*

Valerie and Abigail brought a more personal impetus to changing roles to become school counsellors. Valerie believed that for her being a counsellor is a calling: *"I think I was born to be a counsellor because even as a small child I can recall looking after people."* Valerie initially worked as an English teacher and it was through this role that she recognised and became aware of the challenges faced by young people:

*I was an English teacher and I began to get students to write from experience. Students started writing about their lives and I started thinking, "Oh my God these kids are having such a tough time." There are all these issues coming up for them and how can they possibly concentrate when they are worried about that?*

It was through this experience as an English teacher that Valerie developed an interest in a strength-based approach to counselling:

*Because of my experiences as an English teacher I did some professional development seminars that looked a lot at strength-based modalities of solution focused and narrative therapy.*

Abigail initially worked as a primary school teacher. Her personal experience of being in *"traditional negative-based counselling"* piqued her interest in becoming a strength-based counsellor:

*Other [counselling] approaches are constantly focusing on the deficit: what is wrong with you and how come you've ended up there? I didn't know a strength-based approach existed, the counselling that I had was very much looking internally and what's wrong with me - a process of ripping off scabs that were healing and being in constant pain.*

Reflecting on the counsellors shift to a strength-based counselling approach, I recognised a greater metanarrative in participants' decisions to become school counsellors than simply wanting to make a change to what they did career wise on a day-to-day basis. Rather, in their current role as school counsellors many of the participants in this study felt a dissonance between what they were doing as school counsellors and what they felt they should be doing to help young people. A negatively orientated outlook did not appear to fit well with the school counsellors I interviewed. They were aware of the need to address the issue around focusing on deficits. They wanted to be more effective and were frustrated with the way things are.

Valerie reflected on her current role as school counsellor and felt there is a deficit orientation to counselling. She believed that by taking a negative-based approach counsellors are “feeding” the problem: *“The opposite of strength-based, is problem-focused. I wouldn't ever do that. It wouldn't matter how serious the case, I would never ever go back to the problem, spending time on it, feeding it.”* For Valerie, *“Counselling in its nature should be positive, it should be strength-based. It should be – I am going to see someone because I want a different outcome and you would hope that the outcome is positive.”*

In her statements above, Valerie indicates her support of strength-based counselling. However, she does not identify the benefits of exploring the presenting problem. While it is important in strength-based counselling not to become stuck on the problem, it is still necessary to focus on the issue to facilitate appropriate problem-solving (Kashdan & Biswas-Diener, 2015b). Strength-based counselling is not about discounting the presenting problem. Angus also reflected on strength-based counselling: *“I was first attracted to strength-based counselling because I felt it supported my growth and development as an individual. It added something different from a deficit-based approach.”* My exploration of counsellors' backgrounds, the dissonance they felt working within a deficit-orientation, and their shift to a strength-based counselling approach led me to explore the common features of the counsellors' philosophical positioning around not only their counselling practice but also their views of human nature; these are discussed next.

#### 9.4 Counsellors' philosophical positioning: Metanarrative of the human condition

In all the school counsellors' interview transcripts a positively orientated metanarrative of the human condition could be recognised.

##### 9.4.1 Counsellors' view of the person

The school counsellors appeared to show compassion and caring for the adolescents under their care. This view of the person resonates with a Rogerian humanistic view. A Rogerian approach to counselling is one where counsellors are empathic towards and show unconditional positive regard towards their clients. Clients are treated with empathy and non-judgement by the therapist. This is a client-centred approach to therapy where clients are seen as the experts in their own lives (Rogers, 1995). The Rogerian therapist believes that the client is inherently "good" and that life circumstances and faulty ways of being prevent the client from achieving their ideal self. The ideal self is the person they strive to be and stands in contrast to their actual self, which is the person they currently are. The goal of therapy is to work with the client to assist them to move towards their ideal self (Rogers, 1995). Positive psychology and strength-based counselling originate partly from a Rogerian humanistic view to counselling (Seligman, 2003; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

All the school counsellors saw the inherent good in everybody and felt that everyone has the innate potential to better themselves.

Thomas: *My counselling philosophy is that everyone is born good. I see people as born healthy and well meaning.*

Hamish: *There is always something positive to look for. Every person is unique and has the ability to make positive choices that will enhance their lives.*

Several counsellors reflected that the knowledge and expertise within the counselling process lies with the student. This philosophy reflects a strength-based, social constructionist and narrative approach to counselling. Both Gabrielle and Abbigail commented that adolescents are "*experts on their own lives*".

Gabrielle: *The girls that come into this room have the knowledge.*

Abbigail: *I'm happy for the student to be the expert in their lives and for me, not to be the expert.*

Jessica: *I privilege students' knowledge over my own. I consult with them about what they think is best.*

Gabrielle further reflected on her view of the person in relation to moving away from a deficit-orientation to a strength-based orientation: “*Strength-based counselling is having the belief that my clients have the strength to deal with their own problems and not looking at it from a deficit perspective.*” Jessica expressed the empathy and compassion she has for the adolescents she works with: “*I have a real heart for this place. The girls know I have a really big heart for them.*”

As can be seen, all the counsellors reflected a positive view of the human condition and emphasised that the students they counsel are “*experts*” of their own lives. However, it may be that it is through the counselling process and with the assistance of the school counsellor that this expertise becomes accessible. The counsellors talked about teaching of skills and self-regulation to adolescents as part of the counselling process. This may be counsellors’ way of honouring their knowledge of their own counselling practice. In addition, in positioning adolescents as experts school counsellors honoured what adolescents know about their own lives (see section 11.2.5). At the same time, school counsellors used their own expertise to teach adolescents how to access and use the knowledge they already have. While school counsellors’ views of adolescents were positive, again in line with a Rogerian Humanistic approach to counselling they also believed there were trip-ups and obstacles that impeded adolescents from achieving their full potential; these are articulated below.

#### **9.4.2 Trip-ups and obstacles: The person is not the problem**

Jessica mentioned trip-ups directly in relation to her view of human nature and reflected: “*We are all good, but things trip us up.*” Thomas expanded on Jessica’s statement and felt that while we are essentially born “*good*”, society imbues us with a deficit view of ourselves as we grow and experience more of life:

*I can't see babies are born bad. You could say that life experience overlays our view of ourselves and we construct a whole problem to deal with these views.*

*People have been imposed upon by unhelpful ideas about themselves.*

Abbigail aligned herself with the philosophy of narrative counselling. She agreed with Thomas and saw the client’s presenting problem as external to them and as being

within the system they live in: *“It is looking at the problem as being somewhere in the system people are living in and seeing the problem as being there and looking at how the system can be changed.”* To assist students in overcoming these trip-ups and obstacles, the school counsellors believed that they must empower adolescents and help them re-story their problems to focus on the positive aspects of their lives. This is discussed in the following section.

#### **9.4.3 Re-storying: Moving away from a problem-focused perspective**

To move adolescents beyond problems and a deficit way of viewing their situation, school counsellors used reframing or re-storying. This technique requires school counsellors to assist adolescents in looking at the presenting problem from a different perspective, and in so doing help adolescents move forward (White & Epston, 1992; Winslade & Monk, 1999). Jessica used a narrative approach to strength-based counselling, where reframing involves helping adolescents come up with an alternative story to their problem story: *“When I meet someone for the first time I’m interested in knowing about them, what’s going well, not just the problem story.”* She described this process as supporting adolescents to have the *“best story”* they can.

Hamish similarly talked about strength-based counselling and used reframing but did so from a solution-focused perspective. He viewed the problem as a *“stepping-stone”* that can move you towards your desired outcome: *“Your problem, it is there, and then we might move away from that and look at the problem as a stepping-stone to reaching different outcomes.”* Hamish believed that to help adolescents move beyond obstacles in their lives you have to be future-focused and move towards solutions: *“It is important to be positive with adolescents, regardless of the situation they find themselves in, you have to look forward.”* Here Hamish is acknowledging that, yes, there is a problem, but the adolescent is more than the problem, and that the problem can lead you to where you want to be.

Valerie and Gabrielle drew on a narrative approach and believed that it is important as a school counsellor to allow students to see their strengths and to move away from the problem. This is part of the re-storying process where adolescents are encouraged to come up with a different story to the story of deficit.

Valerie: *The essence of counselling is never letting her see herself as a failure, never letting her see herself as someone who didn't have the resources to survive, because she's an incredibly talented girl. It was a happy experience; we got on like a house on fire. She left with a big smile on her face. It wasn't a story of deficit at all, **it didn't remain problem focused.***

Gabrielle: *There are many different stories out there about being a victim **but we don't have to stay in that story.** There are other stories that we can enlarge and believe in.*

In Valerie's and Gabrielle's quotes above the sections in bold show that while they do address the problem it does not remain the focus of the counselling process.

While I felt that focusing on the positive aspects of both adolescents' lives and the counselling process is important and a part of strength-based counselling, the presenting problem should not be discounted within the re-storying process. Valerie and Gabrielle do acknowledge this problem before moving towards re-storying, however Hamish did not appear to do so. The problem adolescents present with can provide valuable insights for moving towards resolution. It should be noted that strength-based counselling is not about "overlooking" the problem (Galassi & Akos, 2007). It is about working with the problem, reframing it at the appropriate juncture, and then moving towards a way in which adolescents can manage and eventually resolve the problem. Some of the school counsellors I spoke to were more adept at doing this than others. I believe there should be more of an awareness regarding the value of the presenting problem within counselling (Hefferon & Boniwell, 2011; Kashdan & Biswas-Diener, 2015b). To assist adolescents in re-storying or reframing their experiences, all the counsellors I interviewed use a form of strength-based counselling. Their views on strength-based counselling are discussed next.

### **9.5 Counsellors' views on strength-based counselling**

The school counsellors I interviewed were selected purposefully as they all use a strength-based approach to counselling in their practice. As a researcher, I had my own constructions as to what strength-based counselling entails but I wanted to gather school counsellors' constructions as to how they defined this modality and how they used it within their counselling practice. In reading the counsellors' narratives, I noticed that their views on strength-based counselling could be seen through four lenses: school counsellors'

constructions of, motivation for, passion for, and actions around strength-based counselling. These views on strength-based counselling shape school counsellors' practice stories and reflect the metanarratives they draw on. Each of these lenses is now discussed in turn.

### 9.5.1 Counsellors' constructions of strength-based counselling

In exploring school counsellors' constructions of strength-based counselling the metanarratives school counsellors draw on to construct their practice stories come to the fore. School counsellors spoke about how the constructions of strength-based counselling supported a move away from constructs of pathology and deficit towards what is working well:

*Angus: [Strength-based counselling does not] focus on the deficits that other approaches outline ... It recognises the positive, or the affirming qualities of human nature that sustain growth and relationships.*

*Thomas: Many other traditional approaches see the person as being the problem ... Most adolescents have so much saturation in a negative description of themselves that anything that stands counter to that has to be good .... it knows there is nothing wrong with the person ... it doesn't focus on the negative.*

*Gabrielle: [With strength-based counselling] adolescents are not this patient we have to treat ... It treats people with the respect and sees people as having strengths.*

*Pam: Strength-based counselling is not about pathologising ... it is non-blaming ... It focuses on young people's strengths and what they are doing well.*

*Jessica: It is about recognising the good things in their [the adolescent's] life.*

Abbigail and Thomas saw strength-based counselling as providing an alternative way of looking at a person and assisting them in accessing their strengths:

*Abbigail: Strength-based counselling helps the client mine through their experiences to find examples that demonstrate they can do a task, think in a particular way, or have power over a situation, which seemed they were hopeless in the face of.*

*Thomas: Strength-based counselling is where you look for the strength of the person even if they don't know they have them. Strength being things they do well,*



*understandings they have, practices that are helpful and useful, anything that stands against the description they have of themselves as being weak or useless.*

Jessica embraced a narrative approach to strength-based counselling, and when adolescents tell her their “*problem saturated story*” she asks them what is “*going well*” to move them away from deficit towards a positive frame of reference: “*If I had someone come with their problem saturated story, I’d want to know, ‘What’s going well for you at the moment?’ It’s not often that I don’t hear something that’s going well.*” Angus saw strength-based counselling as being “*more in the here and now*”. For him, “*strength-based counselling is different because you do not go back to the deep dark times of childhood. There isn’t a need to go back into history to traumatic moments.*” Here Angus is referencing the psychoanalytic therapeutic modality which places an emphasis on examining childhood events to gain insight into their impact on the present. Like Jessica above, Angus believed that focusing on the presenting problem is only helpful in so far as it assists the client in moving towards resolution: “*If someone wants to bring up something that’s an issue it’s only within the context of what may be supportive of a future to come, or may bring a solution.*”

Pam, meanwhile, believed that “*strength-based counselling is a great preventative approach*”. This sentiment, while appearing to move away from a focus on illness, still carries the connotation that illness may occur and that intervention is required. It in effect still reflects the biomedical model of deficit that focuses on fixing problems. Strength-based counselling is about focusing on what is working within the situation. However, as noted, it is imperative that the presenting problem should not be discounted. A counsellor can gain valuable insight into an adolescent’s character in exploring the presenting problem. In addition, taking the time to focus on the nature of the problem and the strategies an adolescent may have used to deal with the problem could potentially provide an important opportunity to foster resilience (Kashdan & Biswas-Diener, 2015a). I would thus caution that to move towards adequate resolution of the problem, the problem needs to be examined and worked with first.

Thomas highlighted that since adolescents already have a strength base this provides school counsellors with a solid foundation from which to begin the counselling process: “*Adolescents really have the strength and may not even realise them. So, you are starting from an existing base rather than trying to find something new and getting them to*

*learn it*". Jessica, meanwhile, worked in a Catholic school and equated strength-based counselling with the beliefs and ethos of Catholicism. She explained, *"I work in a Catholic school, so strength work is also calling on spiritual practices or beliefs that people may be living by."* Here Jessica takes a more holistic view: *"There is a spiritual component, which I consider a strength-based practice. It is not judgemental and it is being there for someone in their time of need"*.

The message that all counsellors conveyed in defining strength-based counselling is that it is more than focusing on the presenting problem. School counsellors' comments about strength-based counselling seemed to be more solution-focused than problem-focused. The counsellors believed that strength-based counselling requires a shift away from a deficit approach to counselling and a move towards what is working and going well for adolescents. As already mentioned, while I agree that it is important to ultimately move towards resolution of a problem, the problem itself should not be discounted and the issue at hand should not be minimised. The school counsellors' definitions of strength-based counselling appear to emphasise pushing towards resolution while minimising the presenting problem. This is of particular importance in working with adolescents at risk of self-harm and will be discussed further in chapter 11.

### **9.5.2 Counsellors' motivation for using strength-based counselling**

I asked school counsellors to reflect on why they use strength-based counselling as part of their professional practice. The replies are indicative of the metanarratives that school counsellors draw on in their counselling practice and answer the research question for this chapter: *"Which metanarratives are drawn on to construct school counsellors' practice stories?"*

Jessica was the most effusive in her response but all the school counsellors were adamant about the benefits of strength-based counselling and what it achieves in people's lives. Jessica believed in the importance of accepting where you are at in the moment but at the same time allowing space for growth. She took a philosophical, almost religious, view of strength-based counselling – being accepting of what life presents – which seems to align with the values of the Catholic school she works at: *"Strength-based counselling is about what is good in people's lives, it supports growth, it supports the soul's journey."* However, Jessica also believed strength-based counselling *"helps people step in and*

*recreate themselves.*” She talked about strength-based counselling as not merely focusing on and moving away from the presenting problem but as shifting adolescents to a better place than they were before the problem presented.

This notion aligns with positive psychology’s health versus disease model debate. Traditional counselling modalities focus on alleviating mental illness such as depression and anxiety. However, focusing on the absence of illness does not necessarily consider the importance of promoting positive mental health. Positive psychology and strength-based counselling approaches seek not only to alleviate mental illness so that people are “*surviving*”, they seek to move beyond that so that people are “*flourishing*” and “*thriving*” (Hefferon & Boniwell, 2011).

*Jessica: Strength-based counselling is life giving. It makes a difference for young people, it makes a difference for families. People do not just get problems sorted; they get more than they come for. They are positioned into a new place, their relationship is in a different place and it has new opportunities.*

Pam and Jessica both believed that one of the benefits of strength-based counselling is that it gives people hope.

*Pam: It gives hope, it makes good sense and I feel confident using it. It has been proven to have an impact on a young person’s mental health.*

*Jessica: Strength-based work is about keeping people connected positively to life, to people, to hope.*

Jessica talked about wisdom in relation to strength-based counselling and believed that it is the culmination of positive human experiences that can then be put into practice through counselling:

*Wisdom comes from many places. It comes from research, it comes from the commonality of human experience and what makes a difference. Strength-based practice, has some knowledge about all of that.*

Jessica, Angus and Valerie, meanwhile, talked about moving adolescents towards a better place, away from deficit-and problem-focused ways of viewing the world.

*Jessica: People leave uplifted, they are not as burdened, they have something to work towards, and it’s a better place to be.*

*Angus: A strength-based approach builds a platform that is solid, a base that you can grow from. It seems to be particularly effective at focusing on encouraging*

*things. It recognises things that may not be seen in the deficit-focused world that we occupy.*

*Valerie: Strength-based counselling is not problem focused, it's not negative, it's not energy draining, it's energy giving. It keeps things light instead of getting too heavy. It helps you to make interventions that are time limited. It builds towards something.*

Note how Angus and Valerie both used a building metaphor to refer to strength-based counselling.

Without exception, the school counsellors I interviewed used strength-based counselling because it moves away from deficit and provides a foundation from which adolescents can be taught new skills, tools and resources to move them towards a better way of being. However, while strength-based counselling does move towards solutions sometimes the issues raised by adolescents in counselling are “heavy”, as Valerie put it, and need to be adequately explored. School counsellors must be cautious that in their eagerness to move towards resolution of the problem they still give the presenting problem its due.

### **9.5.3 Counsellors' passion for strength-based counselling**

Abbigail, Jessica and Valerie all expressed their passion and love of using strength-based counselling approaches with young people.

*Abbigail: I love it and couldn't imagine doing anything else.*

*Jessica: There isn't a session that goes by where I don't know I've made a difference. It could be a one-off conversation. It could be one question that turns someone's life around. It could be over a large chunk of associations over years at school.*

*Valerie: What attracted me to strength-based counselling was energy. My own energy and adolescents' energy.*

Jessica and Valerie said of the young people they counsel:

*Jessica: I strive to become more aware of the beautiful, strong person I'm dealing with.*

*Valerie: I like young people. I am positive. I like my work. I would never go through a day of counselling, and come out feeling that it wasn't worthwhile.*

As a researcher taking a social constructionist perspective, I position myself as part of the research process. I have been open about both the preferences and biases I bring to the research process. I have indicated my preference from the onset of the research process for strength-based counselling. However, I remain open to any concerns strength-based counselling exhibits. I have raised the question as to whether strength-based counselling would be beneficial with the more serious cases adolescents present. I have also stressed the importance of working with the problems adolescents present with and not discounting them too soon in moving towards resolution. It is nonetheless clear from the above comments that the passion and drive that the school counsellors I interviewed bring to their counselling practice is sincere.

School counsellors' actions around strength-based counselling, including the counselling relationship, divergent metanarratives within a school counsellor's practice, and the power dynamics within the counselling relationship, are discussed next.

#### **9.5.4 Counsellors' actions around strength-based counselling**

When asked how they do strength-based counselling all the counsellors spoke initially about aspects of the counselling relationship and the importance of engaging with adolescents and offering support. The counsellors also talked about the importance of accessibility of counselling for adolescents. This engagement involved establishing a rapport and explaining to adolescents what counselling is to ensure the adolescent felt comfortable during the counselling process. In providing access and in establishing rapport school counsellors were then able to give the adolescents the support they needed. In addition to the counselling relationship the counsellors also commented on the structure of the strength-based counselling sessions. They used several counselling philosophies and modalities including social constructionism, narrative therapy, humanistic Rogerian person-centred therapy and solution-focused counselling. The counselling relationship is reviewed first, followed by a review of counselling modalities.

##### ***9.5.4.1 The counselling relationship***

While the therapeutic relationship is not related directly to the use of a strength-based counselling modality, there has been research into the importance of the relationship between counsellor and client concerning successful counselling outcomes (Wampold & Imel, 2015). Many of the school counsellors spoke about the importance of establishing a

good relationship and developing a rapport with adolescents to facilitate the counselling process.

*Pam: Having skilled and qualified counsellors who have the ability to engage with young people in a purposeful way is important. Because you can have all the training in the world, but if you cannot develop a rapport with young people it's pointless.*

*Abbigail: The rapport and the relationship is important. The relationship is 80% of counselling. It certainly feels like the foundations on which everything else is built. If something has wobbly foundations that building isn't going to stand up.*

*Jessica: I know what facilitates counselling – support and positive connections.*

Concerning the counselling process, Valerie, Pam and Angus respectively discussed the importance of being an “ally”, “being available” and “being there” for the adolescent in order to facilitate a good counselling relationship.

*Valerie: A lot of my counselling is sitting with the things adolescents' experience. Making sure, they see you as an ally so that however much they go off the rails they have someone in the school that they can tell.*

*Pam: My counselling philosophy is around being available for adolescents in a way that they feel comfortable approaching me and accessing support.*

*Angus: My counselling philosophy looks at meeting, or understanding, or supporting, or being there for the individual needs of the child.*

In talking about the counselling relationship, the school counsellors above seemed to acknowledge indirectly that they had an awareness of the adolescent's presenting problem but it is not apparent to what extent they focused on it before they moved to resolution. To establish a good counselling relationship, Pam felt that the adolescent needs to feel comfortable enough to seek out counselling. She believed that the basis of a good counselling relationship is in establishing trust with the adolescent.

*It is about supporting them to feel safe with me and to trust me, and that is about how I build rapport, but also about talking to them about confidentiality. It is about having the skills to meet the student where they are at.*

To build rapport, the school counsellors expressed genuine interest and curiosity in the adolescent:

Angus: *I am interested in who is sitting in front of me, and what it is they are asking of me, and how it is that I might be able to communicate with them in a way, which is comfortable. So, engagement would be very high on my list.*

Thomas: *I have a genuine curiosity for who they are and what they are. At the heart of successful school counselling is really, seeing the student.*

Valerie: *I'm always curious. What more is there in this story? What more do I have to learn to understand this young person?*

Hamish believed that to establish rapport and build a good counselling relationship there must be a certain level of mutual respect: *"Everyone should be treated with respect regardless of race, religion or gender."*

Three of the school counsellors talked about the qualities and responsibilities that make a good counsellor:

Angus: *As a rule, you would hope that all counsellors are caring, compassionate, and good listeners.*

Hamish: *Part of my responsibility as a counsellor, is to try and peel the layers away to find out what sits at the bottom. That takes time.*

Abbigail: *I consider myself somebody who journeys along with them through part of their lives and we have some interesting conversations. They teach me as much as I teach them.*

Jessica's perspective on the counselling relationship was that as a school counsellor it is her professional obligation to support of adolescents: *"We [counsellors] are responsible for guiding young people. It's a professional responsibility to support them to feel positive about themselves."* As part of establishing a good relationship with adolescents, the school counsellors spoke about the imperative of listening to and engaging with students. Here the counsellors acknowledged that there is some focus on the presenting problem.

Jessica: *It's important to hear where people are at first. But it's not helpful to keep them there. It is part of our responsibility to have someone experience hope in talking about what they're going through.*

Valerie: *You do have to learn to be humble and listen because their story is always unique.*

Angus: *I listen to the telling of their story and their sense of identity. What are they saying, or telling me?*

Jessica and Valerie were aware that there have been times when they did not listen adequately.

Jessica: *Sometimes in my desire to be helpful I did not listen long enough and let someone talk and share what they were thinking and feeling and what the experience was. I might be too eager to fix and offer ideas.*

Valerie: *I've got caught out by that before and I've thought, "Oh I know what's going on for you", and then the more I listen it's quite different.*

In the above examples, Jessica's and Valerie's desire to try and "fix" the problem hampered listening skills. This notion of rushing to fix things stems from a deficit-based biomedical model where presenting symptoms need to be alleviated. Jessica's and Valerie's reflection on their listening skills highlights school counsellors' propensity to move to solutions too quickly while not spending sufficient time examining the presenting problem. Valerie talked in terms of the adolescent's story, but reverted to drawing from her own life experience in understanding that story: *"Oh okay, now I get it. It's wonderful to have had enough experience of life. They don't have to say very many words before I think, 'I know where you're coming from, I understand.'"* Valerie in drawing from her own experience believed she enhances her depth of understanding of the adolescent's story.

Similarly, Hamish talked positively about self-disclosure by the counsellor in the counselling relationship. He asked the question *"How appropriate is revealing something about yourself?"* and answered himself thus: *"The answer inevitably is always. If it's something that will help the client understand the situation better, or make a better choice, or have a better alternative, then self-disclosure is used and then my own narrative comes into play."* However, as researcher I wonder whether in drawing from their personal stories and self-disclosing may at times cloud counsellors' perception of the story of the adolescent in front of them.

Jessica talked about the importance of boundaries in the counselling relationship. She explained that while empathy is important to the counselling relationship, it is still prudent to set appropriate boundaries with adolescents.

*I had worked in an alternative school where kids had been kicked out and that taught me not to be too soft and gentle sometimes. I'm effective because I can be straight up, the kids like that. I'm a bit of a stalwart around justice, I will challenge people when I think something's not okay.*



In terms of the importance of the counselling relationship, Pam explained that as a school counsellor the support she offers students can act as a preventative measure and curtail the development of more serious mental health issues: *“I am proud of being able to support young kids who have the beginnings of mental health problems and supporting them to develop the skills to avoid it becoming a more significant part of their lives.”*

Another important aspect of the counselling relationship from a strength-based counselling perspective is equipping adolescents with the means and tools to support themselves.

*Pam: Strength-based counselling is about supporting young people to recognise their resources and strengths and know how to tap into those to cope with different challenges in their lives.*

*Jessica: Strength-based work is making sure students are supported, know how to support themselves and know how to bring joy into a hard day.*

There appears to be somewhat of a contradiction here between viewing adolescents as experts in their own lives and the need for school counsellors to equip adolescents with the necessary skills to manage their lives. I believe strength-based counselling falls somewhere in the middle in that it both utilises adolescents’ current strengths and resources and should teach them the necessary skills to access them (see section 11.2.5).

In this section, in answer to the question “How do you ‘do’ strength-based counselling?”, the school counsellors’ reflected on the counselling relationship. The next section’s focus is on the counselling modalities counsellors use during the counselling process.

#### ***9.5.4.2 Divergent metanarratives: Counsellor as expert or counsellor as facilitator***

A strength-based approach to counselling views the adolescent as having expert knowledge on his or her own life (White & Epston, 1992; Winslade & Monk, 1999). However, traditionally the counsellor is esteemed as being the expert guiding the client towards resolution of his or her presenting problem. Indeed, within a school context adolescents are often sent to the counsellor to be “cured” of what ails them. This is very much in alignment with a deficit metanarrative and a traditional approach to counselling. The school counsellors I interviewed had varying ideas around the notion of counsellor as expert.

Hamish felt the school counsellor does come from a “*position of wisdom*” and is responsible for guiding the client towards resolution of the presenting problem. He said that as a school counsellor he could “*provide better options*” for the adolescents he counsels; the unspoken corollary is that adolescents are unable to provide good options for themselves:

*A strength-based counselling approach is where the counsellor is aware of his or her own strengths and is able, from a position of wisdom, to provide better options for boys to work towards a positive outcome.*

Hamish continued to describe himself as being admired for his counselling expertise, during which he inadvertently fell back on a deficit metanarrative of adolescents. However, he was aware of this lapse and quickly pulled himself back to a strength-based metanarrative:

*I am proud of being seen as someone with experience and expertise in being able to deal with boys. Not deal, that's a horrible word, being able to work with boys in a positive manner to effect positive outcomes.*

Further into the interview Hamish again shifted away from the dominant metanarrative of school counselling and the notion that he as counsellor can “*provide better options*” for adolescents. He relinquished his positioning as “*expert*” in part and said, “*I can't live their lives, I can't make decisions for them. I can only give them suggestions.*”

Jessica also presented counsellors as having “*knowledge*” of “*what helps people*”. In so doing she too put herself in the role of expert. However, unlike Hamish, rather than seeing it as a point of pride, she appeared to recognise the responsibility that comes from being positioned thus:

*Counsellors have knowledge about what helps people. Students don't have that knowledge, so I feel hugely responsible for representing that wisdom in my work. That's being a master of what you do, rather than a novice.*

...

*Counsellors have a voice on things and are responsible for sharing that knowledge. We have amazing knowledge that young people and adults don't.*

Gabrielle's and Abbigail's views in part contradict Hamish's and Jessica's.

Gabrielle and Abbigail saw strength-based counselling as a joint undertaking between school counsellor and adolescent. Gabrielle felt that this partially absolved her of having be

the “*expert*.” Abbigail also believed she was not the expert and felt that recognising this lightens her burden as school counsellor.

Gabrielle: *Strength-based counselling is about working together. It's not here's some pills and that'll make it better. I am not the expert. It's quite freeing to know that.*

Abbigail: *If I had to feel like I was the expert in everything that would be a heavy yoke to bear. If you feel like you've got to put on big shoes and clomp around it must be horrible.*

In rejecting the position of expert both Gabrielle and Abbigail put the onus on adolescents to engage in the counselling process.

Gabrielle: *I am not completely responsible, it's not up to me, it's up to us, it's a shared thing.*

Abbigail: *I don't consider myself an expert. I consider the student to be the expert and they have to find an answer that's going to work for them. Strength-based counselling leaves them as a competent person who either is or will be able to have power over their situation.*

Here Gabrielle and Abbigail place the onus of reaching resolution during the counselling process partly on the adolescent. Their positioning of themselves as “*not the expert*” stands in stark contrast to Hamish and Jessica’s positioning of themselves as “*experts*.”

Abbigail also described some of her interactions with adolescents:

*I don't lecture them. Sometimes I say, "I'm just putting on my mum's hat for a moment and I'm just going to tell you how important breakfast is and it'll only last a few minutes." But we do it in a funny way.*

Abbigail appeared not to be aware of her languaging around her interactions with adolescents. Her languaging here stems from a hierarchical deficit-based view within a school context of the school staff holding power over the students. This is indicated by her use of the words “*lecture*”, “*mum's hat*” and “*tell you*”, all of which imply authority. Again, we see the tension and discrepancies involved in straddling the metanarratives of deficit and strength.

### 9.5.4.3 Power dynamics in the counselling relationship

In the previous section we saw that counsellors had disparate views on whether their role is that of expert or that of facilitator. Being an expert comes with a measure of power. The counsellors I interviewed also had disparate views on power (Foucault & Gordon, 1980; Foucault & Sheridan, 1995; Winslade & Monk, 1999). Thomas talked about the issue of power at length. According to him, power is implicit in the nature of the counselling role. He believed that the position of counsellor gives the person who takes up the role power over others. He also believed that this power is bestowed on counsellors whether or not they are aware of it or feel that they do have power over others:

*I have become more aware of the complexities of counselling and a major element is power relations. Even when you think, you're not in a position of power you are. Becoming aware of that in a deep way is very important.*

Thomas further explained the nature of the power he had as a counsellor: *"I have power as a male, an older male, and as a therapist and as an authority figure in the school."*

However, he also talked about the power of the therapist and the importance of being aware that as a counsellor you do not abuse this power: *"The more subtle power is the power as the therapist because counsellors think they are being even-handed but you need to be very attentive to make sure you are."*

Thomas also described the steps he takes to ensure he is not abusing his power as counsellor:

*To ensure I am being even-handed I ask, "How will you know if this isn't right for you?" I make sure they [adolescents] can answer that. Then asking, "How will you be able to tell me this is not right?"*

He believed that school counsellors are in a position of power over adolescents and that adolescents themselves see counsellors as wielding authority. Being open with adolescents about the power dynamic in counselling allows them to see the counselling relationship differently too: *"A lot of the work is in shifting the way students relate to the power dynamic itself."* Thomas's view that counsellors have power over their clients appears to stem from the biomedical model where the professional providing a service is elevated above the person receiving it and is seen as being the expert (Kashdan & Biswas-Diener, 2015b; White & Epston, 1992, 2002; Winslade & Monk, 1999).

Gabrielle's view on the power dynamic in the counselling relationship contradicts Thomas's view and on the face of it appears to stem from a more strength-based metanarrative to counselling: *"Some people get caught in the power thing. But that's not counselling, counselling shouldn't be about power. I see it as a more equal relationship. Strength-based does emphasise that."* While Gabrielle's view is indeed in line with a strength-based approach to counselling, she is mistaken, according to Thomas, if she believes that as a counsellor she has no power over the adolescents she counsels. I believe that Gabrielle did not consciously wield power over the adolescents she counsels and her intention behind this is honourable. However, I agree with Thomas that the nature of the role of counsellor does indeed bestow power. A way in which to manage this power differential is to have an awareness of it in the counselling relationship. In fostering this awareness, the counsellor can work alongside the client, being mindful not to impose their views on the client.

Jessica's allusion to power is somewhat different to that of both Thomas and Gabrielle. She talked about power more in terms of her identity as a school counsellor and the influence or lack of influence she has over others as a product of this identity: *"I had cultural supervision with a Tongan woman. I wished I had brown skin because I could then work better with Māori and Pasifika. I thought that was important, they were the most in need."* Here Jessica assumes that as a Pākehā (European) she is not best situated to assist Māori or Pasifika clients. Jessica's statement that *"they were the most in need"*, while based on a genuine desire to help, is a deficit view based on the bias that Māori or Pasifika people potentially have a greater need for counselling. Jessica added that it was brought to her attention that she should embrace her identity as a European counsellor: *"Someone said, 'Jessica, it's who you are as a Pākehā or Palagi [European] that will make the difference. The fact that you're with them in that way as a white person, that's where your power is.'"* However, Jessica did not explain how her power as a Pākehā counsellor could make a difference to Māori or Pasifika clients.

Hamish was aware of his power as a school counsellor and his view of power is deficit-based. He sees power as the means to instil fear. On his own admission, he did use fear as a *"motivating tool"* within the counselling process but not *"too often"*:

*The fortunate thing about counselling in New Zealand is we are far removed from the rest of the world that many of the boys would like to travel one day. It's quite a*

*shock to them to find out that if they have criminal record, they could potentially not be allowed out of the country. That can be a deterrent, I know fear is a deterrent, but I try not to use fear too often as a motivating tool.*

The ways in which the power dynamic in the counselling relationship was seen by the school counsellors I interviewed ran the gamut from a deficit-based metanarrative to a strength-based metanarrative. It seems that again the school counsellors were left straddling the metanarratives of deficit and strength within their practice and positioned themselves somewhere between these opposing metanarratives.

#### ***9.5.4.4 School counsellors' positioning and use of counselling modalities***

The school counsellors I interviewed drew upon and integrated aspects from different counselling approaches. All these counselling approaches fall under the umbrella of strength-based counselling (see appendix N and chapter 5). These strength-based modalities are discussed next.

##### **9.5.4.4.1 Social constructionism as strength-based counselling**

This thesis is underpinned by the philosophy of social constructionism. In reading the interview transcripts I noticed that several counsellors positioned themselves within a social constructionist perspective. The school counsellors use terms such as “*represent*”, “*position*”, “*co-discover*”, “*voice*”, “*speak*” and “*construct*”, all of which fit within a social constructionist framework. Jessica in particular has a strong bent towards social constructionism. She talked about being aware of how her students position themselves within the counselling context and within their own lives:

*We have to understand the story. We are interested in the discursive positioning, the discourses that people are operating under and we wonder about the origin of their stories.*

...

*I look at how young people position themselves and their feeling state and the context they're living under.*

...

*I provide students with opportunities to represent themselves and they speak themselves into existence.*

The notion of “*speaking yourself into existence*” stems from a social constructionist philosophy where who we are in the world is “*co-created*” by our interaction with others and their subsequent interaction with us.

Angus similarly positioned himself as a “*co-constructionist*” and was “*intrigued to co-discover with adolescents where counselling might go*” by giving students a “*voice*”. Thomas said: “*I see life experience as a construct. That is why I like narrative counselling because it separates the problem from the person.*” These notions of life as a construct and the externalising that narrative counselling achieves also stem from social constructionism.

Gabrielle alluded to a social constructionist approach, commenting that “*meanings are created through society but meanings can change*”. This references the way in which we story constructs within a society. The constructs we identify with may support either strength or deficit metanarratives. The metanarratives that are played out and supported are dependent on the dominant viewpoints of the system or institution in which they are embedded. As indicated above, another counselling modality that several school counsellors use is narrative therapy which, according to Winslade and Monk (1999), has social constructionism and Foucauldian thinking as part of its philosophical underpinnings (Burr, 1995, 2003; Foucault, 1973, 1979; Foucault & Gordon, 1980; Foucault & Sheridan, 1995); this is discussed next.

#### **9.5.4.4.2 Narrative therapy as strength-based counselling**

The philosophy of narrative counselling is evident within the descriptions of Angus, Abbigail, Jessica and Thomas of their counselling processes. They talked about not knowing or not being the expert, about separating the client from the problem or externalising the problem, about reframing the problem story, and about creating an alternative story to the problem story (Bird, 1994; White & Epston, 1992; Winslade & Monk, 1999). All these constructs are part of narrative therapy. Angus talked about the notion of “*not knowing how it is*” for adolescents:

*Being a curious enquirer is a narrative approach. That comes from not assuming that you know how it is. Because how could I know what they are going through at the age of forty-two when someone who is fourteen has come to see me?*

Interestingly, Valerie in section 9.5.4.1 above also talked about herself as being “*curious*”. However, instead of taking a “*not knowing*” stance as Angus does, she draws on her own experiences to help her understand the adolescent’s story.

Abbigail agreed with Angus about “*not knowing*” and explained how as a narrative strength-based counsellor your focus is on externalising the presenting problem:

*It’s about not being the expert, and about separating the client from the problem.*

*The client is not the problem. The problem is the problem and that problem is not situated inside them.*

Abbigail and Jessica described how as a school counsellor you shift from the problem story to focus on the alternative story:

Abbigail: *They come with the dominant story that, “I can’t do this because, or I’m stuck because, or this is unfair because.” While that is dominant at the time, if you look through their past you can often find alternative stories, that show them they have dealt with this before; they have succeeded here before and then look at ways they did that.*

Jessica: *I don’t work with problem saturated approaches. I hear problem stories, it’s important for me to hear the problem story. But I’m more interested in hearing the other stories that are hope-filled; stories that don’t necessarily get heard.*

Both Jessica and Thomas talked about the social context within which stories are told and explained that the problem story arises within this context. This also links back to the social constructionist approach:

Jessica: *Problems are not within them. I never see a problem within a person, there’s a social context to it. I’m interested in exploring that social context.*

Thomas: *Their view of themselves in life has been constructed by the social context or environment.*

Jessica: *Narrative counsellors are interested in the stories that have influenced someone to believe what they believe about themselves.*

Thomas: *Narrative takes the theoretical stance that you are a good person, you just have these ways of being that make you seem not true to yourself and others*

#### **9.5.4.4.3 Humanistic, solution-focused counselling and systems theory**

In addition to adopting a social constructionist paradigm and a narrative approach to their strength-based counselling, several counsellors employed other strength-based counselling modalities. Angus believed that “*successful school counselling is about having a heart*”. This resonates with a humanistic, Rogerian person-centred approach to counselling where the counsellor extends “unconditional positive regard” towards the client (Rogers, 1995).



Angus explained himself thus: *“Thinking about counselling from a caring, compassionate position is important because whatever I do sometimes just caring and listening is the best approach. There is no, one size fits all.”* Angus’s sentiment aligns with what school counsellors said about the counselling relationship in section 9.5.4.1, whereby the counselling relationship is regarded as being more important than the counselling modality the counsellor uses in terms of counselling efficacy.

Abbigail used a technique from solution-focused counselling called magic questions:

*I often ask magic questions, “If you could wake up tomorrow and everything was the way you wanted, what would it look like?” We compare that with what they’ve got and then we look at how they can get there.*

Abbigail went on to explain how using a solution-focused approach to counselling moves adolescents from where they are enmeshed in a problem towards a solution by taking lots of small steps:

*I use the language baby steps. “What’s one little thing you could do?” So, they tackle the issues one at a time. There’s no sense of fixing the whole world in one go but with lots of little interventions into their family systems.*

With *“interventions into their family system”* Abbigail was making reference to a systems approach to counselling, where the broader context and family system that the adolescent is a part of is taken into account and becomes part of the counselling process. The family context is discussed further in chapter 12.

This concludes the sub-section on how counsellors *“do”* strength-based counselling. It looked at both the counselling relationship and strength-based counselling modalities used in exploring counsellors’ views on strength-based counselling. Instances of when counselling did not appear to *“work”* and where school counsellors reverted to a deficit metanarrative of counselling will be discussed next.

## **9.6 When counselling does not work: Reverting to a deficit metanarrative of counselling – where does responsibility lie?**

All the school counsellors were asked if there was an instance where strength-based counselling had not worked for them. The responses were interesting, as were the counsellors’ interpretations of my question. Many of the counsellors placed the onus for the

“failure” of the counselling process on the student rather than on themselves, the therapeutic relationship or the modality of strength-based counselling. For example, Gabrielle, Thomas and Abbigail put the onus of failure of strength-based counselling on the adolescent:

Gabrielle: *I don't know if it's strength-based counselling that doesn't work. Like any counsellors, I have had my failures. But there are girls who for whatever reason are pre-conditioned to think that counselling's not an avenue they want to go down. Which is difficult if you have a kid that's cutting and that [Child and Youth Mental Health Services] wouldn't pick up.*

Thomas: *I can't relate any specifics where strength-based counselling did not work. But often it won't take because adolescents don't want to see it that way. If a student, for all sorts of complex reasons, doesn't want to be in a different place to where they are because it serves them well. So if you're trying to invite them to somewhere else, they don't want to go there.*

Abbigail: *Some students are just easy to work with. I don't know that the deficit is anything to do with me, some students are going to be harder work for whoever works with them.*

Pam's answer to the question “Is there an instance where strength-based counselling did not work?” was different from her peers: “*There has never been a situation where I have felt I needed to use another approach.*” Hamish also reflected on an instance where strength-based counselling did not work for him. What he said, however, completely contradicts the tenets of strength-based counselling:

*I'm dealing with a client where strength-based counselling has not worked. He has sexual identify issues. The fear, or the shame, or the embarrassment of talking to his parents about it, is becoming a hindrance. I'm [the counsellor] disappointed that he's chosen not to [tell the truth] even although we decided that this was the best way forward.*

Here Hamish appears to blame the adolescent for the failure of the counselling process and seems to show little insight into or understanding of the adolescent's perspective.

The above instances of where strength-based counselling did not work reiterate the complexity of embracing metanarratives of deficit and strength. All the school counsellors I interviewed positioned themselves as strength-based practitioners. However, the dominant

deficit metanarrative – where the problem in the therapeutic context is viewed as lying with the client – was still prevalent. In the next section, I discuss the misinterpretation and simplification of strength-based counselling.

### **9.7 Strength-based counselling as problem-story: Misinterpretation and simplification**

While describing the benefits of strength-based counselling, many of the school counsellors did acknowledge that it had shortcomings. There were also instances where their use of strength-based counselling seemed superficial. In these instances, counsellors spoke of only skimming the surface of the presenting problem and jumping to solutions too soon.

Thomas recognised the inherent flaws in strength-based counselling and did not rely solely on a strength-based approach within his counselling practice. He explained that he first explores the presenting problem and does not focus on strengths alone (see section 9.5.4.4.2): *“I don’t call my approaches strength-based approaches. That’s part of what I use. It goes beyond looking for strength because you do look at the problem even though you are externalising it.”*

Here Thomas assumes that a strength-based approach does not explore the presenting problem and that to explore the presenting problem he must employ additional counselling modalities.

School counsellors, it seems, had different ideas about what strength-based counselling is. However, the definition of a strength-based approach does encompass the exploration of the presenting problem. The question to ask is: Is the presenting problem sufficiently explored to make a favourable difference within the counselling process? (Kashdan & Biswas-Diener, 2015a, 2015b)

Valerie, by comparison, appeared to see only the merits inherent in a strength-based counselling approach. She seemed to diminish the serious nature of the counselling process and made it appear easy and straightforward:

*Strength-based counselling is terrific. You would get exhausted if you didn’t use it. I recall working in another school with girls with depression and feeling exhausted. I don’t experience that anymore. If I had gone on using a deficit approach, I don’t think I would have survived, I’d get burnout quickly.*

Valerie added that in relation to one client she *“looked at her strengths and not her weaknesses”*. It could be argued from this statement that Valerie is perhaps avoiding or

glossing over the problems that the adolescents present with and reframing the presenting problem too soon.

In *The 12 Stages of Healing: A Network Approach to Wholeness*, Donald Epstein (1994) says the following of pushing people towards positive reframing too soon:

When someone tells you that your problems can be solved rationally or reasonably while you are in the stage of suffering, it's infuriating and simply not believable. Logic or linear reasoning does not work when you are suffering. Only one thing works, and that is being acknowledged that you are suffering. Another person confirming that something is indeed wrong and that you feel violated is exactly what you are seeking. When others acknowledge the critical nature of your situation, you feel a sense of peace. When they acknowledge your suffering and despair, they are helping you find resolution. (Epstein, 1994, p. 18)

In their book *The Upside of Your Dark Side*, positive psychologists Kashdan and Biswas-Diener (2015b) also explore the benefits of experiencing negative emotion and suggest:

1. In not avoiding negative emotions, we gain emotional agility, the ability to use the full palette of emotional experiences.
2. Anger, guilt, anxiety, and other negative emotions are helpful in surprising ways. They give us more courage, regulate our behaviour, keep us alert to our surroundings, and recharge our creative energies, among other benefits.
3. Abandon the notion of labelling emotions as exclusively positive or negative and instead, target what is healthy or unhealthy in a situation. (p. 93)

This section has discussed the misinterpretation and simplification of strength-based counselling by school counsellors, as well as the importance of not discounting negative emotion. The suitability of using strength-based counselling in a crisis is discussed next.

### **9.7.1 Strength-based counselling in high-risk and crisis situations**

It is all very well acknowledging the need to explore the problem the adolescent presents to counselling with before pushing for solutions, but how effective is strength-based counselling in a crisis? Thomas further explored his concerns about strength-based counselling: "*I am not convinced about strength-based alone. There needs to be some understanding of the source of the issues.*" He felt that counselling should go beyond just focusing on strengths. Especially in a crisis, he believed, the school counsellor needs to be

aware of the underlying issues that created the situation for counselling to have a long-term benefit:

*It is not just looking for strengths because I think that's good short term but in a crisis, it doesn't deal longer term with the issues. Along with strength-based, you need to be aware of what created the situation.*

Several school counsellors questioned whether it is appropriate to use a strength-based counselling approach in all instances, and suggested that it may not be appropriate to use strength-based counselling in a crisis:

Thomas: *Strength-based counselling would not be appropriate when there's too much of a crisis and it takes attention away from the problem that needs dealing with. Once the crisis is being managed then you'd look for, depending on if it was ready to be worked with, the strength they're using to managing the crisis, even if they don't realise it themselves.*

Pam: *I might not weave strength-based counselling in straightaway. If a student is coming to me in absolute crisis or falling apart because of some significant loss, initially there might not be a significant strength-based focus, but absolutely it would eventually be a part of the therapeutic process.*

Valerie: *Strength-based counselling does not work with some. A little girl came in and she was just about catatonic. I referred her on.*

The school counsellors appeared to see strength-based counselling as not working with the presenting problem but instead pushing towards resolution.

Valerie, however, added a cautionary note about school counsellors and strength-based counselling: *"We are not psychologists; we are not psychiatrists it's terribly important that we don't step out of our role."* This is appropriate modesty on Valerie's part as she retains her ability to call for help when she feels out of her depth within the counselling process.

School counsellors' views on whether strength-based counselling should be used in high-risk and crisis situations were therefore variable. Some believed the presenting problem should be dealt with first before a strength-based approach is used. Again, I question the notion of excluding the examination of the problem from the strength-based counselling process. A strength-based counselling approach should include both exploring

the presenting problem and looking for strengths that will assist in working with the problem.

This chapter has focused on the “counsellor context” narrative category and all the aspects that make up the school counsellor’s practice, from the intersubjective relational space and the counsellors’ philosophical positioning to their views of strength-based counselling and whether it should be used in high-risk situations. This chapter has therefore addressed the following research question:

*Which metanarratives are drawn on to construct school counsellors’ practice stories?*

In the next chapter I explore the “school context” narrative category, which is the social field in which a school counsellor conducts his or her counselling practice.

## Chapter 10: Narrative category: School context

*I have a real heart for this place.*

—Jessica

*Counsellors practising in a school context advocate for the students they counsel. At the same time, they need to be knowledgeable and abiding of the ethos of the school. There is a gap between the school and the counsellors because both are standing for different things.*

—Thomas

This chapter focuses on the “school context” narrative category. The school context looks at the environment in which a school counsellors’ counselling practice is situated since school counsellors do not work in isolation but instead form part of a broader educational context. This context makes counselling in schools different from counselling in private practice. The school counsellors working in the school context is influenced not only by their own counselling philosophy but also by the underlying metanarratives that inform the school’s ethos and teaching practices. Angus explained this thus: “*We work in organisations and institutions that are influenced enormously by cultures and discourses as well as systems of thought and organisation.*” The school counsellor is tasked with working within this diverse context and is called on to be supportive of both the adolescent they counsel and the ethos of the school context in which they practice.

To explain this diverse context, the chapter starts off with a brief discussion of the social field as context. This is to remind the reader that, as Zilber et al. (2008) suggest, we locate our stories “within certain social structures and historical events” (p. 1053). In this thesis the social field is the unique school context that each school counsellor practices in and which comes with its own ethos and agendas. The chapter then focuses on the school context as being both ally and hindrance to school counsellors and strength-based counselling. A discussion on resisting the dominant deficit metanarratives in schools and acknowledging subjugated strength metanarratives follows next. The chapter moves on to a discussion of school counsellors as part of the school system and explores what school counsellors bring to the school context. A survey of the unique features of counselling in the school context, strength-based models in a school context, and strength-based models in the classroom as part of teaching, ends the chapter.

The research question addressed in this chapter is:

*How do the metanarratives (discourses) of the school context influence a school counsellor's practice?*

The social field as context is discussed next.

### **10.1 The social field as context: School context, ethos and materiality**

The social field as context is part of Zilber et al. (2008) three-sphere model of external context (see chapter 8). This three-sphere model is one of the two analytical tools used in this thesis, the other being Lieblich et al.'s (1998) categorical-content mode of reading a narrative (see chapter 7). Zilber et al.'s (2008) model identifies the contexts apparent in school counsellors' narratives relevant to their counselling practice. The authors suggest that context can be voiced by narrators according to three main spheres: intersubjective relations, the social field, and metanarratives. The relevance of the intersubjective relational process to the results of this study and to the counsellor context in particular were discussed in section 9.2, and school counsellors' metanarratives permeate all four results chapters of this thesis.

Zilber et al. (2008, p. 1053) explain that the social field is important in understanding "how certain social rules and institutions" help construct the story the narrator chooses to tell. The social field includes the material aspects of the school context, including the location of the counselling suite, its interior design, and the objects and accoutrements therein. The notion of materiality is supported by a critical realist approach to social constructionism that holds that certain aspects of our physical environment are static and cannot be constructed otherwise. After each interview for this research I took field notes regarding the materiality of the counselling suite as well as my impressions of school counsellors and how they might appear to adolescents. My observations included comments on what the counselling room looked like; the possible implications of the content of posters on display and, for example, the profusion of fluffy toys that lent the room its personality; proximity to principal's office; and privacy from the rest of the school. These observations were important as they provided a context for possible metanarratives that each counsellor associated with his or her practice within the school context. These metanarratives are discussed across chapters 9–12 and are thus also apparent



in this chapter as part of the social field. Next follows a discussion of school context as ally to school counsellors.

## **10.2 School context as ally to counsellors and strength-based counselling**

In a school setting counselling does not happen in a vacuum but instead forms part of the greater school context. When counselling is considered valuable in such a setting by the school management, teachers and the parent community, the work of the school counsellor becomes easier. As Pam commented, *“At the heart of successful school counselling, is being fortunate to work in a school where the management, staff, and parent community understand the importance of our role, value it, and support it.”*

Teachers and school counsellors can work together to promote and instil in students the ethos and principles of a strength-based approach. Gabrielle and Pam talked about the ethos of the school in which they worked as being aligned with a strength-based counselling approach.

*Gabrielle: The ethos of the school is based on the core Mercy values which is respect for human dignity, compassion, service, social justice and care for the poor and vulnerable.*

*Pam: It's exciting being a part of the school with a principal who's interested in positive psychology. That says a lot if management is starting to take an interest in wanting to look at ways to weave some of the strength-based ideas into the curriculum and encourage staff to take it on-board.*

School counsellors spoke of the benefit of counselling in a school context in that they were given access to a broader knowledge base regarding the adolescent. School counsellors have access to students' academic and behavioural reports for the duration of their attendance at the school. Teachers or deans who spend a lot of time with adolescents may be the first to observe mental health issues in adolescents. Thus, in the school context adolescents in need are often referred to counselling by the teachers and deans and can provide the school counsellor with valuable insight.

Teachers and deans can act as allies of school counsellors and help reinforce certain things that were introduced by the counsellor or at the very least monitor a student's progress. As Pam stated:

*The beauty of working in a school is I can check in with teachers. Having teachers on board can help to reinforce things with students. I can also read their latest school report and see if they are making progress.*

...

*We [counsellors] regularly liaise with deans. Sometimes they know the students we are working with because they have referred them to us or a student has been happy for us to talk with them. The deans will often flag us if something is not going well, or if they have noticed some improvement.*

Having access to information on adolescents via teachers and the school record system does, however, raise issues regarding ethical guidelines around confidentiality. In private practice, counsellors cannot access information about clients outside of the therapeutic relationship. However, school counsellors *do* have access to information on the adolescent beyond the counselling setting. This is one of the aspects of the school counselling relationship that sets it apart from counselling in a private setting.

It was apparent from what school counsellors said about the school context that the school management and teachers can lend support to the school counsellor and be a steadfast ally in the school counsellor's advocating for adolescent wellbeing. However, there are also aspects of the school context that hinder the school counsellor's work and that inhibit adolescent wellbeing; these are discussed next.

### **10.3 School context as hindrance to counsellors**

While the school context can be an ally that is supportive of what the school counsellor does, it can also at times pose a hindrance to the counselling process. The school environment as a context for counselling is fundamentally different from a traditional private counselling setting. The school counsellor must contend with the dominant metanarrative around education and adolescents which in some instances may be one of deficit. This deficit metanarrative can be punitive and pessimistic. In addition, the school counsellor must accommodate and manage the complexity of the counselling role and the practical constraints that are part of this role in a school context. These practical constraints included time pressure, unrealistic expectations of the counsellor, and the sheer number and volume of students and teachers in the school. These tensions and constraints are presented subsequently.

### 10.3.1 Dominance of a deficit metanarrative (discourse) in schools

Some high school environments tend towards a deficit focus on adolescents (Drewery & Winslade, 2005; Winslade & Monk, 1999). Many schools are concerned with rules, regulations, discipline and academic achievement and want to build a reputation that portrays a good standing within the community. The management of the school may subsequently frown on any student that does not abide by the ethos of the school, fails to achieve academically, or who develops behavioural problems. These adolescents are often sent to school counsellors so that they can “fix” the perceived problem.

Angus believed that the school context in which he worked was one that takes a deficit metanarrative towards education. While Angus uses a strength-based counselling approach with students, he was sceptical as to whether it held any sway within the disciplinary processes within the school. He reported that once students reach the place where a disciplinary intervention is required, the view towards them is already one of deficit:

*I am not sure that the school board of trustees’ disciplinary processes would appreciate strength-based ways of working. They tend to focus on the facts, on the issues, on the offences, which are presenting. The weight of evidence has already been gathered against adolescents in those forums.*

Valerie also said that her school context was driven by a deficit metanarrative. Both Valerie and Angus point out the hierarchical nature of the school environment and of the relationships therein:

*Valerie: Essentially what drives relationships in schools are power relationships. Students are here, they are the kids and we are the adults, and they are going to be marked by us and a report is going to be written by teachers about them and they are going to be disciplined by teachers.*

*Angus: The teacher is the boss and the person at the top of the hierarchical structure is well and truly the leader.*

Several counsellors spoke specifically of the deficit nature of teachers’ view of adolescents.

*Angus: You can hear the deficit approach from other professionals. I say, ‘I am sorry but we are strength-based and if you are going to tell me what is wrong, then could you tell me when it is right.’*

Valerie: *Teachers must have an understanding that they are not here to catch kids out. I say, "This is a child that's doing her best." "Oh well I think she's malingering." It is hard to get them away from that cynical point of view.*

Thomas: *I see the kids in trouble. They get into trouble because teachers don't have the time or the understanding to see past bad behaviour.*

Hamish: *I use Maslow's hierarchy of needs with students. The teacher says, "Oh so and so is not working." I am like, "Yes but he's sleeping in a shack." I think there is a lack of understanding from teachers. When they have sent someone and he has seen the counsellor, he should be fine. No, because I see him in the office, and he goes back into an environment that is not positive.*

In the above quote Hamish is referring to aspects in an adolescents' environment that may influence their psychological wellbeing. He touches on practical concerns like poverty and the effect this may have on an adolescent's academic performance. In these instances, the school counsellor may have a limited capacity to assist the adolescent. Despite receiving counselling, the adolescent's practical reality is not altered and the poverty the adolescent lives in is not alleviated.

Teachers who are unaware of the conditions in which adolescents live may inadvertently believe it is the duty of the school counsellor to "fix" the adolescent and may not understand why the problem persists. In this sense teachers' perceptions of the role of school counsellor stem from a deficit-based metanarrative whereby the problem lies with the adolescent and it is the school counsellor's job to fix the problem and thereby the adolescent. Here the role of school counsellor is reminiscent of that of a social worker who works with social conditions that impact individuals.

Angus highlighted not only teachers' deficit view of adolescents but also the deficit language that teachers use: *"The teacher jargon tends to lead toward deficit approaches and to labelling of a problem child."* Valerie, meanwhile, illustrated her frustration regarding teachers' cynical view towards adolescents with an example:

*This teacher doesn't comprehend that if she sat down with the child, listened to the difficulties she's having with the subject, and understood her, that would do more than all the negativity." She's a lovely woman and a skilled teacher but it's not useful having a negative view because that girl is doing her best.*

Valerie believed that teachers “*could make their own job much easier*” by taking a strength-based approach but despaired that she didn’t “*know how to shift people like that*”. Valerie’s notion of having to “*shift people*” speaks to the ingrained nature of the dominant deficit metanarrative in schools and the difficulty of changing this paradigm towards a strength-based metanarrative. In explaining this deficit view, Valerie’s comments do not themselves reflect a strength-based attitude and are themselves deficit based.

Valerie explained that sometimes teachers’ negative engagement is overt and other times they are unconscious of such engagement. She felt that teachers have power over students and that the language they use when communicating with students can have a potentially negative impact:

*I’m thinking of lots of examples of kids who had little things said to them that completely crushes them. It’s probably not fair, the teacher probably doesn’t feel that negatively about them and they wouldn’t be aware that what they said is so devastating.*

Thomas believed that “*bad behaviour*” in students is a symptom of something more: “*What I work with in students is what they were standing for, what was the good thing in the bad behaviour?*” He felt that while teachers “*don’t have the time to think about it, if the teachers could come from that place it would be a much more helpful for them.*” Thomas went on to give a definitive example of miscommunication between a teacher and an adolescent. He seemed to believe that students who act out do so because of what they view to be some inequity in how they are treated by the teacher:

*A student who swears at the teacher, throws something at them, and storms out in anger. The teacher tries to get them in, they swear at them, and they are taken off to the Deputy Principal. If we explore that, we often find there was a real injustice. The teacher might say “You haven’t handed in your book,” and the student said, “I did. I handed it in yesterday,” and the teacher said, “No you didn’t,” with the whole “You are lying,” and later the teacher finds the book. It is a sense of injustice again. Underneath most of the problems students have is perceived injustice or real injustice, for others or for themselves.*

Thomas qualified his view of teachers and how they deal with students by saying “*we all vary and some teachers see students as bad, some teachers see them as good.*”

Jessica came to the defence of the teacher and felt that coming from a strength-based approach is not always easy with challenging students: *“Where it gets tricky is when young people are considered rude or difficult then it is not always easy for teachers to stay in a strength-based approach.”* Angus believed that sometimes teachers impose their beliefs and expectations on students and want students to be and behave in a certain way without giving any consideration to what the student wants: *“The teachers are the ones who think there are issues because this young lady seems to be really enjoying her year and everything seems fine [laughter]. She is who she is.”* This deficit metanarrative is one that school counsellors working within a strength-based paradigm must both accommodate and transcend to maintain a practice that advocates for adolescent wellbeing. This notion of duality within the school counsellor’s role is discussed throughout the results chapters.

### **10.3.2 Institutional, relational and systemic constraints of counselling in schools: Tensions and multiplicities**

All the counsellors spoke of the institutional, relational and systemic constraints of working within a school environment. Schools are concerned with education at the meta-level to meet the growing demands from the community around the success of the majority, and often meeting the needs of the student at a micro-individual level is discounted. The school counsellor’s role is to advocate for the student, however the counsellor must still work within the parameters of the school system. The school wants the counsellor to advocate for positive learning outcomes and to ensure that students function at acceptable academic and behavioural levels. These varying goals, while both valid, may cause a divide between how the school counsellors perceive their role and how the school perceives it. This dynamic speaks to the multiplicity of the school counsellor’s role and the tensions inherent therein. Thomas, Hamish and Valerie had the following to say about institutional constraints:

*Thomas: As a school counsellor, there are two core businesses. One is the school’s idea of core business, which is learning outcomes, which is valid for me too. The other is helping the student get to a place where they can meet life in a better way. There is a gap between the school and the counsellors because both are standing for different things. The school’s there for education and counsellors are there for the person. It is how to make that gap as small as possible or to have them both enhancing each other.*

Hamish: *Counselling is a helping profession but the danger of working in an organisation where you are constrained by its requirements, is that sometimes students are sent to me to fix. Counsellors do not fix people they are there to help them navigate difficult circumstances.*

Valerie: *There is too much conversation about management and running the place like a business. It's not a business model, we're educating young people. You want to support the institution as well as the child.*

Hamish expanded on the notion that in a school context the expectation is that the school counsellor has to “fix” students. Both Hamish and Abbigail talked about students being referred to counselling when they had no desire to be counselled. This again creates a duality between what the school expects of the counsellor and what the counsellor is able to do with integrity within his or her role as counsellor:

Hamish: *I am reminded of the New Zealand Association of Counsellors Code of Ethics where it says that you should not do counselling with an unwilling client. Yet, that is not how our society operates. A school, usually around areas of discipline, can refer an unwilling client to counselling. The school expects me to wave a magic wand and fix this kid with no understanding of what they might be dealing with.*

Abbigail: *We had a boy referred by a teacher and he didn't want to be there but he treated us with respect and he was invited back any time. I wish teachers had a few lectures in their training about how counselling works and understood the idea that the right time for counselling is when the client is ready. If they send them before then we're really wasting their and our time.*

While most school counsellors put their role of student advocate foremost in their practice, Angus supported the school's agenda with adolescents and put this ahead of the student's autonomy:

*I support adolescents to understand why teachers may be doing what they are doing and how that fits into the school framework. Outlining, in a very open way, how the system works. That if you don't wear your school uniform you'll always be on daily report.*

Angus continued to explain that the school system has certain expectations of students:

*“Everyone gets a diary – if you want to know where the school is coming from; the school has outlined it quite clearly.”* He gave an example about counselling students around the

rules and regulations of the school: *“I simply ask straight-up questions about what your dean is expecting of you for you to get off daily report?”*

Valerie highlighted that counselling in a school environment is different from counselling in private practice. As a school counsellor you cannot simply embrace your counselling role and deal with the student’s presenting problem. You must see the student as a part of the school context and Valerie believed her role was to support adolescents as learners within the school environment. When counselling students she maintained an awareness that after the counselling session students must return to the classroom and anything that transpires in counselling must be supportive of this:

*You should be conscious of the specific role of school counselling. You are here to support students as learners. You don’t want to do anything that disadvantages them as learners. A child steps out of our office into the school with teachers, with demands, with assignments. You don’t want to get so deeply immersed in your therapy that at the end of an hour they’re feeling upset and disconnected to the school.*

Valerie said that should the counsellor present the teachers as being in deficit to the students, this is not conducive to a learning environment: *“You don’t want to encourage students to think their teachers are all horrible. You don’t want to listen too intently to stories of deficit in the classroom.”*

In the above quotes the duality of the school counsellors’ role is expressed between upholding the policies of the institution and advocating for and supporting the student. This duality results in school counsellors having to shift between a metanarrative of deficit that is portrayed within the school system and a metanarrative of a strength-based approach to counselling that is the counsellors’ *modus operandi*.

Pam talked about the culture of the school one is working in and felt that having teachers who are supportive of the counselling process is important: *“It is about the culture you are working in. If you have teachers who don’t mind their students missing the odd class to come to counselling and develop skills, that makes a big difference.”* Valerie’s experience contrasts with Pam’s. Valerie talked about teachers who don’t support students in counselling and that due to the imperative of maintaining confidentiality the counsellor may not discuss the child’s issues with the teacher. This again creates a duality in that by



honouring the student the counselling process is seen in a less favourable light by the teacher.

*Valerie: I get a lot of cynicism from teachers. If a student is seeing me out of a deeply felt need, and the teacher says, "Oh out of class again," rolling her eyes. I end up saying, "Oh well there's more to it than meets the eye." The teacher's probably thinking I am a sucker and I have to wear that because I can only say so much.*

Here Valerie speaks to ethical guidelines regarding confidentiality. The NZAC's (2016b) Code of Ethics states regarding confidentiality that "counsellors shall treat all communication between counsellor and client as confidential and privileged information, unless the client gives consent to particular information being disclosed" (section 6.1a). As explained above, school counsellors have access to adolescent information and can speak to teachers about them, however in these instances it is prudent for counsellors to gain consent from adolescents.

Jessica pointed out that in a school environment counsellors have the added layer of having to deal with not only the student's presenting problems but also the conflict inherent in the school environment:

*I feel saturated with staff and student conflict. I think, people don't know how to deal with conflict and their own emotional responses, or they don't know how to keep themselves safe and stand up for themselves.*

Valerie also felt that the relational dynamic is different in the school environment and that there are certain hierarchical structures in place that the counsellor must accommodate: "I am asked for a lot of advice by senior management. You see their name on the phone and say, "I have to pick up for this person." But no I don't, I'm here to counsel the students."

The counsellor in the school context is often misunderstood by school management and teachers who lack awareness of the counsellor's role:

*Valerie: Senior management do not understand. They make it difficult for me. It is senior management's worldview about what they see as important that colours their view of counselling. In the end, you have to do good work with the students accepting that not everyone will know what you are doing.*

*Thomas: The management of the school are not specifically aware of what kind of counselling approach I use.*

Jessica: *No one would really know what I do. It wasn't always easy with the person who's my senior.*

Talking about a strength-based approach to counselling in schools, Abigail observed, “A strength-based approach is supported within the school environment by some people and not by others.” She revealed that initially teachers were reluctant to allow students to attend counselling in class time:

*When I first arrived, there were teachers who would never let students out to go to counselling. They didn't mind that the kid had counselling, that's their phrase, but they weren't going to miss class to do it, even though teachers sometimes referred students to counselling. Now everyone will let a student out of class unless there is an assessment.*

Abigail continued: “There might not always be trust in the counselling process, but teachers are more open to the possibility that this might help.” Thomas agreed with

Abigail: “A strength-based approach is supported within the school in a general sense, not in any specific way.” He did, however, reiterate that in terms of support for counselling in schools, “I do not think it's uppermost but it's there when asked for.”

Angus took a slightly different slant and talked about his qualifications and standing as a strength-based school counsellor not being recognised by schools: “There are educational institutions that won't recognise the quality of the training I've done because it doesn't fit in with a deficit approach.” Valerie considered counselling in a school to be very challenging, with little recognition: “It's hard work. It's not necessarily recognised, it's an enormous commitment and a moveable feast.” She felt the need to protect herself: “I'm getting desperate and I had to do something to protect myself. They don't care about the pressures on me.” Valerie did, however, acknowledge that “you cannot manage perceptions of others, it's too big. You hope over time, you build a reputation but there is nothing to stop people from misunderstanding you.” Jessica took the relational aspect of the school environment a step further: “Schools need to think about how they are managing relationships amongst young people. They need to look at their peer culture and find ways to keep people feeling safe and have a sense of belonging.”

In addition to the institutional and relational constraints faced by school counsellors, Hamish also talked about systemic constraints. He referred to the Ministry of Education and the lack of importance placed on having school counsellors within the school context.

*The magic number from the ministry is one [counsellor] for every six hundred [students]. So we should have three and a half counsellors. It is a guideline, it's not a directive, but I know why the school thinks they can get away with it. They have two deans at each year level; they have senior management at each year level, which they think covers the pastoral care. They do it their way and I am a part of the machine, part of the system.*

He pointed out the discrepancy between what passes for pastoral care from a disciplinary perspective and from a counselling perspective. Being part of the system, he must abide by it and make do with the time he has with students. The institutional, relational and systemic constraints of working within a school environment discussed above highlight the unique challenges faced by school counsellors. The practical constraints of counselling in a school context are reviewed next.

### **10.3.3 Practical constraints of counselling in schools**

School counsellors also spoke of the practical constraints of counselling in a school context. These constraints included time pressure, unrealistic expectations of the counsellor, and the sheer number and volume of students and teachers in the school. Angus, for example, talked about trying to gain teacher support for counselling in a large school where he often does not get to meet the teacher: *"The downside with where I am, is it is a large school. There are 90 plus teachers, there are teachers I will not meet. The groundwork to get to know a range of teachers is tough."* He explained that teachers have the same problem with getting to know their students because of the large class numbers: *"In large schools, you cannot assume that even teachers know them [adolescents] because they don't see their teachers often and there's a class of thirty-five."*

The contact that school counsellors have with students is minimal and yet the school management's expectations of the school counsellor to effect change within the student are high. Jessica commented: *"We have so many expectations on us in a school to do this and that, it's a great opportunity but most of the time the kids are in class so there's only so much we can do."* Hamish and Jessica both felt that often the number of school counsellors within the school is insufficient, while the number of students who need counselling is high.

Hamish: *I would like to see an extra counsellor in here, I don't think one and a half is enough.*

Jessica: *Schools are hideous place, there are no limits but you have to find limits. We don't have a limit to the clients that come.*

They explained the effect that the limited number of counsellors in schools has on the counselling process:

Hamish: *We are dealing with sort of ambulance at the bottom of the cliff stuff.*

Jessica: *It is all about an overload of crisis when you are the sole person in the school.*

Jessica discussed the implications of not having enough time to counsel students: “*You have to get comfortable with mess and not finishing*”. Hamish said he “*would like to be proactive, and go into classes to talk to boys about positive changes in their life, but there is not enough time*”.

Pam, meanwhile, talked about the practical limits of counselling in a school context differently and highlighted the frustrations inherent in counselling in a school context by describing it as a “*band aid*” approach. This metaphor harks back to Hamish’s “*ambulance at the bottom of the cliff*” approach to counselling:

Pam: *The reality is that school counselling is different from being in private practice because sometimes there can be quite a lot of putting on Band-Aids. You can attempt to start a therapeutic process with the young person that you believe in, but something comes up and you might not see them again for several months. It is difficult trying to see students weekly.*

Abigail conveyed the intense and chaotic nature of school counselling. She used the metaphors of a doctor’s appointment book and an emergency department to explain what her counselling practice is like:

*I have a diary with appointments, but if a teacher brings over someone that they think needs to see me urgently – It’s like running a doctor’s appointment book and running an emergency department at the same time. You have to take whoever crashes through the door. Teachers think I’m just sitting here waiting for them to bring someone through the door, whereas, I’m fully booked.*

Abigail was the third counsellor to use a medical metaphor to explain counselling practice in schools and this suggests that school counsellors, while practising a strength-based

approach to counselling, are still very much influenced by the metanarrative of deficit which may be part of the school system. This is reminiscent of the biomedical model that treats symptoms as opposed to underlying causes. This may be different from counselling in a private setting where counsellors are more likely to have more time and resources to devote to clients. In the school context, the school counsellor has more constraints.

In addition to the practical constraints of unrealistic expectations placed on the counsellor, the sheer volume of students in schools, and the insufficient number of school counsellors, several school counsellors mentioned the time constraints of counselling in schools. These time constraints influenced the type of counselling school counsellors did with students. This differed from counselling in a private practice where, dependent on funding constraints, one has the opportunity to work with clients over longer periods of time:

Jessica: *In schools, you do brief therapy; you do not have the privilege of working with someone over time. Often, I only get ten or twenty-five minutes.*

Pam: *Counselling takes time. I need to be aware of age and the fact that it takes more than one session to introduce a new concept.*

Valerie: *I have had feedback from students that it would be good if counsellors were more involved. That is tricky because there are just so many hours in a day. I am trying to shrink my hours because most Monday nights I was here until 8:00pm. That is not okay.*

Jessica described school counselling as “a public health service” and again pointed out the time constraints involved. This yet again shows the different nature of counselling in schools compared to private practice: “*I would love to call her up, but I will not have time. It’s a public health service here; it’s not a private service.*” In addition to time constraints, Jessica also talked about the number of students she needed to counsel, which also adds time pressure: “*I have a wad that big of kids to see.*”

The practical constraints faced by a school counsellor are many and impact on his or her practice. The support for school counsellors within a school context varies. The school counsellors drew attention to the fact that schools often are not aware of what school counsellors are trying to achieve within the school. School counsellors may be supported in a general sense by the school but specific support may be lacking.

This section has discussed the school context as hindrance to school counsellors. In particular, I would like to highlight the dominance of the deficit metanarrative in schools (see section 10.3.1), since this can greatly impact on a school counsellor's practice. In the next section, I discuss how school counsellors resist this dominant deficit metanarrative and acknowledge subjugated strength metanarratives in the counselling and school context.

#### **10.4 Resisting dominant deficit metanarratives in schools: Acknowledging subjugated strength metanarratives**

I have discussed above how school contexts can be permeated by a dominant deficit metanarrative and how this can be a hindrance to school counsellors. The counselling context traditionally is also permeated by a dominant culture of deficit. A dominant culture wields power over and subjugates lesser cultures which are seen to be inferior (see section 3.3).

Hamish demonstrated the subjugation of his counselling practice and appeared to fall back on deficit and the structure and rigidity of rules and regulations that are laid down by the school and societal contexts:

*If you look at the definition of educating boys, it's to create men that can take a positive role in society. Therefore, teaching boys to be proud of who they are, what they want to achieve and obviously to function within society and adhering to certain rules and regulations.*

Angus also presented himself as a strength-based counsellor who advocates for adolescents and yet is caught up in promoting and supporting the agenda of the dominant school culture: "As I get to know more of the deans and teachers, I think the skill set of communicating to adolescents what might be supportive or encouraging of behaviours that deans or teachers want to see more of." There is a constant tension between the dominant metanarratives of deficit in the school and counselling contexts and the subjugated metanarratives of strength that come through in school counsellors' strength-based counselling practices. In the next section, I shift the focus away from deficit and focus on what school counsellors bring to the school context.

## **10.5 Counsellors as part of the school system: What do counsellors bring to the school context?**

Since school counsellors work within a school system which affects them and which they affect, part of counselling may involve addressing the broader issues within the school context. All the school counsellors spoke of using a strength-based approach to move the school ethos away from a deficit metanarrative towards embracing a strength-based metanarrative. Pam, for example, talked about her role as a school counsellor and said she needed “*to be quite skilled at working within a system*”. She felt that when working within a system you need to be inclusive of the other role-players, and “*that means, as much as students are comfortable, including teachers in the process*”. School counsellors have to take on a number of roles in order to work well within the school system; these are discussed next.

### **10.5.1 Counsellor as an advocate and collaborator**

Working within the school system involves partnering with multiple role-players. This partnership requires the school counsellor to both advocate for the student he or she counsels and to collaborate with multiple role-players within the school system to support adolescent wellbeing. In relation to this, Pam commented: “*Being in a school, a big part of my role is working systematically advocating for the student in relation to their learning with their teachers, and being available to work in conjunction with parents.*” Angus agreed with Pam and felt that the school counsellor needs to “*collaborate quite actively with the deans within our school environment*”. He expanded on this notion to include teachers as partners in the process:

*I have to be conscious and supportive of the teacher’s reception of restoring an adolescent’s position. I’m tentative. I am not in an expert position speaking over. I am in collaboration with the teachers, that it is a partnership, which could support the reception of strength-based approaches.*

Valerie, meanwhile, talked about her role within the broader school system and believed that this extended beyond the counselling suite to the school at large: “*I love to work at a proactive level on school climate. For example, working against bullying and harassment, working against all those nasty habits people have.*”

### 10.5.2 Counsellor and relationship building

The school counsellors achieved this movement away from the deficit view of adolescent by building and fostering relationships amongst the different role-players within the school. Valerie took a strength-based view and said school counsellors can influence teachers to look beyond a deficit orientation of adolescence. Jessica added that strength-based work is many different things but ultimately has to do with relationship building.

*Valerie: School counsellors can help teachers to view adolescence positively automatically and then problem solve, rather than being automatically suspicious and assuming the worst and then being surprised by something good.*

*Jessica: We have different names for strength-based work here. We would talk about what supports resilience and positive student relationships. We talk about having expectations of students' work. There is a little blurb about what resilience looks like. It is about ensuring participation, inclusion and that students are succeeding. Learning has to be supported by the warmth of a relationship. Everything we do is about relationship in the school.*

Jessica believed that successful school counselling is “multi-pronged”, but she highlighted that relationships are at the “heart” of it all: “*Having a relationship with the principal and the leadership team, and taking up leadership. My relationship with staff is important so that teachers refer kids to me.*”

School counsellors must ensure that the supportive relationship they promote within the school environment is reciprocal. On the one hand, as Valerie indicated, school counsellors “*encourage students to realise that teachers are not evil, they are really trying to do the best thing for you that is helpful*”. On the other hand, as Pam stressed, school counsellors “*need to be able to have strong skills in advocating for students and liaising with teachers*”. Jessica talked of supporting teachers “*who feel quite downtrodden by parent complaints or teacher complaints*”. She explained that her support of teachers and students was real: “*I genuinely care about them [students and teachers] and they know that.*”

Valerie and Angus also talked about the importance of relationship building.

*Valerie: What you hope to do is build trusting relationships with teachers so they value you, you value and respect them, and then you start getting trust. Then they will give you a bit of leeway. They will make a charitable assumption about you and what you are doing with the child who is out of class. Mm, tricky.*



Angus: *I am new at this school and I have the sense that the relationships that I form with the deans of these students are crucial to the acceptance of strength-based concepts that may be supportive of what we all hope for the adolescent referred to me.*

In the next section I focus on the school counsellor as leader, role model and educator.

### **10.5.3 Counsellors as leader, role model and educator**

Jessica recognised that as a counsellor she is able to effect change and that she can use her influence to steer how staff and students in the school view wellbeing: *“I have quite a bit of influence in the wellbeing discourse of the school.”* She believed that a school counsellor needs to position him or herself as a leader that models an open and understanding school environment: *“I am responsible for the leadership around student and staff wellbeing. I am a leader, I input into other people’s development, deans and teachers. I support them into their potential and their strength.”* Jessica further noted that her work is within the school system rather than only within the counselling suite. She acted as a role model within the school context: *“I model something in the school about respectful relationships and stress that this is the best way that we can feel safe and realise our potential.”* Jessica went on to talk about her positioning within the school context and delineated two aspects of her role: face-to-face counselling and the contribution she is required to make to the culture of the school:

*The ways that I position myself in the school, is wishing to contribute to peer culture, which is a very different role from face-to-face counselling. A school counsellor’s role depends on what your focus is and my focus is not just on the work in the room.*

Jessica, Pam and Valerie all spoke about the importance of working with teachers in the school context to foster a positive environment and promote a strength-based approach to addressing adolescent issues.

Jessica: *Professional development and promoting and educating staff about young people’s issues and their [teachers’] role in supporting them is important.*

Pam: *A big part of my role is around educating teachers and helping them understand, what might be going on for the young person. I help teachers understand the things that I’m doing to support students. Encouraging teachers to*

*translate some of that into the classroom and supporting teachers with basic strategies for encouraging students.*

*Valerie: We are trying to introduce strength-based approaches into the school through our professional development. We are trying to get teachers to view adolescence from a more informed basis.*

Valerie stressed that “to introduce a school-wide strength approach you would have to educate staff. But we need to maintain it.”

Valerie and Pam talked about strength-based counselling in their respective schools:

*Valerie: Strength-based counselling is supported within the school. I share a lot of what I learn and do and read and each year I organise a dean’s training day on whatever is the flavour of the moment. I have talked about positive psychology quite a lot.*

*Pam: Making sure that I am included in the development of education plans, making sure that deans and principals are on board. We [the counsellors] work closely with the deans because they have a significant pastoral role.*

Within this school context school counsellors are pivotal in managing an intricate system of relationships between themselves, students, teachers and parents. The school counsellor works within this system of relationships and consults, guides, advocates, supports, educates, leads and fosters relationship building within the school context.

### **10.6 Unique features of counselling in the school context**

Some of the school counsellors I interviewed spoke of the nature of their role within the school environment. As school counsellors based in the school they must participate in the day-to-day routines by partnering with teachers and management. At the same time, they needed to set themselves apart as counsellors who advocate for adolescents.

Jessica explained that when she first started at her school she did not know how to position herself as a counsellor, and Valerie discussed working with colleagues in the school environment and the importance of supporting each other.

*Jessica: When I first came to this school I was timid, didn’t quite know where to put myself. Now I know the school. People know my work. There’s respect built up and my influence is much wider. It takes a long time to gain credibility and to be visible.*

Valerie: *I think we need to be absolutely in sync with each other. We need to trust each other and support each other and value each other's work and challenges. You need to have a very robust relationship with someone you are working with. If you don't have someone who's collegial it's such a lonely role.*

Abbigail and Jessica also talked about fitting in, being available, and integrating with the school environment.

Abbigail: *accessibility is important, if students can't get to you then it doesn't matter whether you're a brilliant counsellor, or a dead beat. There's got to be accessibility. That means the school has to, to some degree, support students coming to counselling.*

Jessica: *All those opportunities I have in the school I make a point to build that connection. I smile, the way I dress, my demeanour; I don't look too old fashioned. The way that my room is.*

Jessica added that counselling in a school is very much more than one-on-one counselling:

*This is very much a community development role. When I look at the work that I am doing with peer culture, it is about developing a community and having a response at a community level. That is a bit broader than people might think in a school.*

Jessica and Valerie spoke of the imperative of being visible in the school environment:

Jessica: *I am very much out of the room literally and, in terms of my thinking.*

Valerie: *I think extramural activities enhance my role as counsellor because kids see you as being more normal around the school. It gives you an informal chance to gauge the climate of the school; you can observe the students you are worried about in a non-threatening manner.*

Jessica's notion seems twofold, pointing both to Jessica's literal idea that she needs to be out in the school environment as a counsellor and to the metaphorical idea that in a school context she must not be constrained by the limits of the counselling suite and her counselling must be inclusive of the environment. Valerie's expression "*being more normal around the school*" speaks to the idea that in the school context counsellors are often set apart by students and teachers as being outside of the school system.

Hamish talked about counselling in the school context and in doing so contradicted himself about the nature of counselling therein. On the one hand, he said:

*The beauty of being in a school is that your clientele changes every year. If you are in private practice, you could potentially see someone for twenty years. Whereas in school, there is constant change.*

While on the other hand he commented:

*School is a constant, always. It starts at a certain time, ends at a certain time, the teachers are always there, students know they can go to the counsellor when they want to, they can draw from that.*

This dichotomy that Hamish identifies within the school environment speaks to the duality of the school counsellor's experience and the varied factors that have to be considered in the role of school counsellor.

Valerie and Angus talked about the varied demands placed on a school counsellor that go beyond counselling:

*Valerie: You've got to juggle, all the demands at school, the administration, relationships, meetings, how you're perceived by others, relationships with parents and the actual business of counselling, keeping that straight, keeping that right.*

*Angus: You are called on to be eclectic in so many different ways.*

*Valerie: Everything is so multi-dimensional in school counselling.*

Jessica and Pam, meanwhile, touched on the idea that in a school context you are not just counselling adolescents, you are also doing social work related to practical issues around satisfying the basic needs of students.

*Jessica: My work is very practice focused. If you're a counsellor, particularly in a school, you need to have some awareness around social work ideas.*

*Pam: I have had extensive experience, but often, I feel like I am doing social work. I don't feel like I've had the same sort of experience in counselling as you would in private practice. You are a Jack-Of-All-Trades as a school counsellor, but that is good.*

In the next section the school counsellors' comments about introducing a strength-based model in the school context are surveyed.

### 10.7 Strength-based models in a school context

Angus and Pam both believed that there is room for strength-based models in schools but to facilitate these models there must be support within the school context as well as within the education system as a whole.

*Angus: There is a place for strength-based models. The current Ministry of Education guidelines looking at encouraging pro-social behaviours and positive behavioural approaches could provide a framework. But, the school would have to be brave and interested in doing things a little differently from other schools.*

*Pam: To introduce a strength-based approach into schools it needs to start from the top. The management team need to be interested and staff need to have their interest peaked. Staff need to understand not just how it can make a difference in the young person's life, but also how it can make a difference in their lives and enable them to be more effective and better teachers. It needs to be sold to them.*

Angus added that initially the strength-based model could be introduced into individual schools but that ultimately there would need to be support from the Ministry of Education: *"It is about supporting at a micro-level some changes that with the right climate could impact at a macro-level."* Pam, as can be seen above agreed with Angus that support needs to come from the macro-level and that school managements need to buy into a strength-based approach. However, Pam also explained that teachers need to understand the impetus behind and the potential benefits of using a strength-based model.

Like Pam, Valerie and Angus also believed that management needs to be supportive of a strength-based approach.

*Valerie: Senior management needs to be on-board. I have a Deputy Principal in charge of pastoral care and she is totally on board with all this sort of stuff.*

*Angus: To introduce a strength-based approach school wide it would have to come from the top. Through the principal's meetings. A strength-based approach has to have buy-in from management. If there is no buy-in from management, you could only work at a micro-level.*

Gabrielle, meanwhile, said that a strength-based approach would have to be introduced slowly and she too agreed that senior management needs to support the initiative:

*You could introduce a strength-based approach teacher by teacher, but I think it probably has to come from the top. You have to get senior management to buy into*

*it and then get those changes happening. If you haven't got it coming from the top it's not going to happen, it will happen in some classrooms but the whole tenor of the school would be quite different.*

Thomas talked about a strength-based approach being introduced through the proper channels:

*To introduce a strength-based approach it would have to get into the PPTA or into the school system through the proper channels and then filtering in through the mainstream. I can't see it coming in from the side. It would have to become part of the way things are done in schools. It needs to become part of the ethos of the school and the teacher training.*

Pam added that there may be resistance from teachers to introducing a strength-based approach in to schools as they might view it as yet another thing they have to add to their already overextended schedule:

*Teachers are busy and exhausted. In the past, I have endeavoured to have some conversations around restorative justice and teachers, particularly those who don't know too much, shut me off before I have an opportunity to explain. They are quick to say, "Oh look we're already so busy."*

Pam believed that the way in which a strength-based approach is presented to teachers is crucial: *"It needs to be presented in a way which seems manageable and beneficial."*

Valerie took the notion of introducing a strength-based approach into schools a step further than Angus's and Pam's view that support is needed from the top down. She believed that a strength-based approach is a completely different metanarrative that requires a *"mental shift"* in how teachers view adolescents: *"You almost need to shift everyone's consciousness - not I'm adding on a bit of positive to what I'm doing already, but as a whole mental shift of viewing young people in a positive light."* She added that at a fundamental level *"you are looking to alter people's point of view"*. A *"mental shift"* requires a completely different mind-set in how adolescents are seen: *"You are looking to jump teachers from over here to right over there where their whole view of young people is automatically positive."* Valerie qualified this by saying *"if you have people in positions of authority who are still with the old model, it is not going to work"*.

Several school counsellors felt that for a strength-based approach to be introduced successfully it has to be part of teachers' training.

Hamish: *I think a strength-based approach should be introduced at Teachers College there should be an aspect of their education training that should be incorporated.*

Thomas: *I would like it if a strength-based approach becomes more a part of teacher training. So, that the student is seen as a good person inherently, not the troublemaker.*

Angus: *The psychology profession is wielding more voice and power within educational circles and a strength-based approach would be a useful framework.*

Abbigail provided an anecdote of the benefit of having a strength-based approach introduced via teacher education:

*To introduce a strength-based approach into schools. Let me go back to the early 80's. One of my sisters and I were both training to be teachers. I was training to be a primary school teacher. My sister was training to be a secondary school teacher. It was evident to my sister and me that I was learning how to teach children, my sister was learning how to teach her subject. I really think in Secondary Teachers College they need to have one year where they're learning to teach their subject and they need a second year where they're learning to teach children. Where they are learning about child development and how children learn, the impact of trauma on learning and in particular how that affects the ability to do mathematics. They need to learn about the legal aspects of teaching, about CYFS [Child, Youth and Family service; renamed Ministry for Vulnerable Children, Oranga Tamariki in April 2017] and the school's responsibility in loco parentis, all these things that come with teaching that my sister never learned at Teachers College. I really think another year is needed at Secondary Teachers College. The training is woefully inadequate.*

The school counsellors in this study were thus of the opinion that introducing strength-based models in schools would require both support and buy-in from the Ministry of Education, from school management, and from teachers. Some felt that a strength-based approach should be part of teacher education, especially at secondary level where it is less likely to occur. In the next section, I explore a strength-based model in the classroom as part of teaching.

### 10.8 A strength-based model in the classroom as part of teaching

Following on from the idea that a strength-based model should be introduced into schools, Hamish observed that “*teachers are open to discussions around strength-based approaches*”. Jessica expanded on this notion by giving example of how a strength-based approach is already used within the classroom:

*A strength-based approach should definitely be part of teaching. Teachers and students start with a classroom treaty, what is our treaty for how are we going to be together? Those are positive things that get put down. Sometimes when teachers have problems, they have circle time where people sit down and talk about how to solve the problem. In order to have solutions you have to be strengths focused, otherwise you're just going to run in to problems.*

Valerie and Gabrielle suggested that several teachers already used positive or strength-based approaches in their schools.

*Valerie: I think there are quite a few teachers who use positive approaches, in a private school you are enjoined to do your best for every single child, and teachers really do, do their best.*

*Gabrielle: Most of the teachers in the school would use a strength-based approach within their teaching it's something that's really emphasised.*

Valerie added that using a strength-based approach in the classroom requires careful consideration. Teachers need to be well versed and trained in a strength-based approach, otherwise they could potentially do more harm than good:

*Teachers come with their own personalities and training backgrounds and have different abilities. Where you've only have a little bit of training, like you might have a little CBT and a little narrative therapy, or a little positive psychology, it's not that effective. Because it gets the students hopes up and then the teacher is not versed in the whole philosophy and they are likely to do something that the student sees as being contradictory. Even teachers who are well versed in counselling issues and backgrounds occasionally go horribly wrong. The teacher still has to exert authority and she might do it in an insensitive way. The student has developed a hope about how they are going to be treated by that teacher and then they are disappointed. It's a bit dangerous really. Some teachers do step out of the boundaries and try to counsel.*



Valerie reiterated that a “*shift in consciousness*” is needed: “*A strength-based approach is not simply a teaching technique, teachers have to have buy-in and actually believe it themselves.*” Gabrielle adds: “*not everybody is using a strength-based approach to teaching because I certainly get to know who the kids feel aren’t.*”

Thomas and Angus were not convinced that a strength-based approach would work in the classroom. Thomas said there are too many practical constraints and other demands on a teacher’s time for them to focus on strengths: “*Teachers often don’t look at strengths. There are no resources, there is no time, and there is a curriculum to follow.*” Angus joked that a strength-based approach may work if students towed the line:

*That’s a tough one, I’m unsure if a strength-based approaches should be used in a classroom setting. Maybe if students could be compliant [laughter]. If they could even be collaborative, there could be hope [laughter].*

While Angus’s comments are light-hearted, the notion of students being compliant speaks to a deficit view of the school environment. This once again expresses the duality between a strength-based approach and the impetus of schools to focus on what adolescents don’t know and how to fix it.

The narrative category focused on in this chapter was the “school context”, in which the school counsellors’ practices are located. In accordance with Zilber et al.’s (2008) three-sphere model of external context, this chapter situated the school counsellors’ practice within the social field. It explored the school context as both ally and hindrance to school counsellors, surveyed the resistance to the dominant deficit metanarrative in schools, and looked at the school counsellor as part of the school system, including the unique features of counselling in a school context. Finally, introducing strength-based models in a school context and in the classroom as part of teaching was discussed. This chapter addressed the research question:

*How do the metanarratives (discourses) of the school context influence a school counsellor’s practice?*

In the next chapter I explore the “adolescent context” narrative category, the adolescent being the school counsellor’s client in his or her counselling practice within the school.

## Chapter 11: Narrative category: Adolescent context

*They don't need any more deficit stuff. I build on their strengths.*

—Abbigail

This chapter focuses on the “adolescent context” narrative category. It looks at school counsellors’ constructions of the adolescent student and the context that adolescents are situated within when they attend counselling sessions in a school environment. In particular, the chapter explores school counsellors’ constructions of adolescent wellbeing from different theoretical perspectives that were recognised within school counsellors’ narratives. School counsellors’ constructions of strength-based counselling and its influence in fostering adolescent wellbeing are also investigated. It was noticed that this fostering of adolescent wellbeing appeared to follow a set pedagogy or formula that starts with recognising adolescents’ strengths and resources and culminates in the teaching of a skill set to adolescents to help them self-regulate and manage their daily lives. This pedagogical approach is used as the foundation from which to introduce a model for co-creating adolescent wellbeing using a strength-based approach and is one of the contributions of this research.

The chapter goes on to discuss what adolescents value most about strength-based counselling and looks at working with adolescents at risk. It ends with an exploration of the deficit metanarrative that sometimes underpins society’s view of adolescents and strength-based counselling’s attempts to counteract this perception. The research questions addressed in this chapter are:

*What are school counsellors’ constructions of adolescent wellbeing?*

*How do school counsellors describe their strength-based practice as co-creating adolescent wellbeing?*

### 11.1 Counsellors’ constructions of adolescent wellbeing

The school counsellors I interviewed for this thesis constructed adolescent wellbeing in different ways and I recognised that this aligned with certain theoretical constructs. These constructions were embedded within a particular metanarrative of adolescent wellbeing that could be viewed on a continuum of deficit and strength. The theoretical constructs that I

recognised within school counsellors' narratives included a social construction, a holistic construction, a developmental construction, and a systems theory construction of adolescent wellbeing. These constructions by school counsellors of adolescent wellbeing are discussed individually below.

### **11.1.1 A social construction of adolescent wellbeing**

As discussed in chapter 2, the epistemological stance of this thesis is based on social constructionism (i.e., that "reality" as we perceive it is not a concrete notion but is rather created in context with others through our interactions with them). Social constructionism further holds that our "reality" or "narrative" is "constructed" by the language we use (Burr, 2003; Crossley, 2000; Gergen, 1985; Lock & Strong, 2010; Paré & Sutherland, 2012; Wong, 2006).

Some of the school counsellors' references to adolescent wellbeing were recognised as being socially constructed and, while not necessarily based on social constructionism, could be viewed within a social constructionist perspective. Gabrielle, for example, explained one of the socially constructed interpretations of what is deemed to be an acceptable body for teenage girls and the resulting detrimental influence this can have. Through her counselling practice, Gabrielle created an awareness that girls do not need to buy into this socially constructed message: *"This is a girl's school; society's message around body image creates negativity. None of the girls here who are all beautiful would feel good about themselves. They don't need any more deficit stuff."* Gabrielle went beyond body image and co-constructed with the girls a sense of self-efficacy and ownership of who they are: *"I build on their strengths and get them to start realising that they have control over their wellbeing and control over their world. I think that's powerful stuff."* Thomas also alluded to a social constructionist lens of adolescent wellbeing: *"A large part of adolescent wellbeing, for me, is that they are on the road to being themselves, not somebody else's version of who they should be."* He showed an awareness of the societal impact on an adolescent's sense of self and like Gabrielle explained that wellbeing is about enabling adolescents to embrace who they are.

Jessica's narrative around adolescent wellbeing talked about adolescents *"having a voice, being honest, having the ability to express themselves."* This notion of adolescents *"having a voice"* speaks to the social constructionist view that it is through language and

the words that we use that our reality is constructed. Jessica believed that this expression of self by adolescent is “*a sign of wellbeing*”. Valerie, meanwhile, saw adolescent wellbeing as “*complex for adolescents because they are in the process of becoming*”. This “*process of becoming*” recalls a term Deleuze (2004a, 2004b) uses in relation to embracing who you are as a person (see chapter 6). This term also resonates with a social constructionist view, since who we are is seen as being constructed in conjunction with the societal context of which we are a part.

Angus also saw adolescents through a social constructionist lens: “*I think adolescents can teach us so much if we are curious and are engaged in a co-discovery framework with them. We don’t presume to know how things may be.*” “*Co-discovery*” is a social constructionist term meaning that what transpires in a social setting is a product of the interactions and conversations of the people within that setting. Here Angus indicates that the process of counselling is not fixed. As a school counsellor, you are open to what the adolescent needs. The process of counselling itself is constructed in interaction with the adolescent where both the counsellor and the adolescent contribute to the overall engagement. A holistic construction of adolescent wellbeing is discussed next.

### **11.1.2 A holistic construction of adolescent wellbeing**

The predominant construction of adolescent wellbeing reported by the school counsellors was a holistic one. A holistic lens considers the whole or all aspects of the person. Pam, for example, spoke of needing to “*consider the adolescents emotional, social, spiritual and physical health*”. Hamish felt that wellbeing included a need to safely negotiate “*all the changes that the adolescents go through, physically, emotionally, sexually, spiritually*”. Thomas, meanwhile, saw wellbeing as “*having a healthy sense of self. As well as physical wellbeing and spiritual wellbeing*”. Abigail included “*wellbeing in body, spirit, community and family*”, and Jessica emphasised that health should be regarded as “*a state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing not merely the absence of disease or infirmity*”.

In the above quote, Jessica takes wellbeing a step further from what positive psychologists call “*surviving to thriving*” (Catalino et al., 2014; Csikszentmihalyi, 2008; Fredrickson, 2009; Hefferon & Boniwell, 2011; Seligman, 2003, 2011). Adolescent wellbeing is thus constructed as multifaceted or “*multi-layered*” (Jessica). Jessica’s focus

on adolescent wellbeing includes the concept of resilience: *“I look at wellbeing and resilience holistically. Resilience is the ability to bounce back.”* She focused on empowering adolescents to take ownership of their own wellbeing: *“Adolescent wellbeing is being able to stand up for yourself, to step into your own integrity, to make choices for yourself, to be reflective.”* While powerful, this is an individualistic view of wellbeing and does not account for the importance of accessing support from others to assist in promoting wellbeing.

Abbigail favoured the Māori approach to wellbeing known as Te Whare Tapa Whā. This model considers health as having four cornerstones (or sides) to wellbeing. These four sides include Taha tinana (physical health), Taha wairua (spiritual health), Taha whanau (family health) and Taha hinegaro (mental health) (Rochford, 2004) (see chapter 5). This model is often represented by the four walls of a building needing a strong foundation. If one wall is missing or lacking the structure (person) cannot remain standing. The model is also reminiscent of a holistic approach to wellbeing and incorporates both spirituality and the inclusion of family connections and their impact on an adolescent’s health:

*Abbigail: I like the Māori view of Te Whare Tapa Whā. That applies to everybody irrelevant of language and culture. That’s body, spirit, community and family wellbeing supporting overall wellbeing. You can get by if there’s a bit missing, but if there’s too much missing it all comes tumbling down. In which case, it still exists but instead of being four walls with a roof on top, you have a pile of blocks and they can be a bit disconnected, but they’re still all physically there. It’s a matter of finding a way to reconstruct the building, nothing is lost.*

Abbigail felt that as a school counsellor you need to recognise which aspects of health are lacking and assist the adolescent in finding tools to build this aspect up. It is apparent that Abbigail also sees the multiple facets of adolescent wellbeing and the contributions made to these by strength-based counselling. She saw an adolescent’s mental wellbeing and physical wellbeing as being linked: *“Probably 50% of the students that see me for depression would be helped by me talking to them about what food they eat and when they eat and what they eat.”* Abbigail believed that to achieve physical wellbeing *“getting parents on board with making sure there is food for breakfast”* is critical. She added: *“We also look at the need for sleep.”*

Regarding spiritual wellbeing, Abbigail believed it makes a difference to adolescent wellbeing: *“Spiritual is harder in a school setting, especially in a government secular school situation. I had a placement in a Catholic School, which was lovely because you could bring in the spiritual aspect and pray with students.”* Finally, in terms of a holistic view of adolescent wellbeing Abbigail talked about the importance of supporting adolescents and in promoting happiness and health:

*I see my core business as supporting students in their education process. The Youth Health Survey found that young people learn better, when they are happy and healthy. Happiness is not actually my goal for my students, but that word happy is what we’re heading for, which is basically good mental health, healthy thinking and probably contentment rather than happiness.*

Overall, school counsellors saw holistic wellbeing as including all aspects of an adolescent’s mental, physical and spiritual wellbeing, and emphasised the importance of familial support (see chapter 12 for further discussion on familial support). A developmental construction of adolescent wellbeing is discussed next.

### **11.1.3 A developmental construction of adolescent wellbeing**

In addition to a holistic construct, several school counsellors viewed wellbeing from a developmental stance (i.e., seeing adolescence as a unique stage in the lifespan when adolescents undergo tremendous physiological and psychological changes). As Valerie commented:

*What people don’t understand is developmental psychology. They don’t understand there is a blueprint that young people have. People talk about adolescents as if every individual adolescent has decided to be difficult. That’s not the way it is, it’s just who they are for the time being.*

...

*You only have to watch boys risk taking [laughter] to see that it’s built into them, it’s physiological, and they don’t choose to be difficult. Some do of course but they are not fundamentally difficult.*

Pam, meanwhile, stated, *“Adolescent wellbeing is to me a young person’s sense of mastery of a stage of development.”* According to Pam, adolescence represents a challenging stage over which the adolescent must gain “mastery”. Valerie, meanwhile, felt that “adolescents

*are a moving target for themselves. I think how I would feel if I woke up every morning and my body was a little different [laughter]. I think wellbeing is trying to keep abreast of their development.*” However, these notions of “mastery” and “keep[ing] abreast of” do have positive connotations in that adolescents can succeed and reclaim their wellbeing.

Valerie implied that adolescents are continually playing catch-up and that the changes they experience happen so quickly that it can be unnerving. She discussed these physical changes in a humorous way: *“I’m pimply, I’m spotty, I’m growing too fast, my ears are too big and my nose is growing faster than the rest of my face but my dad loves me [laughter].”* She also referred to the role of school counsellors in helping adolescents “maintain momentum”: *“Change is important and I think as school counsellors we must help adolescents maintain momentum, so they keep on going with their developmental path.”* Here Valerie sees school counsellors as mediating the developmental challenges that adolescents face to ensure their wellbeing. Through the developmental lens, Valerie attributes much of adolescents’ challenging behaviour to physiological and developmental causes. In so doing, the blame and responsibility for adolescents’ behaviour is partially alleviated. However, in taking this developmental perspective Valerie also supported the deficit notion that adolescence is a difficult stage of the lifespan and that adolescents are challenging to work with. This contrasts with Pam’s idea of adolescents being able to master their own development.

Pam believed that “age influences counselling”. She commented: *“Older kids have more insight into what’s happening, they get it quicker, and are more invested in making changes.”* This relates back to her quote above about gaining a sense of mastery. Hamish, meanwhile, reflected that during adolescence peer relationships are imperative and any input from adults is seen as less important:

*At that age, and I’m talking fifteen and a half, nothing I say, or his parents say, has a massive impact, his peers are critical to him. We can only hope that the seeds we plant in terms of moving forward will have bearing.*

Overall, the school counsellors’ developmental approach to adolescent wellbeing does seem to be somewhat deficit-based and influenced by a pessimistic view of the adolescent stage of the lifespan. A systems theory construction of adolescent wellbeing is discussed next.

#### 11.1.4 A systems theory construction of adolescent wellbeing

Most school counsellors viewed adolescent wellbeing as being a product of the system of relationships that an adolescent is a part of. This view is based on systems theory, which suggests that individuals do not function in isolation but are rather part of a family and community unit. This family and community unit impacts on adolescent wellbeing, and adolescent wellbeing in turn impacts on the family system (Lohman, 2000; Maring, 2006; Sheridan et al., 2004).

*Abbigail: We do a lot of talking about the student being part of a system. The family being a system and helping them look at where they fit in that system and how their family's system work. And how they can use the knowledge they have to make the changes they would really like to have.*

*Pam: Under the social umbrella, there are family and wider social systems and my belief is that if those areas are in harmony that helps strengthen adolescent wellbeing.*

Jessica, Valerie, Hamish and Thomas didn't directly refer to systems theory but they also viewed family and family connections as being imperative to adolescent wellbeing.

*Jessica: Positive connection with family, friends and themselves is important.*

*Valerie: Adolescent wellbeing is best supported by good family relationships.*

*Hamish: Adolescents deserve to have a safe environment where they have people they can trust.*

*Thomas: Access to support is important.*

Whether counsellors take an overt systems view to adolescent wellbeing or simply believe in the importance of family connections as they relates to adolescent wellbeing, it is clear that some form of support and connection is imperative to adolescent wellbeing.

In this section on school counsellors' constructions of adolescent wellbeing we have explored the various metanarratives and constructions used by school counsellors as a lens through which to view adolescent wellbeing. These theoretical models all appear to offer some support to school counsellors in more readily noticing and attending to adolescents' strengths, enhancing their use of strength-based counselling modalities. It is apparent then that school counsellors' constructions of adolescent wellbeing do influence their strength-based counselling practice. Strength-based counselling and adolescent wellbeing are discussed next.



## 11.2. Strength-based counselling and adolescent wellbeing

In the previous section I explored school counsellor's *constructions* of adolescent wellbeing. In this section, the focus is on the narratives of school counsellors' strength-based counselling *practice* and how it shapes adolescent wellbeing. The counsellors I interviewed expressed the view that strength-based counselling is supportive of adolescent wellbeing. Furthermore, the counsellors portrayed their strength-based practice as equipping adolescents with skills that facilitate their wellbeing in other areas of their lives outside of the counselling suite. Nonetheless, the ways in which counsellors talked about strength-based counselling and how it enhances adolescent wellbeing varied. These variations or narrative threads within individual counsellors' narratives form a larger narrative of the way in which school counsellors use their strength-based counselling practice to promote adolescent wellbeing.

Within this larger narrative I recognised a commitment to a pedagogical or educational focus on the strength-based counselling process. School counsellors began by focusing on adolescents' strengths and how they used strength-based counselling practices to access these strengths. They also focused on promoting confidence to foster resilience in the adolescent. Part of this resilience building culminates in co-creating transferrable skills that the adolescent can draw upon to manage not only the issue at hand but also other concerns (Bryan & Henry, 2008; Franklin, 2015; Galassi & Akos, 2007; Jones-Smith, 2014; Sapp, 2006; Sharry et al., 2012; E. J. Smith, 2006; Ungar, 2006; Wong, 2006). School counsellors' broader narrative of how they foster adolescent wellbeing using strength-based counselling is discussed next.

### 11.2.1 Strength-based counselling and focusing on adolescent inherent strengths

In terms of the "bigger picture" of strength-based counselling, several school counsellors saw strength-based counselling as moving the emphasis away from a deficit-based view to assist adolescents in recognising and focusing on their strengths.

*Abbigail: You're looking at something that is already in the student. You're helping them use skills they have to deal with something they haven't dealt with before. It's empowering.*

Valerie: *Strength-based counselling contributes to adolescent wellbeing by giving them a positive view. Kids romp into counselling with a smile on their face.*

Jessica: *If young people are only thinking about what's not working, they're not connected to joy. As strength-based counsellor's we contextualise, "What needs to happen at home, at school. What do you need to do to be happy?" Strength-based counselling turns their lives around.*

Thomas: *Strength-based counselling contributes to adolescents' wellbeing by inviting them to look at the way they approach their life from a strengths base.*

In his use of “*inviting*”, Thomas alludes to the nature of the counselling relationship as being collaborative (see section 10.5.1).

Pam expanded on the idea that adolescents already have identifiable strengths. She reported having what she calls a “*strength-based conversation*” with the adolescent to assist them in recognising his or her strengths. She explained, “*Having that strength-based conversation that identified her strengths was useful because I don't think that she recognised how courageous and skilful she is.*” Pam went on to say that strength-based counselling “*enables kids to engage and not feel judged, to feel hopeful and invest in the process*”. Thomas also explored what is already accessible within the adolescent. He explained that in a conflict situation he explores what values adolescents are protecting and makes them aware of the values that lie at the core of why they are in conflict:

*I'm looking for what they're standing for in the conflict. Rather than seeing it as a problem I go to what values they were standing for, even if they weren't aware of them. This gives them a great awareness of their sense of self.*

Abbigail and Pam both believed that strength-based counselling is about giving adolescents a sense of agency:

Abbigail: *I talk about taking agency for your own circumstances. To me it is important that young people who feel disempowered feel, not only enabled but, a sense of agency in their own lives.*

Pam: *He could go back and put these ideas into action in the classroom.*

Abbigail's word “*agency*” refers to the notion of being an active agent in your own life.

The term brings with it a sense of forward motion away from perceived problems to focusing on resourcefulness and strength. It aligns well with a strength-based counselling

approach and can be linked to the notion of empowerment that Abbigail mentioned previously.

In addition to strength-based counselling's role in empowering adolescents and giving them a sense of agency by identifying what is already within them regarding their values and strengths, the school counsellors also spoke about the importance of providing an adolescent with support to promote wellbeing. The counselling relationship and the school counsellor's support role was discussed in depth in chapter 10. In the next section, specific reference is made to how strength-based counselling and school counsellor support shapes adolescent wellbeing.

### **11.2.2 How does the supportive practice of strength-based counselling shape adolescent wellbeing and strengths?**

In addition to assisting adolescents in accessing their resources and strength, school counsellors also act in a supportive capacity to help ensure adolescents' strengths are nurtured. Angus explained that *"strength-based counselling supports adolescent wellbeing by providing a base of knowing that there are contacts for support."* Pam reiterated this: *"If they can access good support rather than focusing on what is not going well, it has a significant ability to impact adolescents' mental health."*

Part of this support process is establishing a collaborative relationship with the adolescent. Pam said of her work with an adolescent boy: *"We devised the plan together in the counselling room."* She also emphasised the part of the support process where the school counsellor acts as a *"cheer-leader"* for the adolescent to cement their resources and strengths: *"What worked well were lots of rewards and praise and focusing on the progress that he was making."*

Hamish pointed out the difficulties in the adolescent stage of the lifespan. His view of adolescence was deficit-based (see chapter 10) and he believed that, due to the difficulties adolescents face, providing them with support is imperative: *"It is a difficult time. There are many milestones, rites of passage and things they must reach. If they don't have someone to help guide them through it, they could potentially fall off the rails."* Valerie also alluded to the notion of support and gave an example of an adolescent girl she counselled:

*A 13-year-old girl (from a certain cultural group) was having difficulty with sexuality issues. She is intelligent, successful in her schoolwork, a successful*

*sportswoman so all those things came out in the counselling session. By the end of the strength-based counselling session, she had a fuller picture of herself. It was not problem focused.*

Regarding adolescent wellbeing, the counsellors highlighted that identifying an adolescent's strengths and providing them with the necessary support to draw on these strengths is important. However, in supporting adolescents counsellors also spoke of being mindful of fostering confidence and self-esteem in adolescents to give them the courage to draw on their strengths, which is discussed next.

### **11.2.3 Strength-based counselling and co-constructing confidence in the adolescent**

Pam, Hamish and Abbigail all referred to the positive effect strength-based counselling has on an adolescent's confidence and self-esteem. Pam, for example, commented:

*For adolescents two things stand out, confidence and self-esteem and figuring out your identity and where you fit in. Strength-based counselling can have a significant impact on self-esteem and confidence but alongside that, I hope that long term it can impact mood.*

In co-constructing confidence within the adolescent using a strength-based approach, Pam believed that long-term benefits on an adolescent's mood can result. She went on to say that in awakening confidence in an adolescent strength-based counselling gives an adolescent a sense of hope: *"Strength-based counselling gave him confidence and hope that he did have the ability to manage better."*

Hamish believed strength-based counselling *"build(s) confidence and self-esteem, knowing that, with help of people around them, they can reach those milestones."* Abbigail agreed: *"I think they blossom because of a strength-based approach. Their self-confidence increases."* Hamish again mentioned the importance of providing an adolescent with support and felt that in so doing a school counsellor mirrors back to them a *"stronger"* view of themselves, which in turn builds confidence and self-esteem.

Strength-based counselling is constructed by school counsellors as important not only to increase an adolescent's confidence and self-esteem, but also to promote adolescent resilience, as is discussed next.

#### 11.2.4 Strength-based counselling and adolescent resilience

Gabrielle believed strength-based counselling fosters resilience and self-belief, saying that it “*gives adolescents the belief in themselves and helps them have that ability to come back and try again*”. Pam also talked about strength-based counselling and resilience. Referring to one client, she said, “*We’ve been talking about the concept of being able to bounce back from hard times.*”

Hamish felt that strength-based counselling with its future-focused orientation is ideal in promoting adolescent wellbeing and the developmental challenges that adolescents may encounter: “*Adolescents are very resilient and in their development phase they start looking towards the future and strength-based counselling has a huge impact there.*”

Jessica explained that in her strength-based counselling practice she brings an awareness to the adolescent of what wellbeing “looks like” and assists them in fostering resilience: “*I’ve done strength-based training around wellbeing resilience and am interested in practices of wellbeing and helping kids know what things help us to be resilient.*”

Similarly, Gabrielle emphasised strength-based counselling’s role in teaching adolescents effective coping strategies to deal with challenging circumstances:

*It’s having the resilience to keep going and learning from their mistakes and not getting pushed down a hole and being unable to climb back out again, or resorting to the drugs and alcohol and not being able to come back.*

Jessica offered her clients this advice: “*When you have a worry, deal with it when it’s small. Get some help so that worry shrinks rather than grows.*”

Abigail believed that while it may appear that adolescents are not functioning well, given the extent of the challenging circumstances they are dealing with they are in fact coping admirably:

*Students may have failed at something and people are looking at what they expected and what the student achieved, but in fact when you look at what the student’s living with, it’s amazing what was achieved. They’ve got this resiliency and you look at how you can grow that in counselling, or make it more visible to the audience.*

To continue to foster resilience through strength-based counselling, school counsellors explained that they equip adolescents with a skill set that adolescents can then transfer to other aspects of their lives. This skill set enhances resilience and fosters self-regulation. The teaching of a skill set to adolescents using strength-based counselling is explored next.

### 11.2.5 Strength-based counselling, the teaching of skills and self-regulation

Jessica highlighted the idea of teaching adolescents how to regulate their own wellbeing: *“I coach students on what wellbeing looks like.”* In this quote, Jessica suggests that wellbeing is a *skill* that can be acquired. Abbigail also talked about the skills that adolescents learn in counselling and explained that these skills become transferrable to other areas of adolescents’ lives:

*Adolescents often report other issues that came with the main issue. For example, trouble getting on with their mother that just seems to disappear. So, it’s like they find within themselves, all their strengths, not just the strengths that were required to work on that issue, but they start thinking in a strength-based solution focused way, instead of in terms of deficits. It becomes a generalised way of thinking and living.*

Thomas agreed with Abbigail that the skills adolescents learn because of strength-based counselling allow them to focus on their strengths in other areas: *“They might start to approach things more in that way in their own life rather than just when they are having counselling.”*

Gabrielle believes strength-based counselling teaches adolescents more productive ways of coping. Gabrielle explained, *“Strength-based counselling teaches them other ways of trying to deal with the pain that don’t involve destructive means.”* Pam also thought that strength-based counselling is beneficial to adolescents in that it equips adolescents with tools that enable them to *“regulate”* their mood: *“We have all sorts of issues with young kids with depression and anxiety and the strength-based approach gives them tools to better manage and regulate their mood and anxiety.”* She added that strength-based counselling *“improves their ability to manage the challenges and to come away from those challenges feeling positive.”*

Pam, Thomas and Gabrielle referred to specific techniques that they use in their strength-based counselling practice to teach transferable skills to adolescents. Pam used cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT): *“We look at weaving in some CBT and having conversations around her perception of difficult situations. She then chooses how to respond.”* In her choice of the word *“we”* Pam points to the collaborative nature of the counselling relationship and in her use of a CBT approach she teaches adolescents that they

have a choice in how they respond to challenging situations. Pam also used “*solution-focused work*” to help adolescents develop “*a concrete step-by-step plan*”.

In addition, both Pam and Thomas used metaphors in their counselling. Pam commented:

*We spoke of metaphors around the teenager’s issue with goals being something to hold on to when everything else is falling apart. We talked specifically about strengths and she identified things like independence. It has enabled her to stay focused so she can achieve at school in the way that she needs to.*

She also used the metaphor of “*bouncing back*” and metaphors from nature and childhood to illustrate how this occurs:

*We started by talking about the concept of bouncing back and how our body repairs itself. We talked about examples in nature. If there are bush fires eventually little green shoots start to come through. We talked about personal experiences that she has had as a young person where she has been able to bounce back. Like learning to ride her bike, how when she is first learning she’ll fall off but she’ll get straight back on the bike and keep practicing and eventually she’ll master it.*

Thomas spoke of how he used metaphor to enhance the engagement he has with an adolescent and to create some common ground between them:

*One student didn’t want to engage. He didn’t think there was a problem but I found out through what we were talking about that he wants to design computer games. So, we approached his life as if it was a computer game. How would you design this game, how would you meet this situation in your game? It was a good way of doing it. He appreciated it.*

By using metaphor both Pam and Thomas allow adolescents to view their presenting problems through a different lens, which in turn opens different ways of approaching the issue at hand – an effective way to reframe the problem.

Gabrielle and Thomas both gave examples of using the narrative-based counselling technique of externalising the presenting problem (see chapter 5). Gabrielle used Play-Doh as a tool to help a teenager externalise her problem of eyebrow pulling so that she could see it as something outside of herself and would then be better equipped to deal with it:

*We used Play-Doh to build a model of what the eyebrow puller looked like. I gave her the Play-Doh and she squeezed the model, like she could squeeze him and get*

*him out of her life. That worked she's got all her eyebrows and her eyelashes back. It made a difference that she'd made this little man. He was round and he had horns and big eyebrows [laughter].*

Thomas also used the “*narrative externalise*” where the problem an adolescent is presented with is externalised. He discussed how he used the metaphor of a computer game to give the adolescent the skill to view his problem differently:

*We started to look at his life in the narrative externalise. Instead of, “I am a bad person,” it's, “How would I do this in my game.” So, he thinks about himself in a completely different way.*

In this section I have focused on strength-based counselling and the teaching of skills and self-regulation. In the next I introduce a strength-based model for co-creating adolescent wellbeing drawing on school counsellors' narratives of adolescent wellbeing.

### **11.2.6 Introducing a strength-based model for co-creating adolescent wellbeing**

Section 11.2 and its sub-sections focused on strength-based counselling's influence on adolescent wellbeing and explored school counsellors' narratives of how adolescent wellbeing is fostered. I recognised that this fostering of adolescent wellbeing appears to follow a set pedagogy or formula that starts with identifying adolescents' strengths and resources and culminates in the teaching of a skill set to adolescents to help them self-regulate and manage their daily lives. However, this pedagogy needs to incorporate exploring the presenting problem. As discussed in chapter 9, strength-based counselling is not about “overlooking” the problem adolescents present with but rather working with them to reframe and eventually resolve the problem. In this way the problem adolescents present with can provide valuable insights and foster resilience (Hefferon & Boniwell, 2011; Kashdan & Biswas-Diener, 2015b).

Being cognisant of this and drawing on counsellor's narratives, I introduce a model that in conjunction with strength-based practices could potentially be used by other school counsellors as a strength-based tool to guide the co-creation of adolescent wellbeing. This strength-based model for co-creating adolescent wellbeing is one of the contributions of this research and is presented next:



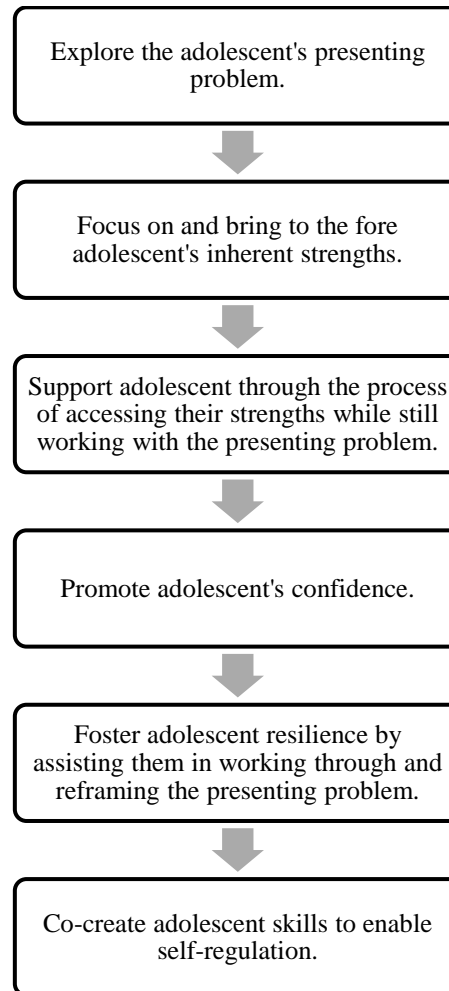


Figure 11(i): A strength-based model for co-creating adolescent wellbeing

The next section explores what counsellors' believed adolescents value most about strength-based counselling.

### 11.3 Counsellors' constructions of what adolescents' value about strength-based counselling

Several school counsellors said it was the counselling relationship and the support that adolescents receive in counselling that was valued most by adolescents. The counselling relationship has already been established in counsellors' narratives as being crucial to the success of the counselling engagement (see chapter 9).

In this section the counselling relationship is explored in terms of what adolescents identify as valuable about strength-based counselling. Again, as in chapter 9, the counselling relationship is recognised as being important irrespective of what counselling

modality is being used, strength-based or otherwise. However, as researcher I was interested in what constituted a productive counselling relationship. According to Jessica,

*Coming into this space communicates something to them [the adolescent]. You can have your strength-based practices and theories but what makes them effective, and what adolescent's value, is the relationship or connection that I build with them. The way I am with them is the thing they appreciate most. There's something I do in bridging the relational gaps.*

In this quote, Jessica talks about “bridging the relational gap” and about bringing something to the counselling relationship that enables her to bridge the gap between herself and the adolescent. She did not specify what this “something” was other than “the way I am with them”. This would appear to suggest that there is an unknown quality to the counselling relationship that some counsellors bring to it and some do not. This unknown quality appears to be important in establishing rapport with adolescents.

Angus and Thomas also touched on this unknown quality of the counselling relationship:

*Angus: Showing that you [the counsellor] get it. That you hear, see and take seriously the issues that adolescents are facing. That you are standing alongside them and actively supporting them, through the present moment, towards what they would rather have in the future.*

*Thomas: The part of the strength-based counselling adolescents value most, from a narrative point of view, is the relationship. The whole basis of narrative [counselling] is the place you stand relative to the person you are working with. Narrative is about valuing them completely.*

Both Angus and Thomas explained the counselling relationships in similar ways. For Angus, “you are standing alongside” the adolescent, and for Thomas, “the whole basis of narrative [counselling] is the place you stand relative” to the adolescent. These metaphors both convey the supportive role of the counsellor in the counselling relationship.

Gabrielle, Jessica and Pam talked about the value of caring, being non-judgemental and supportive:

*Gabrielle: I think that what the kids value most of all is that they want to know that somebody cares.*

*Jessica: They know I am here for them. I really care.*

*Pam: Adolescents value not being judged; they value any conversation in which we are able to externalise the problem. They value being supported to look at problems differently. They appreciate conversations, which focus on drawing out their strengths and competencies.*

Valerie, meanwhile, conveyed that what adolescents value most about strength-based counselling is the chance to develop a greater understanding and broader view of who they are, and may recognise and draw on their strengths as a result:

*Adolescents don't know who they are and they look to us to be a mirror to reflect things about themselves. They'll say, "Oh so and so tells me I'm this." And let's say it's a negative thing like, "My grandpa told me I'm selfish." So, you say, "Well do you think you're selfish?" They go, "I suppose I must be," they just accept it at face value. I will say to them, "Have you ever done anything that wasn't selfish?" "Oh yes." "So, tell me about something that you did that wasn't selfish?" "Oh, I volunteered to collect for the local fire brigade." "Gosh that was marvellous, how did you get on?" I think that adolescents need us to be a mirror to reflect a wider picture of who they are. It would be a very confident adolescent who felt totally positive about themselves or have a fixed idea about who they are.*

Hamish believed adolescents value "privacy" and the fact that strength-based counselling provides them with positive alternatives. He also touched on the importance of the counselling relationship:

*They are very aware of the changes in their bodies, how people perceive them and for them to know that they can go and talk to someone without it going anywhere is important. Strength-based counselling provides boys with alternatives that are positive. Because often they don't get the appropriate feedback from the significant males in their lives and I can provide that in counselling.*

Abigail's comment on what adolescents value most about strength-based counselling is brief yet powerful: "Strength-based counselling gives them some agency in their lives. I'll just say that three times! This notion of agency brings with it a sense of empowerment and having a say for adolescents.

The above reflections by school counsellors shows that, in their opinions, many adolescents in counselling value a strength-based counselling approach, the predominant reasons being the importance of the counselling relationship and the positive and

empowering influence strength-based counselling has. Regarding what constitutes a productive counselling relationship, counsellors talked about caring, bridging the relational gap, taking adolescents seriously, reflecting, valuing and supporting. The term *relationship* is quite broad and what lies within a “good” relationship appears to be open to interpretation, but this was nonetheless what adolescents valued most according to the school counsellors.

#### **11.4 Strength-based counselling: Working with adolescents at risk of harm to self**

As can be understood from section 11.2 above, and from the resulting strength-based model for co-creating adolescent wellbeing that I designed and introduced (see figure 11(i)), a strength-based counselling approach can be used to facilitate adolescent wellbeing and strength. However, what are the possibilities of using strength-based counselling and this strength-based model for co-creating adolescent wellbeing with adolescents who present with issues of a serious nature and who may be at risk of harm to self?

Hamish drew attention to what he called a school counsellor’s “*worst nightmare*” and believed that strength-based counselling’s purpose is to provide adolescents with “*better alternatives*”:

*For a counsellor, the worst nightmare is if a client of yours commits suicide. The inevitable questions will be, what have I done wrong, why could I not help, why could he or she not talk to me, why did they have to go to that length? Even if it is that bad there must be a positive. Counselling is ultimately to provide the person with better alternatives and assist students in focusing on their strengths.*

Here Hamish points to the importance of focusing on adolescents’ inherent strengths. To explore the use of a strength-based counselling approach in working with adolescents at risk of harm to self, this section looks at the dangers of lack of support and the imperative of focusing on adolescents’ inherent strengths to mitigate the risk of harm to self; ensuring adolescent safety through regular assessment and by promoting adolescent strengths and confidence; resilience-based work and co-creating with adolescents, skills to enable self-regulation.

#### **11.4.1 The dangers of lack of support and the imperative of focusing on adolescents' inherent strengths to mitigate risk of harm to self**

Both Pam and Hamish stressed that for adolescents at risk the biggest obstacle they face is the perceived lack of support. Pam explained: *"I know for many teenagers when things are bad and they feel like it is the end of the world, they feel like they are all alone and there is nobody there."* She went on to say that school counsellors need to not only provide adolescents with support but also make them aware of their larger support networks (see chapter 12): *"A big part of our role is about supporting adolescents to feel comfortable to access our support, but also to be aware of their wider support systems."*

Hamish also touched on the theme of support and said that adolescents, boys in particular, may be hesitant to seek out support because

*it might be seen as weakness. I am eighteen, I am a man, and everybody tells you that you are a man but you are not. I think that is a gap in our system. They can drive, they can drink, they can get married, but emotionally they are not quite there yet. They might not have the tools and techniques, there might not be someone to go to for support.*

Hamish discussed the fact that the youth suicide in New Zealand is alarmingly high, and again questioned the lack of support for adolescents (see chapter 4):

*New Zealand unfortunately sits high up in the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) for youth suicides. That makes you wonder, what happens that makes it so hopeless that they do end up committing suicide at such an alarming rate. Why is there no hope? Is there no support for them? They have no family support, because 85% come from blended families and a lot of them are isolated, they don't feel wanted.*

The question then is: How do school counsellors ensure that the adolescents they counsel get the necessary support that they need? Part of this notion of support is explored in greater detail in chapter 12. However, the next section hones in on the importance of regular assessment of adolescents in counselling to ascertain their degree of risk in order to ensure safety and promote adolescent resilience.

#### **11.4.2 Ensuring adolescent safety through regular assessment and by promoting strengths and confidence**

Jessica drew attention to adolescents' use of social media and the potential for “*abusive practices*” among adolescents. In a school environment, Jessica stressed, it is imperative that adolescents feel safe:

*The globalisation of the Internet, texting and Facebook has opened up the opportunity for abusive practices amongst young people. Young people are growing up in a tricky time. One of the fundamental things schools need to consider is around bullying. Kids can't learn unless they feel safe.*

She further emphasised the importance of safety: “A fundamental requirement in counselling practice is to ensure the safety of your clients and to be as sure as possible that they are not a suicide risk.” To this end, Jessica does regular assessments of her clients and asks what she refers to as “*safety questions*”:

*I always ask safety questions, because we have had a student suicide, so I am always on the alert with every student I see, “Are you safe, do you have thoughts about not wanting to live?”*

Valerie explained the serious nature of assessing an adolescent at risk: “If I've done an assessment and they're having suicidal thoughts that's an immediate referral!” She elaborated on the need at times for “an immediate referral” and carefully evaluated each situation:

*I look at whether it's a reactive depression like say someone's died. It's a little bit like a sum. If you pile up a certain number of factors, it starts to feel dangerous. It's a bit like that with depression where, if they're becoming catatonic, they can hardly speak, they're voice is diminishing to a whisper, they have no energy, no investment, no joie de vivre, all those criteria I would refer immediately. The same day. I don't waste any time in cases where they're feeling suicidal. I might not even do a suicidal assessment. I might just say this is a seriously depressed child and refer them to a mental health centre. I have had several girls seen on the same day if I think it's a dangerous case.*

Pam also did regular assessments to ensure safety: “If there's issues related to mood I am regularly assessing that with the young person to ensure their safety.”

Angus too believed in the need to keep adolescents safe and free from harm, saying that where there are “*issues of safety, or ideas of self-harm, or queries about mental health discourses. Then there are safety plans. There would be some assessment processes to deem the adolescent’s level of safety and the need to consult elsewhere.*” The importance of referrals was also touched on by Valerie, who referred students to a mental health support centre who works with adolescents who are at risk.

Abbigail did not talk about the assessing of an adolescent directly but did keep a record of her counselling sessions if she felt it was warranted: “*When I first started, I was very meticulous about taking notes and leaving paper trails of everything. I will now if a student is suicidal.*” Hamish drew attention to the contentious nature of assessment, especially as it pertains to suicide risk:

*It’s a touchy subject and there’s a whole raft of literature about whether you approach the topic of suicide with boys. Are you going to heighten the risk for boys that are vulnerable when you mention it?*

To ensure adolescent safety the Ministry of Health (2003) set up best practice guidelines pertaining to suicide and risk assessment protocols. The Ministry indicates that the aim of a comprehensive psychiatric/psychosocial assessment carried out by a mental health clinician is to enable the best preventive efforts to minimise risk of future suicide. To do this, clinicians should:

- identify all acute and chronic co-morbid psychiatric conditions
- evaluate all factors and motivations associated with the attempt or threat
- identify significant interpersonal problems and conflicts
- identify social stressors and concerns such as unemployment and illness
- identify patterns of dysfunctional thinking and behaviour
- adequately consult with whānau, family and friends where possible
- assess short-term and continuing risks of suicide and deliberate self-harm
- assess for factors that contribute to long-term risk
- conduct the assessment within the context of a multidisciplinary team, under psychiatric supervision (p. 19).

The onus is on the school counsellor to do regular assessments of the adolescent to assess his or her safety as best as possible. Several school counsellors spoke about their resilience-

based work with adolescents to mitigate the risk of suicide and other harmful practices. This is discussed below.

#### **11.4.3 Resilience based work: Fostering resilience and teaching adolescent skills to enable self-regulation**

Pam said that there had been two instances of suicide at her school and stressed the need for resilience-based work: *“It is heart breaking. So, I feel there is such a need to focus on more resilience based work.”* She believed that, through a strength-based approach, resilience can be built (see section 11.2.4 above):

*The thing that I love about the strength-based approach is that I have worked in lots of high schools, including this school, where there have been suicides and this approach supports kids to build up resilience and makes a difference in their lives.*

Jessica also talked about the importance of building resilience and highlighted the careful balance she must strike between staying true to her strength-based positioning and her ethical duty of care as a counsellor to ensure that a student is safe and is not a suicide risk:

*The question I asked of the adolescent is how do you do it; how can you keep going home? So drawing on her resilience and having her story that, because she isn’t suicidal. But I need to know that, I need to know what her resilience is so that I know that she’s safe.*

Valerie was involved in teaching adolescents certain life skills. She reflected on an instance where she taught students about change, loss and grief:

*I do lessons in Year 11 on change, loss and grief to build resilience. However, I’m terribly careful about what I do. Last year when I did the lessons, it was very worrying because we had had many student deaths. There were some tragedies and I was closely associated with another school and the families involved, and I was professionally involved. That was a difficult year and I was conscious that that year level was affected. The so-called lessons took a completely different form, very gentle and responsive to need.*

Valerie carefully highlights above the imperative for a school counsellor to be sensitive to the present needs of adolescents when doing resilience-based work, especially where there have been instances of suicide.



Jessica touched on the impediment of the school environment – the low school counsellor to student ratio that places pressure on the school counsellor. An extremely serious consequence of the sheer volume of students and the limited time that school counsellors have is that those students with serious mental health issues are not always given the time and attention they need: *“I am lucky I do not have suicidal kids that I am aware of, because that would be real pressure for me.”*

Strength-based counselling can be effective especially in instances where adolescents are at risk. Furthermore, the strength-based model for co-creating adolescent wellbeing that I introduced above (see figure 11(i)) may be a useful tool in guiding strength-based work with adolescents.

School counsellors, in providing adolescents with support, doing regular safety assessments, and by teaching adolescents skills that build their resilience can help mitigate the risk factors adolescents face. In the next and final section of this chapter I look at the deficit metanarrative society has in relation to adolescence.

### **11.5 Adolescence and a societal metanarrative of deficit**

The metanarrative of the human condition reflected in school counsellors’ philosophical positioning sometimes tends towards deficit. This view has been discussed (see section 9.4), as has the deficit view school counsellors sometimes revert to in their counselling practice (see section 9.6). In this section I explore the deficit metanarrative, which is one of the metanarratives that often underpins society’s view of adolescence and which forms part of the adolescent context. Strength-based counselling attempts to counteract this deficit perception for adolescents.

Gabrielle commented on the use of strength-based counselling in her practice and explained that in a world which for adolescents tends to be deficit-based, strength-based counselling has a positive impact on adolescent wellbeing:

*Using strength-based counselling with adolescents is the way to go because so much of their world can be seen as deficit, the teachers here try to be encouraging, but they can still come away with feeling bad about themselves.*

Hamish, meanwhile, talked about the detrimental impact a deficit view can have on adolescents and reflected that if you perceive yourself as being in deficit you are unlikely to want to meet the expectations placed upon you:

*If you hear that you're a bad person every day you're not going to worry about school rules and doing things appropriately because there's something at the core of your being that doesn't feel quite right.*

Hamish emphasised that the media facilitates this deficit-based view of adolescents, particularly for boys. Like Gabrielle above, he believed that a strength-based approach mitigates this deficit-based influence:

*Adolescents, especially boys are absolutely hammered in the media about how behind they are in their goals, how horrible their behaviour is. It's important that they know that they are okay. A strength-based approach helps with this.*

Jessica reflects on the disciplinary process at her school and alluded to the fact that it was initially deficit-based. However, Jessica has been able to facilitate a change to a more strength-based approach for dealing with disciplinary issues for adolescents:

*We have stood kids down in the past particularly if they are not remorseful. But, they do community service at school now. We do not stand kids down here; we try to put it right. We have that whole restorative process going which is a strength-based approach.*

Gabrielle appeared to portray a deficit view of adolescence: “Adolescent wellbeing? Adolescents are always going to make mistakes. They're always going to have problems; that's part of adolescence.” She went on to explain that this sentiment is reflected in society: “Much of society is caught in that bad story, particularly for adolescents.” But she also discussed the bittersweet nature of adolescence:

*It's that risk taking and finding out who they are and finding out their own boundaries, which is always going to have some pain with it. Strength-based counselling can help adolescents work through it ... There is not just one story that I am a poor student and I am overweight; there are other things I have done that give a different story to my life.*

Here Gabrielle is reflecting both a strength-based view and a narrative approach to viewing the problems that adolescents encounter. The overall position of school counsellors is that while adolescents are often viewed from a deficit-based perspective, a strength-based approach can counteract this deficit and focus adolescents more productively on their strengths.

This chapter has focused on the “adolescent context” narrative category, the adolescent being the school counsellors’ client in their counselling practice within the school. It has explored school counsellors’ constructions of adolescent wellbeing, looked at strength-based counselling and adolescent wellbeing, and introduced a strength-based model for co-creating adolescent wellbeing. The chapter also discussed school counsellors’ constructions of what ‘adolescents’ value most’ about strength-based counselling and explored strength-based counselling and working with adolescents at risk of harm to self. The chapter ended with a look at adolescence and a societal metanarrative of deficit. This chapter has therefore addressed the following research questions:

*What are school counsellors’ constructions of adolescent wellbeing?*

*How do school counsellors describe their strength-based practice as co-creating adolescent wellbeing?*

In the next chapter I explore the final narrative category, “community metanarratives, counselling and the family context”, by looking at the family’s role in providing support for an adolescent in counselling and examining the implications of the broader community context for an adolescent and his or her family.

## **Chapter 12: Narrative category: Community metanarratives, counselling and family context**

*It takes a positive village to raise a child.*

—Pam

This chapter focuses on the “community metanarratives, counselling and the family context” narrative category. In reading school counsellors’ stories, I recognised a strong narrative thread pertaining to the family’s role in providing support for an adolescent in counselling. Alongside this theme of familial support was the inherent difficulty involved when such support was lacking or unwelcomed by the adolescent. Within this narrative thread I became aware of subtle and implied metanarratives that school counsellors disclosed through their stories. A metanarrative in this context is the story embedded within a school counsellor’s narrative of his or her counselling process with adolescents (see chapter 8). These metanarratives appeared to create a dichotomy in school counsellors’ stories between metanarratives of wellbeing and metanarratives of deficit. These metanarratives, embedded within the broader community context of which adolescents and their family are a part, either facilitated or hampered the counselling process with adolescents.

This chapter presents school counsellors’ metanarratives of wellbeing and metanarratives of deficit as they relate to the adolescent, to the strength-based counselling process, and to the family and community context. It starts with a discussion of wellbeing metanarratives and focuses on the importance of community support, decentred practice and counsellors’ cultural awareness. School counsellors’ stories of creating a community of support and how this facilitates adolescent wellbeing are discussed next. The chapter ends with an exploration of the deficit metanarratives reflected in counsellors’ stories and looks at the implications of lack of support and pre-existing parental and school counsellor attitudes on adolescent wellbeing. The research questions that are addressed in this chapter are:

*How do the metanarratives of the broader community (within which an adolescent is embedded) influence a school counsellor’s practice?*

*What are school counsellors' experiences of the adolescent's family during the counselling process?*

School counsellors' wellbeing metanarratives are discussed next.

### **12.1 Wellbeing metanarratives: What is needed to facilitate adolescent wellbeing?**

The wellbeing metanarrative focuses on what is working well, what feels “good”, and what is seen as being inherently “positive” in relation to contributing towards adolescent wellbeing. Several counsellors spoke about the importance of establishing a community of support in order to facilitate adolescent wellbeing. They saw this community of support as including role-players within the school system such as management, teachers and adolescents' peers. Outside of the school system this community of support included parents, family and friends, as well as external agencies from whom school counsellors and adolescents may seek support. School counsellors felt that the benefits of establishing a community of support are twofold. Firstly, a community of support assists in supporting adolescent wellbeing. Secondly, it ensures that school counsellors do not work in isolation and are supported as they assist the adolescent.

#### **12.1.1. Community support and decentred practice**

Angus and Jessica spoke of “*positive outcomes*” and “*positive connections*” in relation to establishing a community of support. They both recognised that promoting adolescent wellbeing is more than what occurs within the counselling suite. School counsellors can offer guidance and support, however for long-term sustainable change adolescents must be supported from outside the counselling room too. This support can come from school management, teachers and adolescents' peers, as well as parents, family and friends and external agencies.

*Angus: In terms of the positive outcomes beyond the counselling room that would depend on the support from others for any potential changes that could come from a strength-based approach.*

*Jessica: Resilience is about having positive connections at home and at school.*

Pam, Hamish and Angus all emphasised the significance of support from outside of the counselling suite. Pam talked about commencing in her counselling position at her school and the frustration she felt at not initially having external support to promote the work she was doing in counselling. She stated that gaining parental support for the counselling

process was invaluable. Hamish also explained the importance of adult support and guidance for adolescents. Angus spoke to the importance of familial support in that it provides additional sources of information from people in the adolescents' life who have an awareness of not only their weaknesses but also of their strengths:

*Pam: When I first started working here I'd work in isolation with the kids. They [adolescents] were enthusiastic and passionate, but by the time they left my office they'd forgotten a lot of it. Having parents on board is everything. What is important in my work with the kids in the school is having parents working alongside me*

*Hamish: It's important that there are significant adults in adolescent's lives that can help them and provide them with guidance to reach those goals.*

*Angus: From a strength-based perspective, there are always exceptions to problem behaviours. Whānau [family] are a great resource when looking for strengths, so are aunts and uncles and teachers and other environments, health professionals and friends down the road and friends at school. Wondering who is supportive of them when those problem behaviours are not found?*

Pam and Valerie gave specific examples of counselling where they had worked closely with a significant other in the adolescent's life to act as a support person outside of the counselling room:

*Pam: As well as one-to-one work with this student, I have been meeting with the mum. I am encouraging her mum to use some of the same language, and help encourage her to use some of the skills that we are using.*

*Valerie: There was a sexual abuse case, her stepfather had tried to abuse her sexually and was psychologically abusive. Her relationship with her mum was extremely difficult. There were many aspects in the family dynamic around dysfunctional patterns of relating, putting people in double binds. You failed if you did this and you failed if you do that. She had internalised every poor self-concept and had developed obsessive-compulsive disorder. I'm thinking about one of her strengths, because I always resource students. One of her resources and her strengths was her boyfriend. Early on when I realised she had developed obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) I got him in and he became our ally and he was incredible.*

The issue of parental awareness of the counselling process can be a contentious one. While parental support can undoubtedly be advantageous to the school counsellor, adolescent and counselling process in some instances, it can be a deterrent in others. It must thus be managed carefully with the adolescent's awareness and consent of what is being discussed with parents (Burt et al., 1998; Geldard et al., 2016; Licitra-Kleckler & Waas, 1993; Musa et al., 2016; New Zealand Association of Counsellors, 2016b; Sharpy, 2004). This is of course a different matter if there is a risk of suicide. The onus is on the school counsellor to maintain confidentiality and to have sufficient training and expertise to know when and how to breach confidentiality (see section 12.3.2 below and section 11.4).

In addition to parental, familial and peer support for the adolescent undergoing counselling, Angus, Pam and Thomas talked about establishing a community of support and working collaboratively with all the role-players within the school environment:

*Angus: A strength-based model can definitely have an impact at a micro-level, because, as a practitioner within a school, you can engage in collaborative practices with outside agencies, or build up support systems with groups of people within the school, whether they are teachers or other adolescents. Relationships with the deans are also crucial. As well as getting teachers on board and knowing the history of their concerns about adolescence.*

*Pam: In a school system, it's integral to work well with the key staff because there are many people involved who have an impact on the life of the young person.*

*Thomas: A lot of narrative counselling is about looking for the community the person is in. I look for who else in their community, either near family or further, knows what things are like for the adolescent. Who can they talk to, who might they enlist to get help. I'm always looking at the wider community they're in for the strengths.*

Thomas believed that a community of support for an adolescent can become a reciprocal system of support. The people who provide the adolescent with support in turn are supported and strengthened by the adolescent. In a similar way, both the school counsellor and the adolescent benefit from establishing a community of support around the adolescent, as Thomas observed:

*It's a beautiful thing because it's not just who in your environment gives you [the adolescent] strength and support but how can you [the adolescent] help them [parents, friends, teachers] with your strength and support. It's a mutual thing.*

In addition to the benefits of creating a community of support for adolescents in counselling that includes the parents, teachers and peers, establishing a community of support had the additional advantage of decentring the school counsellors' practice. This means that school counsellors are not the adolescent's sole source of support.

*Jessica: The thing, that stands out for me in my work is this idea of communities of support or concern, so that people have more than just me to support them. It is a family, it is a friendship group, it is a teacher. I decentre myself in the work and centre adolescents with support from people that are in their life, so that I am not someone they depend on. I am more of a consultant.*

...

*Decentred practice is the way to go. Knowing other people are supporting my clients, supports me to not worry about them. I try to make myself redundant; otherwise, I'll never go home.*

*Pam: I think that school and community support is critical. Being linked into the community and the different resources within the community is imperative. I can't as a clinician work in isolation because I don't have the skills or qualifications to be managing some of the big stuff.*

Jessica's comments show that the community of support both assists the adolescent and alleviates the burden of sole responsibility or support for the school counsellor. Pam's remarks indicate that as a school counsellor you must be aware of your limitations and know when to call in support from external agencies.

Jessica went on to say that as a school counsellor you can facilitate the establishment of a community of support so that adolescents are supported not only within the counselling suite but also outside of it: *"If a kid doesn't have friends at school it's setting up a little team of people that will help her get to know others, so that's she is centred in support outside of the room."* Pam used a beautiful metaphor to explain the concept of a community of support around adolescents: *"It takes a positive village to raise a child."* This metaphor echoes the basic tenets of positive psychology and a strength-based



approach to counselling in that it says the promotion of adolescent wellbeing is strength-focused and does not occur in isolation.

As a researcher and school counsellor I support the idea that a school counsellor should be only a part of an adolescent's community of support. However, this community of support needs to be managed carefully as all manner of ethical and safety issues are raised around the onus of responsibility for an adolescent's wellbeing when they are in counselling. Should the primary responsibility for the wellbeing of an adolescent in counselling fall to the counsellor? This onus of accountability and ethical dilemmas pertaining to issues of confidentiality and informed consent are discussed under section 12.3.2 below. It is apparent from school counsellors' narratives that in order to facilitate adolescent wellbeing it is imperative that a community of support exists for the adolescent outside of the counselling suite and that if necessary the school counsellor should assist in establishing this community of support.

### **12.1.2 Counsellors and cultural awareness**

In addition to establishing an external community of support for the adolescent it is also vital that the school counsellor considers the cultural and family context in which an adolescent finds him or herself. In this section, I explore the importance of school counsellors' cultural awareness for adolescent wellbeing.

Jessica, Angus and Valerie all spoke about the importance of having a cultural awareness of what is appropriate for adolescents from different cultural backgrounds:

*Jessica: In terms of counselling outcomes, it is important to be realistic and aware of what is appropriate from one culture to the next.*

*Angus: Knowing the adolescents have come from a family, or a specific cultural framework is important. As a counsellor, you need to be interested in what that means and how that is for adolescents.*

*Valerie: Culture is very important so I listen, but it's not so much holistic cultural things I'm listening for. I am listening for their particular experience of life. Their experience of being in this school, at this moment, in that family with that culture and the demands that that culture is making on them.*

Jessica explained that an adolescent's cultural background can impact on the counselling process because what can be achieved through counselling for an adolescent is very

different depending on the beliefs and constraints of the culture from which the adolescent originates: *“What is reasonable hope is very different from one cultural situation to another. You do not want to set people up for pie in the sky.”* Valerie also touched on the issue of adolescent identity and culture. She explained that adolescents in a cultural minority who come from a cultural background that is perceived to be lacking may struggle even more with identity problems than those adolescents who are in the cultural majority. Valerie believed that as a school counsellor you must have the knowledge and cultural awareness to be able to assist adolescents with these identity issues:

*I think that identity, who am I, where do I come from, is really important especially with adolescents. You need to be grounded in who you are and it's quite difficult if your culture is not valued, or is judged as less worthy than another culture. As a counsellor, you really have to address those issues.*

Jessica highlighted that in some cultures having an adolescent in counselling reflects negatively on the parents and can be seen by parents as something to be ashamed of: *“Every time I get a Pacific family into the school for counselling they feel shamed and they think that this is about them as parents. The way I mitigate this is by finding that connection across culture.”* Talking about the importance of drawing from a community of support, Jessica emphasised that in counselling adolescents from different cultures she *“might ask them whose opinion of them they value the most”*. She added: *“It's important that they get positive input on who people think they are.”* Jessica believed that this is relevant *“particularly in cultures that are more collective”*, since in these cultures *“you are who people think you are”*.

Valerie expressed how cultural minorities within a school environment may experience that environment as vastly different to the majority culture and have additional pressures placed upon them through family expectations:

*We have many scholarship students here and it is difficult for them. They might have a different ethnicity; their community might be radically different from the community that most of the girls here belong to. In addition, they might have extra pressures on them like a very religious family and many demands for church going from the community.*

Jessica cautioned, however, that while it is importance to have cultural awareness one must also be careful not to stereotype and make assumptions based on an adolescent's cultural

background: *“Sometimes I make assumptions about students’ social context and how they might position themselves, particularly for our Pasifika or international girls.”*

Angus and Abbigail gave examples from their counselling practice of the importance of having cultural awareness. Angus told the story of a Māori family he was working with. He explained that it was important for him during the counselling process to have an understanding of Māori culture and to reflect on what issues the family may be dealing with:

*I sat down thinking about the issues that this family could be facing, I thought about what would help their adolescent girl, and what resources and exceptions to the rule would be possible. The family were Māori so when they came in it was important to work through a process of whakawhanaungatanga.*

The “*process of whakawhanaungatanga*” Angus refers to here is the process of establishing relationships or relating well to others (Lohman, 2000; Meehan, Durlak, & Bryant, 1993; Quinlan, 2009; Rochford, 2004).

Angus said of the family: *“They had hoped that I would tell them the answers and I clarified that it would be good to find out together, if there were any issues for them that would be important for the school to understand.”* In having an awareness of Māori culture and in working through a process of whakawhanaungatanga, Angus was able to work with the family and draw on their knowledge as how to best proceed in counselling with their adolescent child.

Abbigail gave the following example regarding the importance of cultural awareness throughout the counselling process:

*A younger brother is bullying her and her mother. Dad’s not well and wasn’t intervening, mum was accepting it, and so the daughter accepted it too, because that is what was being modelled. She’s from a different culture, so we talked about her culture. She told me ways that families operate within her culture. Then through that lens what she could do, what steps she could take. We explored a range of those and she was very clear that she didn’t want to be disrespectful to her father because he wasn’t stepping in. I explained that my concern was the kinds of behaviours her younger brother was demonstrating. If he was never challenged in his behaviour, what did this mean for his future wife and children? She decided to talk to her parents. Her parents were very concerned they didn’t want her brother*

*to grow up with this behaviour unchallenged. Through her approaching them they have spoken to the brother. She felt like a weight had been taken off her shoulders.*

In maintaining sensitivity around culture Abbigail was able to explore with the adolescent the appropriate steps to take in working towards an outcome that worked for the adolescent and at the same time was respectful of the adolescent's culture and family.

This section has detailed the importance of school counsellors' cultural awareness and the implications thereof for the counselling process. In the next section school counsellors share their stories of creating a community of support.

## **12.2 Stories of creating a community of support: How does community support facilitate adolescent wellbeing?**

Jessica, Abbigail and Valerie each tell stories about a community of support that is formed with family members of the adolescent who is in counselling. Where these alliances are formed effectively they are beneficial to the counselling process.

To illustrate the value of establishing a community of support for the adolescent, Jessica describes a circle of support set up for an adolescent with anorexia nervosa based on the Maudsley approach. In this story, the community of support is established between the school counsellor, the General Practitioner (GP) and the adolescent's parents. The Maudsley approach is a treatment programme designed to treat anorexia nervosa. In this programme the parents of the adolescent work alongside the clinician and/or counsellor and play an active and positive role in assisting with the restoration of an adolescent's weight (J. Lock & Le Grange, 2013).

*Jessica: This piece of work was with a young person who was borderline anorexic. It was me, the family, and the GP who formed a triangle, and wrapped support around the young person. The Maudsley approach recommends that. I did mother/daughter work. She improved, but it was chipping away. We were lucky that she agreed to let her family be the ones that took care of the eating.*

Gabrielle also tells the story of working with an adolescent who has anorexia. Gabrielle used David Epston's narrative approach to working with anorexic adolescents and also enlisted the mother's help (Maisel, Epston, & Borden, 2004).

*I had a girl who was in the grips of anorexia. Her friends were beside themselves so they came to me and brought her along. She wouldn't eat lunch and they were*

*watching her fade away. I've read David Epston's book on anorexia. That's the narrative approach. Her mother started coming with her and bought into the Epston's approach. We worked together. Mum had had some bad experiences with a psychiatrist who told the mum that it was her fault. It was a lot of building up as well.*

Abbigail also believes that an important part of the counselling process for adolescents is having family support. She reflects on two different counselling experiences where family support was significant in making a difference in an adolescent's life.

In the first instance Abbigail talked about an adolescent boy with a father who displays violent behaviour. The situation is complex with added cultural concerns however, the adolescent is able to draw on his older sister for support and in a culturally appropriate manner.

*He identified this older sister as someone he could talk to about his concerns. It's another culture - a Māori family. They had a whānau meeting about what was going on and decided it was time dad stopped his violent practices and with his family support dad has stopped. So instead of the family being a negative experience for him it's a positive experience. He can now draw on support and strength from his family.*

In the second instance Abbigail tells the story of an adolescent girl who asks her Grandma for support to escape an abusive father. Again, this is done with consent from the family.

*Abbigail: In Year 10, she made a decision she wasn't going to live with her abusive father anymore. She moved into grandma's house, so she was still in the family. That was done with everybody in the family agreeing. She enlisted grandma as an ally. Grandma was so smitten by this, because she had been in two abusive marriages, she decided that none of her daughters was ever going to be victims of abuse again. It became three generations of women standing up to abuse.*

Abbigail uses two metaphors in her description of this case:

*Abbigail: It was like turning on a light in the family and as the light spread through the family, the last pockets resisted them the hardest. But she and the grandma were standing staunch. It was interesting to see, like rings in a puddle go out and out and out.*

Both these metaphors reflect the problem as being at the core of the family situation that is initially contained and allowed to grow due to lack of familial support. Then as the adolescent seeks support from her grandmother, the rest of the family come on board and the community of support has an impact not only on the adolescent girl but on everyone involved.

Valerie also tells the stories of two occasions in her counselling practice where a community of support or lack thereof is significant to the direction and effectiveness of the counselling process. In the first story Valerie told of an alliance she assisted in forming between the adolescent and her mother to buffer the adolescent from a hypercritical father:

*The father was an army type, black and white, thinks counselling is touchy feely and no good, strict, dismissive of the child's needs, critical. The mother was originally as afraid of him as the child was and by seeing mother and child together, we built a powerful alliance between them.*

Valerie explained that seeing the mother and child together in counselling empowered the mother and enabled her to step into her strength so that she can be there for her daughter:

*The mother has become stronger in herself and she has a definite opinion now. She used to defer to him in everything and the child was abandoned, effectively she had no voice. But, mum will now actively enter in. She seems to have developed a wonderful sense of how much intervention is possible. I think the big thing is that they're now allies. The daughter can say, "I need to tell you about this mum but please don't tell dad." And the mother is there to hear and listen and receive it.*

The alliance formed between counsellor, adolescent and mother again positively impacted the counselling process. Valerie believed that in establishing this alliance she greatly enhanced her effectiveness as a school counsellor for this adolescent:

*I can call the mother with the daughter's permission and say, "I'm really worried about her at the moment, did you know." It's amazing and she's a student who would have been at risk if it weren't for this growing alliance. There is nothing that I've done with the student that is as powerful as that simple thing.*

The second story Valerie told contrasts with the first. In this instance, the adolescent faced potential sexual abuse from her stepfather, who was wielding his power over her and using manipulative tactics. However, unlike in the previous story where the mother was

encouraged to form an alliance with her daughter, here the mother's allegiance lay with her husband:

*This girl came in distressed. The stepfather had been trying to touch her and isolate her from the family and playing with a sexually abusive situation. She was distraught. She had rung him and said, "I'm ready to be picked up." He didn't come. Eventually at ten o'clock at night she rang and she said, "I'm still waiting." He said, "Well I came and you weren't there." She said, "I was in the house with the children." He said, "I waited in the car and you didn't come out." The family scenario with a stepfather who has a lot of power, because the mother loves him and doesn't want to lose him and he's abusing that power.*

The above story illustrates the detrimental impact of a lack of support within a family unit for the adolescent, especially where there are instances of abuse within the family. Interestingly, the majority of stories told by school counsellors about a community of support or lack thereof had as their presenting problem some kind of abusive situation be it verbal, physical or sexual. The exception was that of an adolescent girl presenting with anorexia nervosa.

In most abuse situations, the person experiencing the abuse is isolated from the rest of the family unit and is coerced into keeping the abuse a secret (Compas, Slavin, Wagner, & Vannatta, 1986; Licitra-Kleckler & Waas, 1993; Meehan et al., 1993; Straus, 2017; Wexler, 1991). Establishing a community of support within a family context may be particularly empowering for an adolescent who is the victim of abuse as it breaks the silent and secretive nature of abuse and diffuses the power that the abuser wields.

However, as a researcher and school counsellor I recognise that caution is warranted here. The stories presented by the school counsellors above, with the exception of Valerie's second story, all speak to familial support being available and able to assist the adolescent in leaving or alleviating an abusive situation. However, the situation needs to be contained as not all instances of abuse are as simply dealt with. In forming allegiances and in standing up to the abuser, the abuse is brought to the fore and could escalate, creating a potentially life-threatening situation. All the necessary resources such as third-party interventions should therefore be in place to circumvent this (Compas et al., 1986; Licitra-Kleckler & Waas, 1993; Meehan et al., 1993; Straus, 2017; Wexler, 1991).

Another note of caution is that in forming an alliance against someone in the family who is seen as the “perpetrator”, that person could be excluded from the counselling process. It must thus be carefully established what the circumstances are and whether this label is warranted. It may be that said “perpetrator” should be given the opportunity to form part of the counselling process. In this way, the presenting problem may be addressed and the family bond could potentially be strengthened. That said, it remains paramount that the safety and care of the adolescent be the school counsellor’s primary focus.

As has been discussed above, the school counsellors I interviewed believed that facilitating the creation of a community of support for adolescents by drawing on support people like parents, teachers and external agencies is important. The school counsellors’ stories illustrate that adolescent wellbeing is closely linked to the support available to adolescents within their own communities, especially familial support. It is thus prudent that school counsellors foster and draw on this support on behalf of the adolescents they counsel. However, what happens when familial support is lacking?

Lack of familial support for the adolescent undergoing counselling, parental defensiveness against the counselling process, and pre-existing parental and school counsellor attitudes are discussed next.

### **12.3 Deficit metanarratives: What are the implications of pre-existing attitudes of deficit on adolescent wellbeing?**

Within the narrative thread of the family context there were traces of a deeper metanarrative (discourse) stemming from the broader community with its inherent prejudices. This deficit metanarrative is expressed in school counsellors’ pre-existing cultural attitudes, “othering” and in a deficit view of the adolescent stage of the lifespan. These metanarratives of deficit could detract from the counsellors’ practice but, if brought to their consciousness and addressed, could potentially enhance their practice.

The deficit metanarrative typically focuses on what is going “wrong”, what feels “bad” and what is seen as being inherently “negative” and/or “detrimental” to adolescent wellbeing. In this section, I explore the counsellors’ perceptions of deficit metanarratives in relation to lack of family support for counselling and adolescents’ reluctance to enlist support from family. The detrimental nature familial relationships can have on adolescents



and adults' deficit view of adolescents is also explored. Finally, school counsellors pre-existing attitudes in relation to particular cultural groups are discussed.

### **12.3.1 Lack of family support for counselling and pre-existing parental attitudes**

While the school counsellors did stress the importance of creating a community of support, this support is not always forthcoming from adolescents' families. Either the adolescent's family is uninterested and unsupportive of the adolescent in counselling or they are reluctant for the adolescent to be in counselling in the first place. Jessica and Pam expressed frustration at the occasional lack of parental support for and/or lack of interest in the counselling process:

*Jessica: Families are not always on board to support an adolescent during the counselling process.*

*Pam: I had contact with the student's parents in the past and they haven't been interested in engaging, which is a real pity.*

Hamish, Thomas and Pam talked about the implications of a lack of support outside the counselling suite. They explained that as a school counsellor you can do your utmost during the counselling process to make a difference for the adolescent but your job is all the more difficult when the skills taught during counselling are not reinforced at home.

*Hamish: The difficulty is; you can work with adolescents in counselling but the environment outside is a very difficult one. Once they go and live their lives you can only hope that your influence, or the things you make them work on is something they will use outside of the counselling suite.*

*Thomas: You might have a good outcome using strength-based counselling with an adolescent but then the outside environment fritters that away.*

*Pam: I went to a workshop and the facilitator talked about how, what happens in a session isn't as important as what happens outside the session, what adolescents take away with them. It's not rocket science but I do find in working with kids what might happen in the session is meaningful and they might be engaged, but it doesn't necessarily follow them out when they leave.*

In some instances, the lack of support for adolescents can be reflected in reservations parents have towards the school counsellor and the counselling process. In these instances,

the school counsellor must manage not only the adolescent in counselling but also try and get the parents on board so that they can see the value of the counselling process:

*Pam: The parents are questioning the value of counselling. I wonder whether the parents are actually encouraging the kids to engage properly when they are with me.*

*Gabrielle: A lot of parents do have problems with just the thought of counselling!*

*Valerie: There's a lot of resistance. Parents are upset to hear that their child might have a problem.*

Regarding parental reservations towards having a child in counselling, Valerie confided that sometimes her actions have been misconstrued by parents and that she could not explain what had transpired to the parents due to confidentiality constraints:

*I've been seriously misunderstood. I did lovely work which was successful but was perceived by the mother as being a disaster and she blamed all the people. I'm unable to say, "No that's not what happened," I just have to be quiet, it's really difficult.*

Valerie did concede, however, that once the parents become cognisant that their child is having difficulty they are usually more supportive of the counselling process: *"Then you start getting parents coming around and noticing and watching all the child's behaviours and realising there is a problem."*

Jessica gave an example of a mother's negative perception of counselling where the mother saw her child's need for counselling as a reflection of her inadequacies as a parent:

*A mother turned up, she had heard her daughter was seeing the counsellor because she had stolen. It left her feeling very disappointed and disconnected from her young person. She came to school believing that this was proof that she was not a good parent. She had survived a domestic violence relationship, she had been doing her best, and this meant that she was not actually good enough. That was her discourse. That was her thinking.*

Initial distress is an understandable reaction from parents who find out that their child is in counselling. Jessica felt that this is particularly true of parents from minority groups who feel they, as Jessica explained in the example above, are somehow to blame for their child's need of counselling. In these instances, the school counsellor must assist parents in seeing the situation differently, not from a perspective of a deficit due to poor parenting but as a

strength in that their child is getting the assistance they need. Jessica summed this situation up thus: *“It’s about repositioning the parent who’s marginalised so that she can stand tall in our school.”*

Pam talked about the responsibility of the school counsellor to gain parental trust: *A lot of the parents I work with understandably when they hear that I’m involved, or that there’s a problem, they can become anxious or defensive. But, when I explain the ways that I work, they’re comfortable and engaged and excited as well.*

Regardless of the reason for lack of support from the adolescent’s family for the counselling process, such a lack will hamper its effectiveness for the adolescent:

Jessica: *In instances where there is no family support, change may not be possible for the student without input from their family.*

Pam: *Lack of familial support makes counselling a little bit harder.*

Jessica explained that when familial support cannot be relied upon all she can do is be supportive of the adolescent:

*I listen to [the situation]. There might be times when intervention isn’t always effective. I just need to be with the student. That’s not all I want to do but that’s what’s most effective, because family are not going to necessarily be and do what I want them to do for the benefit of the young person. ... Sometimes the adolescent cannot change things; families are the only ones that can turn that around.*

Gabrielle gave an example of where family support was lacking for a referral of an adolescent to a mental health service that provides assessment, diagnosis and treatment to children and young people who present with severe psychological distress. When school counsellors are faced with adolescents who present with issues that are beyond the scope of their practice they can, with parental consent, refer the adolescent to this mental health service.

*I referred a child to a child and adolescent mental health service and the parents have now decided they just don’t want her to go even although we did it in consultation with the parents. I don’t think that’s a fault of the strength-based counselling. I think it’s more to do with attitudes. This family is an immigrant family so they bring those prejudices.*

Gabrielle touches here on a cultural issue and the importance of school counsellors having a cultural awareness of both their own pre-existing attitudes and the pre-existing attitudes of

parents towards the counselling process (see section 12.3.5 below). She added: *“I often find the immigrant families are more difficult to work with. Well sometimes they’re not, sometimes they’re wonderful but they bring their own baggage with them. Their own cultural biases.”*

Several school counsellors, having gained the adolescent’s consent, worked with both the adolescent and the adolescents’ parents and encouraged parental involvement. Valerie explained: *“I like having the opportunity to see a parent and child together to build a more positive relationship between them.”* She expanded on this notion of the importance of parental involvement during the counselling process and how this involvement can help build familial relationships:

*The business of building family relationships that is basic to my counselling. I’ve heard other counsellors say things like, “Oh well, if they could talk to their mothers, why would they talk to us.” I don’t agree at all. Their relationships with parents are forever, those relationships are permanent and whatever I can do to build a parent/child relationship I do. That is part of building strength.*

Valerie gave an example of having a mother involved in the counselling process with a daughter who had OCD:

*I really made contact with the mother who had OCD as well. I said to her, “Has anyone in the family ever had some habits or patterns like this?” At that stage, she was upset at being told that her daughter was developing these habits and she goes, “Me.” [laughter] It was a wonderful moment, and the mother worked much more constructively after that in counselling.*

However, Valerie cautioned that sometimes having both parents involved in the counselling process can be detrimental to the adolescent if the parents have opposing views:

*Wherever I get the opportunity to get mum in, I do. It’s always worth it. Sometimes you get both parents. That is a bit challenging because you might get two parents that are radically different in their view of the child. It’s hard to hold both views and keep it positive for the child.*

Valerie also discussed the added complication for a school counsellor when a parent of an adolescent in counselling is also a teacher at the school:

*We have quite a few students who have parents on staff. If a parent who is not on the staff misunderstands, you have a bit of leeway, you might get a chance to*

*explain, or you might not. You might just have to sit with a negative perception of you as the counsellor. But, if that person's also on staff and they've got a negative perception of you and you can't tell them what has transpired, you can't breach confidentiality that makes it very difficult.*

Angus also spoke of the potential difficulties of having parents involved directly in the counselling process, especially when they have preconceived notions of what their child's issues are and come to strength-based counselling with a deficit based outlook:

*Strength-based counselling approaches are not successful when you have parents who come in and they already have a label, and it is a deficit one. They think they already know what the issues are and this is how it is.*

Another potential issue with parental involvement in counselling is that parents may have the expectation that the school counsellor will provide them with the answers regarding their child's difficulties. Angus says: *"The parents thought that I would have the answers for them about their daughter's behaviour."* Angus explained however that as a counsellor he does not provide the parents with answers but facilitates the process to develop a shared understanding of what is happening: *"I worked with the parents to compile, a wider set of shared understandings that might have an impact on how things are for the young lady at school."*

While there are invariably potential difficulties in having parents be part of the therapeutic process especially if the issue the adolescent is presenting with is a relational one, Valerie stressed that *"you must be careful not to demonise parents. Parents should be included in the therapy. We have had parents that might be perceived by the school as being at fault."*

Parental involvement from a school counsellor's perspective can thus be both a help and a hindrance, and it needs to be managed appropriately with informed consent from the adolescent undergoing counselling. The next section focuses on instances where there is a lack of trust and the adolescent is reluctant to enlist familial support and thus gaining informed consent is challenging.

### 12.3.2 Adolescents' reluctance to enlist support: Informed consent and confidentiality

Sometimes the resistance to having family involved, to seeking external help, and to establishing a community of support during the counselling process stems from the adolescent. Throughout the counselling process confidentiality must be honoured and parental and family involvement must be garnered with adolescent consent. The only exception to this is where there is a risk of suicide and/or significant harm to the adolescent or to someone else. This exception must be made at the school counsellor's discretion after consultation with his or her supervisor and in accordance with the New Zealand Association of Counsellors (NZAC, 2016b)'s Code of Ethics. All ethical requirements regarding safety and confidentiality are delineated therein (see chapter 4).

Abigail had to decide on issues regarding confidentiality and the potential risk involved in maintaining confidentiality with adolescents she has counselled: *"I have had students who have been extremely depressed and suicidal and they have said, 'There is no way I am to talk to their family about it because it will only make things worse.'"* She gave an example of an adolescent girl who was suffering from depression and who had tried to confide in her family but, given the deficit metanarrative and stigma around mental illness, her parents did not want to address her mental illness. The adolescent was thus reluctant for her family to be involved and to be told the extent of her affliction.

*Abigail: One adolescent I counselled who did not want her family involved was a girl and she has a step-father. Mum is embarrassed about her daughter's depression and if it is talked about in the family, the step-father is dismissive. He doesn't want to know about it and hates the fact that this very beautiful step daughter isn't perfect.*

Abigail went on to disclose that she wanted to refer the adolescent to a child and adolescent mental health service. She explained her dilemma regarding the adolescent who was suffering from severe depression and had suicidal tendencies:

*To refer to a child and adolescent mental health service requires parental consent and sometimes it's the only solution I can see and yet the student refuses to give permission for me to speak to the family about it. It feels like I have my arms chopped off and there's nothing I can do.*

This is a challenging situation for any school counsellor as he or she must weigh up the requirements of confidentiality and informed consent against the potential risk to an adolescent's safety. There are, however, Ministry of Health Guidelines (see section 11.4.2) regarding suicide to assist school counsellors in this process (Ministry of Health, 2003, 2006, 2016; Te Pou, 2013).

In another instance, Abigail explained an adolescent's reluctance to have the family involved due to his perception that they would be angry. Ultimately, due to truancy issues the decision to inform the parents was taken out of the school counsellor's hands and the parents were informed of the son's lack of attendance by the school:

*There was a senior boy, who said, "If I tell his family they'll just get angry." He was from another culture and in the end the family were informed by the school because he was attending school so irregularly.*

Abigail went on to explain that in this instance having a parent involved was a good thing: *"His father came and spoke to me and brought his son so there was more openness there."* Finally, Abigail discussed parent/teacher interviews and adolescents' reticence to having their parents speak to the school counsellor: *"Even although nobody ever wants to see me, I'm expected to be present during parent interview evenings. But the school counsellors are the last thing those kids want their parents to run into."*

Jessica also gave an example of a student's reluctance to enlisting support, this time from an external agency:

*I have been working with a young person who has a sad home life, a controlling dad who has started to drink. I want to make a referral, because her emotional needs are not being met. But she doesn't want to do that and we're respecting her decision working at her pace and readiness. I said to her, "It's really hard for me to know that you go home and you hate it, and you hate him." "Let us know when you would like us to give it a go at having a chat with Dad, because we think it might make a difference." So honouring her and not pushing her somewhere she is not ready for.*

In this example Jessica is supportive of the adolescent's decision not to seek external support, however some of her comments to the adolescent could be perceived as being somewhat coercive in pushing the adolescent to access external support.

Gabrielle also told a story of an adolescent who was reluctant to seek external support:

*I had a young girl who was fifteen at the time who was being sexually abused by her stepfather and had been since she was five. The strength base was to acknowledge her strength in speaking up and her strength in being strong. I wrote her letters, I awarded her certificates to acknowledge that strength. I had contacted the sexual abuse team, but she wasn't sure whether she wanted to go forward with the complaint. I thought it was important to give her that power, that it was her choice. We had some women from the sexual abuse team coming in who were quite dominant and I had to explain to them that she doesn't know yet whether she wants to lay charges. In the end she did, but by making it very definitely her choice and giving her that power. He got twelve years. Initially, she didn't want to take her brother and sisters father away from them but in the end, she came to the conclusion that she wanted him away for as long as possible to protect her little sisters. Although he, the delightful character that he was, said he would never do it to her sisters, he would only do it to her because she wasn't his. It was a strength-based story because it was acknowledging her strength and building up her strength to take the course of action that she wanted to take. It did not have a happy outcome for the next few years but she has come through it. It was an empowering story, empowering her to stand up and do what she felt she needed to do.*

Here Gabrielle describes a teenage girl's initial reluctance to seek support before ultimately doing so. Gabrielle shows that while seeking support may be in an adolescent's best interest, the initial fallout created by bringing a problem out into the open may not be a positive one. In reality, the circumstances an adolescent may then have to contend with could in the first instance create more trauma and require even greater external support as the family unit is ruptured.

There are many implications regarding an adolescent's reluctance to enlisting familial and/or external support, including issues of confidentiality, informed consent and safety. School counsellors need to consider carefully the enlisting of support without the adolescent's consent and needs to follow the appropriate ethical and procedural guidelines in addition to consulting with their supervisor.



### **12.3.3 The potentially detrimental nature of familial relationships on adolescent wellbeing**

Several school counsellors addressed the issue of family context and the impact of familial relationships on the adolescent. Abbigail reflected that often adolescents are victims of circumstance and are powerless in the face of adult authority who regulates their lives:

*It's all about relationships and the difficulties that different kinds of relationships can bring for the young person who often has very little power in their own life. They're living with the results of decisions that adults make, or they're living with the way adults in their family are choosing to live.*

She continued to illustrate the impact adults have on adolescents and the negative implications that may result:

*Young people have so many other people's decisions to contend with that impact majorly on their lives. For example, parents who are both abusing drugs and alcohol, or parents who have committed crimes and are now in prison and the young person is in care and that may not be going very well.*

Valerie also alluded to the impact that parents have on adolescents' lives: *"I couldn't wave a magic wand and change her parents. I did my best in that regard; I had people in for meetings and referred her to professionals."*

Hamish talked about the nature of familial relationships and how the changing structure of a traditional family unit also influences adolescents, so that their home life impacts on their school life:

*The way the world has changed, I would say at least 85% of the adolescents that I see are from blended families and most of the issues that we deal with are relational. Issues with a stepparent can become an issue at school.*

Familial relationships clearly have an important effect on adolescent wellbeing. In the next section school counsellors talk about the implications of how an adolescent is "seen" by adults on adolescent wellbeing.

### **12.3.4 The effect on adolescents of how they are "seen" by adults**

The adolescent stage of the lifespan may be viewed by some through a lens of deficit (particularly in the western English-speaking world). That is, adolescence is considered a challenging time in lifespan development and adolescents themselves are often placed

under an umbrella of being emotionally unstable, irresponsible risk takers. This negative view of adolescence in general can influence how they are seen by adults (Cooper, Wood, Orcutt, & Albino, 2003; Gluckman, 2011; P. Katz, 1997; Marcia, 1980; Vernon, 1993). Abbigail gave the example of a teenage boy who was seen as a drug user by teachers at school when in reality the issue was one of environment:

*The issue may be about how adults see adolescents. There's one boy who has been in trouble at school for drugs on more than one occasion, but he doesn't use. He lives in an area where there is a lot of dope use and he comes to school smelling like dope. But it's his clothes hanging on the line downwind of a family who grow and smoke their own.*

Pam also talked about the deficit view of adolescents and how she works to counteract this in her counselling practice:

*In many situations in the home environment and in the classroom, it is more of a deficit model around what the adolescent is not doing well. Parents reprimand them, and sometimes it happens in the classroom as well. I hope that teenagers leave my office feeling empowered and hopeful.*

Similarly, Jessica felt that her strength-based work aimed to look beyond the metanarrative imposed on an adolescent and in so doing establish what story is “true” from the adolescents’ perspective:

*It might not be their story but some other discourse they are operating under about who they are supposed to be. Strength-based work is about wanting to know: Does the story belong to them or is it some institutional framework, or expectations from family that say they are not good enough?*

School counsellors’ pre-existing attitudes and deficit constructs of certain cultural groups are discussed next.

### **12.3.5 Counsellors’ pre-existing attitudes and deficit constructs of cultural groups**

A metanarrative in relation to the pre-existing attitudes that some school counsellors held in relation to certain groups that they work with within their practice was recognised. These metanarratives of deficit form a disruptive pattern in some of the school counsellors’ narratives. This disruptive pattern appears to be largely outside of school counsellors’

awareness and does not overtly detract from their counselling practice. However, it is still worth exploring since an awareness of this disruptive pattern could potentially enhance school counsellors' work. One of the deficit metanarratives I recognised as being situated within the broader community context had to do with school counsellors' views of immigrants and people from a different cultural orientation. The metanarrative of deficit in how adolescents are traditionally viewed within the school system in general and more specifically by school counsellors has already been addressed in chapters 9 and 11.

Gabrielle talked about an instance where immigrant parents did not want their child referred to an external agency for help: *"I don't think that's a fault of the strength-based counselling. I think it's more to do with attitudes. This family is an immigrant family so they bring those prejudices."* All families have pre-existing attitudes. In specifically identifying the pre-existing attitude as being because of the family's immigrant status, Gabrielle is unintentionally separating the immigrant family into an "out-group" category who are seen as being lacking in some way. This so-called othering of those who are different from ourselves is a social psychology concept whereby we favour a group of people we identify with (the in-group) over those who appear to be different (the out-group). This concept is known as in-group favouritism or in-group-out-group bias (Freitag & Kijewski, 2017; Killen & Rutland, 2011; Thomas, Bentall, Hadden, & O'Hara, 2017).

Gabrielle in her statement above positions immigrants as people with different beliefs and preferences. She did show some awareness of this, yet was still unable to recognise that all families have their own pre-existing attitudes: *"I often find the immigrant families are more difficult to work with. Well sometimes they're not, sometimes they're wonderful but they bring their own baggage with them. Their own cultural biases."* In the same way that Gabrielle could be seen to have a prejudiced view of immigrants, two of the other school counsellors appeared to show prejudice towards families with a different cultural orientation. These school counsellors explained issues of deficit or lack in terms of cultural differences rather than as issues of poverty, stress, alienation and/or mental health.

Abigail had wanted to consult with an adolescent boy's family and explained why she decided not to: *"If I tell his family they'll just get angry. He was from another culture."* She talked about another instance where family violence was the presenting problem and again seemed to explain the situation in terms of cultural differences: *"It's another culture – a Māori family."* Valerie also unintentionally separated out adolescents who were from a

different cultural background as being deficient and appeared to explain this lack as being due to culture: “*We have many scholarship students here and it is difficult for them because they come out of a different culture into this culture and there are multiple stresses on them.*” While these metanarratives of deficit relating to people of difference or the so-called out-group are in the minority and are somewhat subtle, it is still important to recognise that these prejudices are present and should be brought to school counsellors’ awareness so that they can be addressed.

This chapter has focused on the “community metanarratives, counselling and the family context” narrative category, looking at the family’s role in providing support for an adolescent in counselling and exploring the implications of the broader community context for an adolescent and his or her family. The chapter began with a discussion of wellbeing metanarratives and what is need to facilitated adolescent wellbeing; it then presented school counsellors’ stories of creating a community of support, asking how community support facilitates adolescent wellbeing. This was followed by a discussion on deficit metanarratives and the implications of lack of support and pre-existing parental and school counsellor attitudes for adolescents. The chapter ended with a look at school counsellors’ pre-existing attitudes and deficit constructs of cultural groups. This chapter has therefore addressed the following research questions:

*How do the metanarratives (discourse) of the broader community (within which an adolescent is embedded) influence a school counsellor’s practice?*

*What are school counsellors’ experiences of the adolescent’s family during the counselling process?*

This chapter completes the presentation of the categorical-content, themes or narrative categories, contexts and metanarratives recognised within school counsellors’ stories. The next chapter provides a discussion of the findings of this research and concludes this thesis.

## Chapter 13: Weaving together narrative threads

*Being a counsellor brought all the paths of my life together into one place.*

—Gabrielle

The narratives of the school counsellors in this study provide access to the complex and multifaceted nature of strength-based counselling in secondary schools in Auckland, New Zealand. Using a narrative methodology and method, this study aimed to examine the multiple metanarratives (embedded narratives/discourses) available to school counsellors. I wanted to make sense of how these metanarratives construct strength-based counselling practices and examine the potential influence of such a construction on co-creating adolescent wellbeing. Finally, I wanted to explore the influence of the broader community (within which an adolescent is embedded) on a school counsellors' practice. In meeting these aims, I recognised certain narrative categories, contexts and metanarratives in counsellor's narratives. This chapter weaves together the narrative threads of the story told about these narrative categories, contexts and metanarratives in this thesis.

The chapter starts with an overview of one of the contributions of this study, the construction of a method of narrative analysis I used to interpret school counsellors' transcripts. It summarises my design and use of narrative tools and then presents my findings for the narrative categories, contexts and metanarratives recognised in school counsellors' narratives using this method of narrative analysis. I present the research context first (see chapter 6 and section 13.2). I then weave together the narrative categories of the counsellors' context; the school context; the adolescent context; and community metanarratives, counselling and the family context into a combined narrative that explores how counsellors manage these multiple metanarratives (see chapters 9–12 and section 13.3). These narrative categories and contexts answered the research questions posed in this thesis and form part of the knowledge contribution for counselling practice. The tensions, epistemologies and ontologies in school counsellors' narratives are discussed as well as the limitations of strength-based counselling from the counsellors' perspectives. The overall contributions include: highlights and implications and then challenges and recommendations for further research, are presented next. The chapter ends by closing the narrative of this thesis.

### **13.1 Contribution: Overview of construction of a method of narrative analysis**

A contribution made by this research is the active construction of a method of narrative analysis that resulted from extensive engagement and repeated reading, questioning, analysis and reflection of transcripts.

The theoretical grounding for my construction of a method of narrative analysis drew on select narrative authors. Initially I utilised and adapted Crossley's (2000) six-step process on how to analyse a narrative. I then introduced and adapted an analytical model from Lieblich et al. (1998), based on four modes in which narratives can be read for both form and content. Of these four modes, a categorical-content mode of reading a narrative was most suitable for a narrative analysis across school counsellors' transcripts to construct narrative categories. During this process I became aware of the importance of context and metanarratives in school counsellors' transcripts. I thus added the Zilber et al. (2008) three-sphere model for context analysis, including intersubjective relations, the social field and metanarratives. To assist in the narrative analysis, I designed story-map grids and heuristic devices appropriate to my research (see section 8.4 for final story-map grid and heuristic device).

The final method of narrative analysis was ideally suited to interpreting school counsellors' narratives as it enabled the researcher to access participants' experiences. It aligns with critical realism and respects participants' expression of "truth" and makes room for them to explain reality as they perceive it. Furthermore, the process of constructing this method aligned with the epistemology of social constructionism and demonstrated my involvement in the co-construction of the narrative in this thesis.

#### **13.1.1 Narrative research tools: Story-map grid and heuristic device**

To assist with the interpretation of participants' narratives I drew up a story-map grid based on the categories recognised in the transcripts. Story-map grids provided a "rough map" for the interpreting of each transcript, which could then be translated into a meaningful narrative (Crossley, 2000, p. 93). The final story-map grid I designed was titled: "A Co-construction of Understanding of Counsellors' Strength-based Practices in Secondary Schools (see section 8.4.4). This story-map grid provides an outline for the results chapters of this thesis. I also used heuristic devices which are visual representations used in

qualitative research to assist in organising information and for providing structure and guidance during the interpretation process (Crossley, 2000).

The final heuristic device for metanarratives, context and categorical-content is presented again here as it is an integral part in depicting the weaving together of the narrative threads of this thesis.

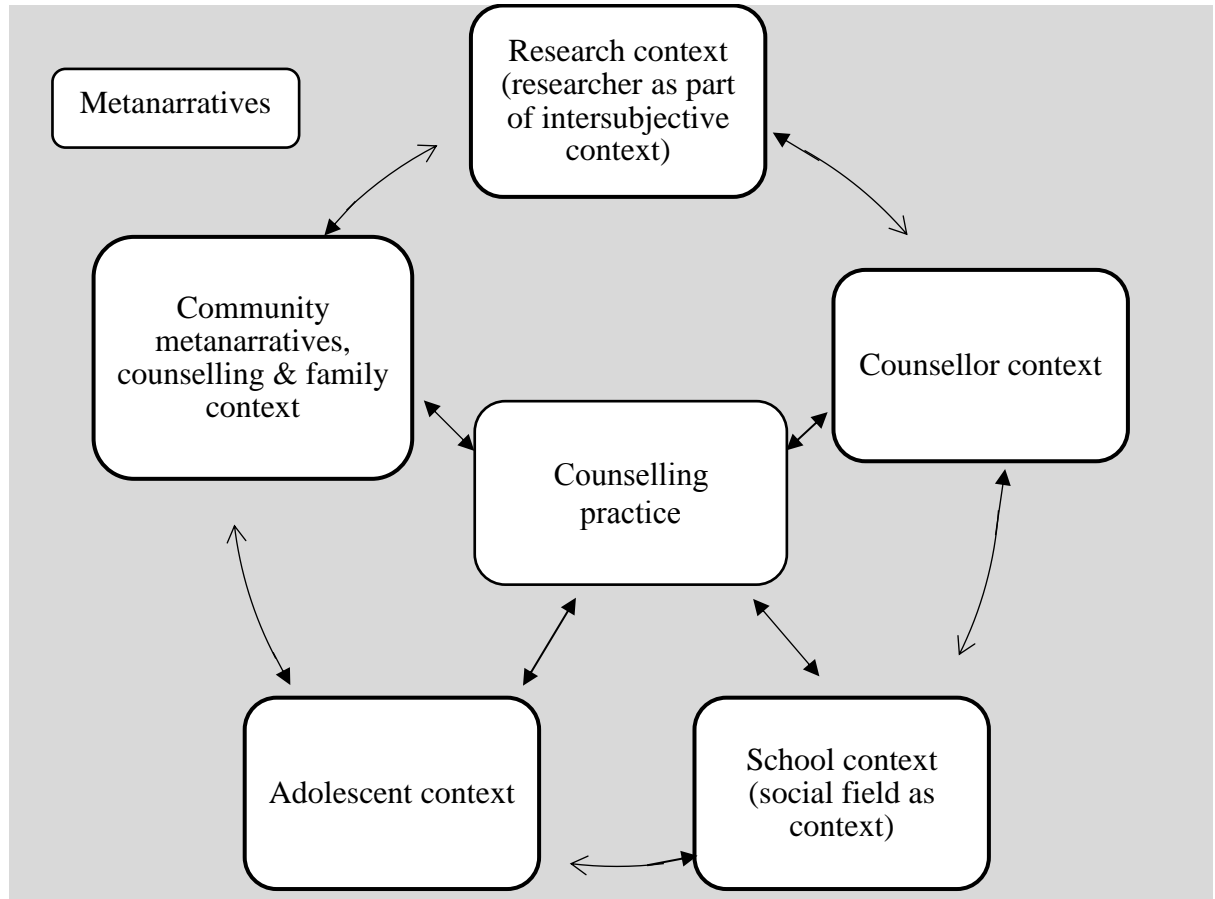


Figure 13(i): Final heuristic device to explore metanarratives, contexts and categorical-content: Co-construction of understanding of counsellors' strength-based practices in secondary schools

The heuristic device illustrates the dynamic, complex and multifaceted nature of school counselling and shows the interconnectivity between the counsellor, school, adolescent, and community metanarratives, counselling and the family context. This links back to notion of intersubjectivity and the social field in which research occurs presented by Zilber et al (2008) (see section 8.3).

All the role-players, including me as the researcher, contribute to the counselling system in schools and all contexts/role-players interact with each other and are acted upon by each other. In addition, the metanarratives (discourses) in all these relationships feed

back into the counselling practice. This exploratory tool captures the multifaceted and complex role of the counsellor working with adolescents in schools, which are also part of the larger community.

The complementary methods of narrative analysis for narrative categories (categorical-content) and context, and the tools of a story-map grid and heuristic device were used in an innovative way to address the overarching research topic:

*How do the multiple metanarratives (discourses), which are available to school counsellors, construct their strength-based counselling practice?*

The research questions explored in relation to the overarching research topic each link to a different results chapter (see chapters 6 and 9–12 and section 8.4.4) and were formulated through repeated reading of participants' narratives to construct narrative categories and contexts. The answers to these research questions are reviewed in sections 13.2 and 13.3 below and were presented in chapters 6 and 9–12 of this thesis. I discuss the research context next.

### **13.2 The research context: Researcher as co-constructionist**

I conceived of the narrative of this thesis as a co-construction between me (as the researcher), and my participants, as they told me their story about strength-based counselling. This relationship between researcher and participant is the intersubjective context, which is “the immediate relations and the interaction” (Zilber et al., 2008, p. 1051) within which the story is told. Considering this, I had to be aware of the influence of my assumptions, biases and metanarratives on the research process. I thus asked:

*What influence do my assumptions, biases and metanarratives (discourses) as researcher have on the research process?*

My own narrative as a secondary school teacher, strength-based school counsellor and positive psychology lecturer meant I had a vested interest in exploring certain themes in counsellor's narratives related to strength-based counselling (see section 1.5 and chapter 6). Given this interest, and a consequent potential for bias, I was mindful of allowing participants to tell the stories they wished to tell that explored all aspects of the counselling experience, strength-based or otherwise.

In listening to counsellor's stories and during the active process of constructing a method of narrative analysis for interpreting participants' transcripts, I realised the



importance of metanarratives and context. The metanarrative and context that provides the backdrop for participants' narratives grants us a depth of understanding about a counsellor's practice that goes beyond focusing solely on the form and content of the story (see chapters 7 and 8).

It was from this positioning within the research context that I was able to recognise the multiple contexts school counsellors negotiated and the metanarratives they drew from to frame their practice. My interpretation of counsellors' understandings of strength-based counselling in a secondary school, including the narrative categories, contexts and multiple metanarratives therein, is discussed next.

### **13.3 Contribution: Counsellors managing multiple metanarratives**

This section presents school counsellors' understandings of counselling in a secondary school. It weaves together the narrative categories, contexts and multiple metanarratives of school counsellors' counselling practice as depicted in the heuristic device above and outlined in the final story-map grid (see section 8.4.4). These narrative research tools show four different lenses or narrative categories through which the counselling practice in schools can be depicted: the counsellors' context, the school context, the adolescent context and community metanarratives, counselling and the family context.

These narrative categories sought to answer the following research questions:

*Which metanarratives (discourses) are drawn on to construct school counsellors' practice stories?*

*How do the metanarratives (discourses) of the school context influence a school counsellor's practice?*

*What are school counsellors' constructions of adolescent wellbeing?*

*How do school counsellors describe their strength-based practice as co-creating adolescent wellbeing?*

*How do the metanarratives (discourse) of the broader community (within which an adolescent is embedded) influence a school counsellor's practice?*

*What are school counsellors' experiences of the adolescent's family during the counselling process?*

These narrative categories, contexts and metanarratives of a school counsellor's practice weave together the narrative tapestry and the multiple metanarratives, tensions and

multiplicities that counsellors manage in their practice. This narrative tapestry is presented next and includes: the counsellors' power, metanarratives of deficit and strength, the presenting problem, misconceptions and challenges of the counsellors' role, introducing a strength-based model for co-creating and facilitating adolescent wellbeing, adolescents at risk and strength-based models in schools.

### **13.3.1 Counsellors' power: Relationship and influence**

A strength-based approach sees the adolescent as having expert knowledge on his or her own life (White & Epston, 1992; Winslade & Monk, 1999). However, traditionally the metanarrative of the counsellor is one of esteemed expert, guiding the client towards resolution of his or her presenting problem. These disparate metanarratives introduce a power dynamic into the counselling relationship.

Counsellors, by virtue of their training and experience, do have knowledge, wisdom and expertise that is different from that of the lay person. During the strength-based counselling process both counsellor and client need to work alongside each other but the counsellor uses his or her strengths and resources to empower adolescents to draw on their own strengths. Counsellor and adolescent thereby develop a reciprocal relationship that straddles the divide between expert and novice.

Some of the counsellors in this study believed that the power dynamic in the counselling relationship was even. However, others felt that the nature of the role of counsellor was imbued with power and the way in which to manage this power differential was to have an awareness of it in the counselling relationship. This can be linked to the tension between a deficit-based and strength-based approach to counselling (see section 13.3.2 below). Most of the counsellors said that being open with adolescents about the power dynamic allowed adolescents to see the counselling relationship differently, which in turn strengthened the trust within the counselling relationship.

Beyond the power dynamic of the counselling relationship lies the power within the school context which actively shapes counsellors' practice. A dominant culture wields power over and subjugates lesser cultures which are seen to be inferior. A dominant culture enforces its rules, regulations and processes on the "lesser culture" and regards itself to be superior. This means that these lesser cultures are often side-lined and are given only token amounts of time, attention and respect. Thus, in a school context where the focus is on

academic achievement and eradicating undesirable behaviour, a strength-based approach to counselling may be in danger of being subjugated. Foucault defines “subjugated knowledges” as:

A whole set of knowledges that have been disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated: naïve knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity. It is through the reappearance of this knowledge, of these local popular knowledges, these disqualified knowledges, that criticism performs its work. (Foucault & Gordon, 1980, pp. 81-82)

What Foucault is saying here is that subjugated knowledges stand counter to the dominant knowledge base and have the potential to challenge that which is accepted at face value within the dominant culture. The school counsellors are part of the dominant, potentially deficit-based, school culture, but at the same time are attempting to promote the lesser culture of strength-based counselling within the school (Winslade & Monk, 1999).

Several counsellors felt that who they were as a counsellor gave them a degree of power that could make a difference. However, they did not say how they used this power to make a difference and spoke only sparingly of the influence they had within the school – focusing predominately on their influence in relation to the schools’ view of the adolescent. They did not actively reflect on how they can affect the emotional health of the wider school. Counsellors seemed to passively accept the ethos and policies of the wider school as being fixed and did not appear to be fully conscious of their potential power to challenge the dominant narrative of the environment they work in.

In chapter 9, I thus questioned whether the power of the counsellor to “make a difference” was merely tokenistic: he or she acting as the kindly face of power and as an advocate for adolescents but with no real influence with regard to the policies and ethos of the school. This raises another question: Is it the school counsellor’s responsibility to affect change in a broader societal sense and in so doing to locate themselves as an agent of change? In this way, according to Foucault, power can be productive:

We must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms: it ‘excludes’, it ‘represses’, it ‘censors’, it ‘abstracts’, it ‘masks’, it ‘conceals’. In fact, power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of

truth. The individual and the knowledge that may be gained of him belong to this production. (Foucault & Sheridan, 1995, p. 194)

Counsellors could thus use power in a productive sense and become agents for change within their schools. In this study, however, counsellors saw their power in this area as marginal at best and made only passing references to “the productive use of power” in their narratives.

Counsellors explained that they initiated this change within the school context by managing the intricate system of relationships between themselves, students, teachers and parents. As school counsellors they worked within this system of relationships and consulted, offered guidance, advocated, supported, educated, led and fostered relationship building within the school context. In this way school counsellors said they could, with the assistance of other role-players in the school context, support adolescent wellbeing and could attempt to move others within the school system away from a deficit view of the adolescent.

A deficit metanarrative shapes much of the counselling profession, especially in schools, and strength-based counsellors must take active steps of resistance against this. Winslade and Monk (1999) explain that these attempts to challenge the deficit metanarrative are referred to as acts of resistance. While school counsellors’ in this study did work towards influencing the school’s view of the adolescent, they still saw their power as being only marginal. They seemed overwhelmed by the dominant metanarrative of the school and did not use their power to shape practices in the larger school context. I would argue that a school counsellor’s power should be especially relevant considering the current high incidence of youth suicide in New Zealand and schools’ need to mitigate this risk (see section 11.4). However, if counsellors do not challenge the dominant culture of the school context and attempt to affect change only at the level of the individual, their knowledge and power to affect change may remain subjugated. This research therefore highlights the importance of a school counsellor’s knowledge and power being used to affect change within the school context as a whole.

To conclude, the main reference to power in counsellors’ narratives related to the power dynamic of the counselling relationship. Counsellors’ had less awareness of their potential power of influence in the wider school system. Counsellors seem to unconsciously straddle the metanarratives of deficit and strength within their practice and positioned

themselves in binary terms or on a continuum between these opposing metanarratives. The tensions and multiplicities inherent in these metanarratives are discussed next.

### **13.3.2 Metanarratives of deficit and strength: Tensions and multiplicities**

Certain tensions and multiplicities could be recognised in school counsellors' metanarratives that fell on a continuum somewhere between deficit and strength for each of the narrative categories and contexts explored including: the counsellors' context, the school context, the adolescent context and community metanarratives, counselling and the family context.

In relation to the *counsellors' context*, school counsellors positioned themselves philosophically as strength-based practitioners with a positive orientation towards the human condition. They believed they were tasked with moving adolescents from deficit into strength and that adolescents' problems were barriers to accessing their strengths. They advocated a narrative strength-based approach whereby the person is not the problem, the problem is the problem (Monk, 1997; M. Payne, 2006; White & Epston, 1992). In externalising the problem, the adolescent is given room to "re-story" the issue and move away from a deficit problem perspective to a metanarrative of strength.

This aligns with positive psychology's health versus disease model debate (Hefferon & Boniwell, 2011). Hefferon and Boniwell explain that in contrast to traditional counselling modalities that focus on alleviating mental illness, positive psychology aims to not only alleviate mental illness but also to actively promote mental health.

However, while school counsellors' constructions of strength-based counselling drew on a strength-based metanarrative, the underlying metanarrative was still imbued with deficit and this tension was reflected in their practice. Thus, although school counsellors constructed themselves as strength-based practitioners they still on occasion drew on deficit-based metanarratives and described adolescents as presenting with 'problems' that were seen to reside within them and for which they needed "help".

This aligns with a deficit metanarrative and the more traditional approach to counselling. While counsellors spoke of strength-based counselling as "*a great preventative approach*" (Pam), the implicit implication was still that illness could occur and that intervention would be required to prevent it. In effect, this still reflected the biomedical model of deficit and its focus on fixing problems.

Within the *school context* counsellors also expressed tensions within their role. They had to uphold the policies of the institution and at the same time advocate for and support the student. This duality resulted in them having to shift between a metanarrative of deficit which was dominant within the school system (see section 10.3.1) and a metanarrative of a strength-based approach to counselling. This dominant deficit metanarrative within the school context hindered a counsellor's practice.

The narratives of the counsellors were thus fraught with tensions between the dominance of the deficit metanarrative within the school context and counsellors' strength-based metanarratives which were placed into a "lesser" or subjugated position (Foucault & Gordon, 1980).

While talking of adolescents' strengths, counsellors were at times "pulled back" into the deficit context of their school system. They had to participate in the day-to-day routines of the school by partnering with teachers and management while simultaneously setting themselves apart as counsellors who advocated for adolescents.

Their narratives ultimately expressed tensions between a strength-based metanarrative of their counselling practice and the fundamental deficit metanarratives prevalent in schools which gives rise to the consequent impetus of schools to focus on what is deficient in adolescents and use school counsellor as the means to "fix" these deficits. Counsellors had to negotiate working within this complex school context and were called on to be supportive of both the adolescents they counsel and the ethos of the school context in which they practiced. These were portrayed as two tasks that are not always in alignment or supportive of the other and that caused tension for school counsellors' practice.

In relation to the *adolescent context* another strong narrative thread in counsellors' transcripts was the societal metanarrative of deficit in relation to adolescents within the school system and beyond. Adolescence is considered a challenging time in lifespan development and adolescents are frequently portrayed as emotionally unstable, irresponsible risk takers (Cooper et al., 2003; Gluckman, 2011; P. Katz, 1997; Marcia, 1980; Vernon, 1993). Again, counsellors believed that while adolescents are often viewed from a deficit-based perspective, a strength-based approach counteracted this view and focused adolescents more productively on their strengths.

However, despite counsellors' efforts to counteract a deficit-based perspective of adolescents, I recognised traces of a deeper metanarrative in their stories with some

inherent prejudices relating to adolescents and their *community and family context*. The deficit metanarrative focuses on what is going wrong and what is perceived as being inherently “negative” and/or “detrimental”. This deficit metanarrative was expressed by school counsellors in pre-existing cultural attitudes and “othering” towards immigrants and people from a different cultural orientation; and in their ironically deficit view of the adolescent stage of the lifespan. These metanarratives of deficit appeared to detract from the counsellors’ practice and formed a disruptive pattern in some of their narratives. However, only a few of the counsellors seemed to be aware of these competing narratives of deficit and strength.

Thus, in summation using all four narrative categories and contexts as lenses of interpretation I recognised tensions and multiplicities within school counsellors’ views regarding metanarratives of strength and metanarratives of deficit and how this influenced their practice.

Firstly, counsellors drew on the traditional deficit metanarrative of the counselling profession which often views clients as presenting with a problem that needs to be “fixed”. This deficit metanarrative affected counsellors’ predisposition and positioning towards adolescents and the counselling process. In school counsellors’ descriptions of the counsellor context and their work with adolescents, as well as in part of the literature on counselling, counselling practice is divided as either being in “deficit” or in “strength”. However, this brings forth a dichotomous, binary view that contradicts counsellors’ holistic construction of adolescent wellbeing (see section 11.1.2) and promotes the notion that if adolescents present with a problem, they are in deficit and are not using their strengths. This so-called positive and negative ideology divides thinking into binaries regarding wellbeing. An adolescent is then seen as being either mentally well or mentally ill.

Recent literature, however, suggests that instead of this dichotomous, binary approach regarding adolescent wellbeing, strength or positive metanarratives and deficit or negative metanarratives are better seen in a holistic sense (Aked & Thompson, 2011; Education Review Office, 2016; Geldard et al., 2016; Hanley et al., 2012; Hone, 2015; Seligman, 2003, 2011). In taking a holistic view both aspects of deficit and strength are harnessed to facilitate adolescent wellbeing (see section 13.3.4 below). While school counsellors did reflect that their construction of adolescent wellbeing was holistic they

seemed unaware that at times they still fell back on the dichotomous, binary view of strength-based counselling and adolescent wellbeing referenced above.

Secondly, counsellors' views of adolescents are also influenced by metanarratives of the school context in which they practise, especially in relation to an education sector focused on both eradicating poor behaviour and enhancing academic achievement. The meaning counsellors assign to these metanarratives and the educational and counselling policies that underpin them may either encourage or discourage strength-based counselling in schools depending on whether they have a strength-based or deficit-based orientation towards a school counsellor's practice.

Additionally, metanarratives surrounding adolescents themselves stem from the broader community in which the adolescent lives and may also be those of deficit. These metanarratives are brought into and form part of the school context. The school context is thus the mediating factor between the school counsellor, the adolescent and the broader community of parents, extended family, peers and neighbours and counsellors must negotiate these sometimes-disparate metanarratives as part of their role.

It was apparent that school counsellors interacted with multiple contexts from which they drew several metanarratives to facilitate their counselling practice. All these metanarratives vied for attention within the space of the counselling session. School counsellors have to manage these often-competing metanarratives to tend effectively to the needs of adolescents in counselling. Much of the tension experienced by school counsellors then were in wanting to uphold the strength-based metanarrative of their counselling practice while at the same time being pulled back into deficit of the biomedical model and traditional views on counselling.

### **13.3.3 Strength-based counselling: What to do with the presenting problem?**

Several of the counsellors interpreted strength-based counselling as focusing on adolescents' strengths as well as pushing towards resolution of the issue at hand. This notion of rushing to "fix" things stems from a deficit-based biomedical model where presenting symptom need to be alleviated. Further, counsellors seemed to think that the presenting problem was of less importance, which the literature would suggest is erroneous (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2013; Galassi & Akos, 2007; Jones-Smith, 2014; Park & Peterson, 2008; C. Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Sharry, 2004; Tedeschi et al., 1998; Ungar, 2006).



Indeed, positivity at all costs can become a metanarrative that discounts the positive aspects of struggling, including the building of resilience. Further, ignored negative thoughts and emotions may ironically become more severe. Several authors in the field of positive psychology do speak about the benefits of experiencing negative emotions (Kashdan & Biswas-Diener, 2014, 2015a, 2015b; Parrott, 2014). Only by adequately exploring the “problems” that clients bring to counselling can they be placed in context and worked through from a strength-based perspective.

Negative emotions can provide the impetus for change and cause us to seek out productive coping skills to deal with problem situations. In their book *The Upside of Your Dark Side*, positive psychologists Kashdan and Biswas-Diener (2015b) explore the benefits of experiencing negative emotion. It could further be argued that people need to experience negative emotions and process trauma before they are ready to embrace its positive aspects. If people are pushed towards solution and positive reframing too soon the trauma may not be sufficiently assimilated to build resilience (Epstein, 1994; Kashdan & Biswas-Diener, 2014, 2015a, 2015b). The importance of experiencing negative emotions is also referenced in acceptance commitment therapy (ACT) where experiential avoidance is proposed to exacerbate psychological distress (Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 2012; Vilardaga, Hayes, Atkins, Bresee, & Kambiz, 2013). However, ACT is not within the scope of this thesis and so has not been discussed.

Despite the research that suggests the importance of experiencing negative emotions, several counsellors erroneously assumed that strength-based counselling modalities do not explore the presenting problem. Rather, they believed that they needed to employ additional counselling modalities to do so. However, the definition of a strength-based approach includes focusing on strengths while simultaneously exploring the presenting problem. The question to ask is: Is the presenting problem sufficiently explored to make a favourable difference within the counselling process? (Kashdan & Biswas-Diener, 2015a, 2015b).

Perhaps, then, a more sophisticated understanding of strength-based counselling and training of counsellors in the strength-based modality are required so that school counsellors can use this modality in all situations, including a crisis. Given the benefits of negative emotions, a strength-based approach should embrace the problem and explore the presenting deficit. Thus, as with the tension recognised between dominant deficit and

subjugated strength metanarratives referenced above, I would argue that strength-based counselling should not be viewed on a continuum or in a dichotomous, binary manner, with the presenting problem at one end and its resolution at the other; instead it should be seen holistically. Exploring the problem and introducing the notion of using strengths to manage and ultimately resolve the problem should be an organic process that occurs simultaneously.

#### **13.3.4 Counsellors' role: Support, misconceptions and challenges**

The school context is unique environment that may provide counsellors with support by providing them with more contextual information that may assist in counselling. Teachers and school management can be called upon by the school counsellor to work alongside them in promoting adolescent health and wellbeing (Crocket et al., 2015; Dahir & Stone, 2012; Drewery & Winslade, 2005; Winslade & Monk, 1999).

On the other hand, the school context may be driven by academic achievement and managing behavioural issues in such a way that the mental wellbeing of adolescents may be discounted. Counsellors' roles may be perceived by teachers and school management as being that of "fixing" or "curing" the adolescent so that they can perform academically and behave as is expected of them within the school context (Geldard et al., 2016; Musa et al., 2016; Rickard et al., 2016; Winslade & Monk, 1999; Witko, Bernes, Magnusson, & Bardick, 2006).

Several counsellors explained that in a school context, counsellors are not only counselling adolescents for mental health issues, they are also managing social issues such as addressing the basic needs of students and having to compensate for the lack of community support. School counsellors thus felt that they needed to address the whole system of wellbeing for the adolescent, focusing not only on mental health issues but practical and survival needs.

It must be emphasised that school counsellors are trained to work within a school context, and thus require a support system for more serious mental health issues and social concerns. Mental health support services are, however, overextended and adolescents cannot always get the support they need in a timely fashion, which makes the school counsellor's role particularly stressful. In addition, support for social welfare issues is also

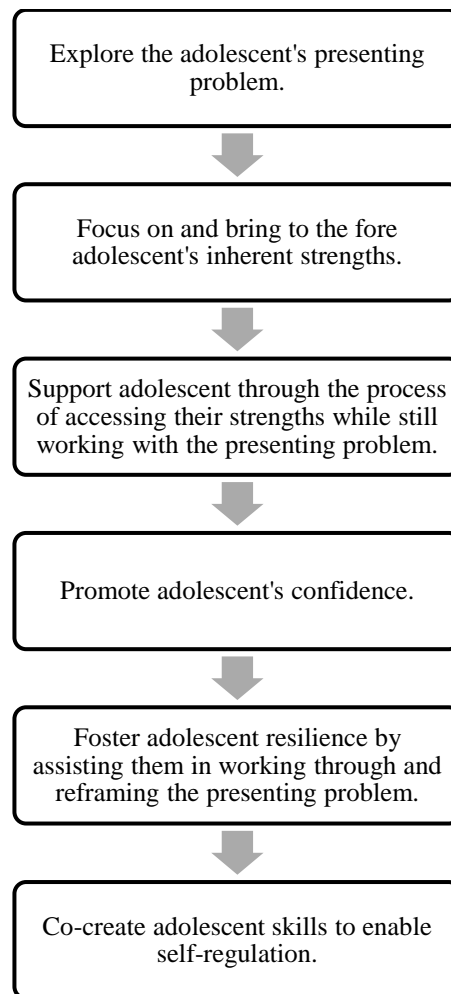
limited. This lack of available support services is something that needs to be looked at further by the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Health.

### **13.3.5 Co-creating adolescent wellbeing: Introducing a strength-based model**

Counsellors in this study, in alignment with certain theoretical concepts, constructed adolescent wellbeing on a continuum from deficit to strength. Counsellors explained that they endeavoured to create a dynamic with adolescents that facilitated a shift from the “accepted” societal view of adolescents as being in deficit towards a more holistic strength-based view. Counsellors described this strength-based view as recognising adolescents’ uniqueness, self-expression and strengths, including mental, physical and spiritual strengths. Furthermore, in understanding adolescent wellbeing from a developmental perspective, counsellors positioned adolescents as having “mastery” and being able to build resilience. Developmental knowledge also assisted counsellors in establishing positive relationships with adolescents, which in turn had a favourable impact on the strength-based counselling modality used. The systems theory construction of adolescent wellbeing links well with a strength-based counselling approach. The system of relationships that the adolescent has with others can hinder or support resilience. Thus, an understanding of the “system” of relationships that an adolescent is a part of was important to the strength-based counselling process.

It is apparent that school counsellors’ constructions of adolescent wellbeing influenced their strength-based counselling practice. In turn, counsellors’ strength-based counselling practice also has the potential to shape adolescent wellbeing. I recognised that the counsellors I interviewed showed a commitment to a pedagogical or educational focus to strength-based counselling and regarded this as promoting adolescent wellbeing. School counsellors began their story by focusing on adolescents’ strengths and how they used strength-based counselling practices to access these strengths. Counsellors also focused on promoting confidence to foster resilience in the adolescent. Part of this resilience building culminated in co-creating transferrable skills that the adolescent could draw upon to manage not only the issue at hand but also other concerns (Bryan & Henry, 2008; Franklin, 2015; Galassi & Akos, 2007; Jones-Smith, 2014; Sapp, 2006; Sharpy et al., 2012; E. J. Smith, 2006; Ungar, 2006; Wong, 2006). However, I highlighted that this pedagogical focus needs to incorporate exploring the presenting problem.

To this end I introduced a model for co-creating adolescent wellbeing using a strength-based counselling approach (see section 11.2.6). Drawing from counsellors' narratives and counselling processes this model for co-creating adolescent wellbeing may assist counsellors in a practical way: it provides school counsellors with a foundation from which to think about their practice in a strength-based manner but without ignoring existing issues and inherent tensions. This model for promoting adolescent wellbeing may therefore alleviate the propensity of the school counsellors in this study to discount the presenting problem.



*Figure 13 (ii): A strength-based model for co-creating adolescent wellbeing*

Furthermore, this strength-based model for co-creating adolescent wellbeing focuses on the partnership between the school counsellor and the adolescent in addressing adolescent wellbeing. The New Zealand Association of Counsellors (NZAC, 2016a) note that establishing relationship skills within the adolescent is more beneficial than relying solely

on “instant fixes” such as medication, even when such medication is warranted.

Counsellors need to build the skills in adolescents to empower them to deal with problems:

Giving young people the skills to stick up for themselves in the right way will better prepare them for any other scenario life throws at them. There’s no instant fix. If you don’t teach the child how to cope with things such as bullying or emotions, they won’t be empowered to be able to stop it themselves. (New Zealand Association of Counsellors, 2016a, p. 1)

The strength-based model above may assist school counsellors in doing just that.

School counsellors’ narratives showed that many adolescents in counselling value a strength-based approach because of the positive and empowering influence of the counselling relationship. Regarding what constituted a “positive” counselling relationship, counsellors talked about caring, bridging the relational gap, taking adolescents seriously, reflecting, valuing and supporting (See section 9.5.4.1).

### **13.3.6 Facilitating adolescent wellbeing: Counselling relationship and community support**

In relation to counsellors’ wellbeing metanarratives, I looked for what counsellors felt was needed to facilitate adolescent wellbeing. To this end I recognised the importance of the counselling relationship, community and familial support, and a cultural awareness of adolescent’s background. The importance of engaging with and offering adolescents support was common in counsellors’ narratives. While the therapeutic relationship is not related directly to the use of strength-based counselling, there has been significant research into the importance of the relationship for successful counselling outcomes. This research suggests that the counselling relationship is more important than the modality the counsellor uses in terms of efficacy (Wampold & Imel, 2015); see also chapter 9). Many school counsellors spoke about the importance of establishing a good relationship and developing a rapport with adolescents to facilitate the counselling process.

In addition to the counselling relationship, school counsellors’ narratives spoke of the importance of an adolescent’s cultural heritage and the potential impact this could have on counselling. They felt that what can be achieved through counselling varied depending on the beliefs and constraints of the adolescent’s culture. It is therefore vital that school counsellors recognise that promoting adolescent wellbeing is not limited to the counselling

suite. The school counsellor needs to consider both the cultural and family context within which adolescents find themselves and then foster and draw on family support on behalf of the adolescent.

Counsellors felt that they could offer support within the counselling relationship and that while this was important for long-term sustainable change, adolescents must be supported from outside the counselling room too. This support could include school management, teachers and peers as well as family members and external agencies. If necessary, school counsellors said they could assist in facilitating this community of support. The NZAC (2016a) article on building relationship skills supports such a view and explains that social relationships must be in place in order to support adolescents in maintaining change (see section 13.3.5 above and chapters 9 and 12).

Establishing a community of support had the additional advantage of decentring the school counsellor's practice, mitigating the need for counsellors to be an adolescent's sole source of support. As a researcher and school counsellor I support the idea that a school counsellor should be only one part of an adolescent's community of support. However, this community of support needs to be managed carefully as ethical and safety issues are raised in relation to responsibility for adolescents' wellbeing when they are in counselling. Should the primary responsibility for the wellbeing of an adolescent in counselling fall to the counsellor? School counsellors cautioned that while familial support could be advantageous, the issue of parental awareness of the counselling process could be a contentious one which needed to be managed carefully with adolescent awareness and informed consent of what was being discussed with parents, as has been demonstrated in other research (Burt et al., 1998; Geldard et al., 2016; Licitra-Kleckler & Waas, 1993; Musa et al., 2016; New Zealand Association of Counsellors, 2016b; Sharry, 2004).

Several counsellors addressed the issue of family context and the potentially detrimental nature of familial relationships on adolescent wellbeing especially where there is abuse and dysfunction, and they are powerless in the face of an adult authority which regulates their lives. Familial support may also not always be forthcoming either through lack of interest or through lack of support for counselling. Another factor school counsellors spoke of was the nature of familial relationships and how the changing structure of a traditional family unit can mean the adolescent's home life impacts on their school life. All these factors must be considered and managed in relation to the possible

impact that community and familial support can have on adolescent wellbeing. However, if managed appropriately, support both within and external to the counselling setting facilitates adolescent wellbeing.

### **13.3.7 Strength-based counselling and adolescents at risk**

Within the context of the counselling relationship, school counsellors referred to strength-based counselling as a “*preventative approach*”. I questioned the usefulness of strength-based counselling as a preventative approach with adolescents who presented to counselling with severe trauma such as suicidal ideation (see section 11.4). This is not to imply that strength-based counselling is inappropriate in an extreme crisis such as suicidal ideation. The modality however needs to be carefully managed in the counselling setting and counsellors need to be sufficiently trained to use it effectively. In these high-risk cases, it would be prudent to use strength-based counselling to nurture a supportive counselling environment. Within this safe environment the presenting problem should be carefully explored and the adolescent should be assisted in identifying potential coping strategies and strengths to help them stay safe and to manage the trauma. In all instances, but especially in high-risk cases, school counsellors should be mindful of carefully exploring the issue at hand and not be focused solely on shifting counselling away from the problem towards resolution.

In this regard, in exploring the use of a strength-based counselling approach in working with adolescents at risk of harm to self I focused on sections in school counsellors’ narratives that looked at the dangers of lack of support and the imperative of focusing on adolescents’ inherent strengths to mitigate the risk of harm to self. School counsellors explained that adolescent safety could be ensured through regular assessment and by promoting adolescent strengths and confidence. In addition, resilience-based work and teaching adolescent skills to enable self-regulation also reduced the risk of harm to self. In providing adolescents with support school counsellors explained the need to go beyond just providing adolescents with one-on-one support. School counsellors also needed to make adolescents aware of their larger support networks (see chapter 12). However, sometimes adolescents were resistant to having family involved, to seeking external help and to establishing a community of support during the counselling process. This has several implications, including issues of confidentiality, informed consent and safety. The school

counsellor needs to consider carefully the enlisting of support without adolescent consent, and needs to follow the appropriate ethical and procedural guidelines in addition to consulting with his or her supervisor. Throughout the counselling process confidentiality must be honoured and parental and family involvement must be garnered with adolescent consent.

An exception to this is where there is a risk of suicide and/or significant harm to the adolescent or to someone else. This exception must be made at the school counsellor's discretion after consultation with his or her supervisor and in accordance with the NZAC (2016b)'s Code of Ethics. All ethical requirements regarding safety and confidentiality are delineated therein (see chapter 4). Thus, school counsellors spoke of the importance of regular assessment in counselling to ensure that the adolescents they counselled got the necessary support they needed. School counsellors said that regular assessment was imperative to ascertain adolescents' degree of risk and ensure their safety and promote resilience. In providing adolescents with support, doing regular safety assessments, and by teaching adolescents skills that are supportive of their resilience, school counsellors can help manage the risk factors adolescents face. Thus, if managed properly, strength-based counselling could be effective in crisis situations, especially in instances where adolescents are at risk.

### **13.3.8 Strength-based models in school**

Changing the ethos of schools to a strength-based approach was endorsed by school counsellors. However, they believed that to facilitate these models there must be support from within the school context, as well from the education system at ministry level. School counsellors also feared resistance from classroom teachers, who would need to be involved in any such transformation. Classroom teachers might resent the implications of having to alter their work practices, as well as the possibility of an additional time investment. To mitigate this, some school counsellors felt that a strength-based approach should be part of teacher education, especially at secondary level where it appeared less likely to occur.

Support from the Ministry of Education for strength-based counselling would involve potential changes to policy and procedure. Since the inception of this study, certain strength-based initiatives funded by the Ministry of Education (2015) have been introduced into many schools. Two of these strength-based initiatives include the school-wide



programmes, Positive Behaviour for Learning (PB4L) and restorative practices (RPs) (Ministry of Education, 2015).

The Ministry of Health, meanwhile, advocates for three Māori health models that also promote a strength-based approach. These include the Māori health models of Te Whare Tapa Whā, Te Wheke, and Te Pae Mahutonga (Durie, 2004; Pere & Nicholson, 1997; Rochford, 2004). These models could potentially be incorporated by school counsellors into their counselling practice and be used within the school context. However, the models take a very holistic approach and the support structures needed to manage them are not necessarily in place. These initiatives and models are a positive step but again require commitment from the school and the Ministry of Education to ensure their efficacy.

Overall, multiple metanarratives arise for school counsellors within the contexts in which they engage. In the first instance, there is a metanarrative that school counsellors draw on from the counselling world, of which they are a part. This is made up of the history of counselling and school counsellors' knowledge base around counselling, which both impact on the language school counsellors choose to use in counselling students. It affects school counsellors' predisposition towards adolescents and the counselling process, their policy around giving or withholding advice, and their positioning of themselves and their clients. This metanarrative forms the basis of a school counsellor's counselling philosophy and was recognised in all the school counsellors' narratives.

The school counsellor is pivotal to the process of ensuring that an adolescent can successfully negotiate the multiple metanarratives and meanings they are exposed to. School counsellors need to be both an advocate for the adolescent to promote his or her wellbeing and a facilitator for the school to ensure that the policies and ethos that form the basis of the metanarratives in the school are honoured. All these metanarratives vie for attention within the space of the counselling session. The meanings counsellors assign to these metanarratives and the educational/counselling theories and school/systemic policies that underpin them may either encourage or discourage strength-based counselling in schools.

In this section, I have recognised several tensions for school counsellors inherent in their counselling practice. The tensions and school counsellors' positioning regarding the epistemology and ontology of their practice are presented next.

### **13.4 Strength-based counselling: Tensions, epistemology and ontology**

As has been illustrated above, the role of school counsellors is multifaceted, diverse and fraught with tensions. These tensions can be viewed through the lens of the three-sphere model for narrative context analysis by Zilber et al. (2008) (see section 8.3).

In terms of the intersubjective space (the first sphere) negotiated between myself as researcher and the counsellors, I recognised tensions between the outcomes I wanted for this research and the metanarratives of counsellors' positioning. The outcomes I wanted reflected my background as both strength-based secondary school counsellor and positive psychology lecturer and my assumptions and biases regarding strength-based counselling (see section 1.5 and chapter 6). I wanted to demonstrate that a strength-based approach to counselling adolescents is "superior" to more deficit-based counselling approaches.

Within the social field (the second sphere), I noted tensions between school counsellors and the school context, with the counsellor having to be both advocate for students and supporter of the school ethos, rules and regulations. The sometimes deficit metanarrative within the school system did not always align well with promoting adolescent wellbeing.

Finally, regarding the metanarratives in participants' narratives (the third sphere), there were tensions in counsellor's application of strength-based counselling. All school counsellor's narratives reflected a positively orientated ontology towards the human condition (see section 9.4). However, counsellors' application of ontological theory or expression of their view of the nature of being was still constrained by and steeped in the traditional ontology of counselling and educational systems. These traditional ontologies evoked a deficit view of the adolescent. Thus, while school counsellors saw themselves as promoting strength-based counselling they seemed to be pulled back into this deficit orientation in their counselling practice.

So, although school counsellors' epistemology embraced a strength-based approach this was incongruent with their application of ontological theory. One's epistemology cannot be fully embraced and promoted without addressing one's ontology. Promoting strength-based counselling as epistemology (the knowledge counsellors draw on to counsel students) without changing the deficit ontology (way of being) of traditional counselling practices, schools and school counsellors may not be sufficient.

School counsellors therefore have to not only manage the multiplicity of their roles and cope with competing loyalties but also have to become aware of their own positioning and philosophy of counselling (Evans & Payne, 2008) in relation to both their epistemology and ontology.

### **13.5 Limitations of strength-based school counselling as reflected in counsellors' narratives**

I have referred to the literature regarding the limitations of strength-based counselling (see section 5.4). In interpreting counsellors' transcripts, I recognised the following limitations of strength-based counselling, particularly in a school context:

- Counsellors conveyed that the demands made on them in the school context rendered them time-poor. They felt that the number of sessions they had with adolescents was not necessarily sufficient for anchoring the knowledge of strength-based skills.
- Counsellors said that there was sometimes little understanding from school management and teachers of what strength-based counselling with adolescents entailed. Furthermore, there was little support outside the counselling suite from teachers in anchoring strength-based skills.
- Counsellors expressed an erroneous interpretation of strength-based counselling as focusing exclusively on adolescents' strengths and treating the presenting problem as being of minor importance.
- Counsellors' narratives reflected that strength-based counselling was a good band-aid approach for minor, day-to-day issues but not necessarily appropriate in crisis situations, such as suicidal ideation.

The last two bullet points above are a misinterpretation, since strength-based counselling can be appropriate and beneficial in cases such as suicidal ideation (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2013; Galassi & Akos, 2007; Jones-Smith, 2014; Park & Peterson, 2008; C. Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Sharry, 2004; Tedeschi et al., 1998; Ungar, 2006). However, these crisis situations need to be carefully managed. Counsellors need to be sufficiently trained in using strength-based counselling so that they can simultaneously focus on the presenting problem and foster the use of strengths. In this way, counsellors can build resilience in adolescents. However, it is important to be aware that this may not be possible for all school counsellors

given the constraints placed on them. In some schools strength-based counselling may be an interim measure, important in helping adolescents cope in the moment but with minimal sustainable benefit in the longer term.

### **13.6 Contribution: Highlights and implications of this narrative study**

This study is unique in a New Zealand context in its focus on strength-based secondary school counsellors and provides them with a platform from which to tell their stories. Since the experiences of these counsellors are unique, this study has added new knowledge about school counsellors' perceptions regarding counselling in a school context and greater awareness of the complexity and multiplicity of the school counsellor's role. In focusing on counsellors' use of strength-based approaches, this study has contributed to research in the areas of school counselling and positive outcomes for youth in New Zealand.

This study has implications for New Zealand secondary schools:

- It could assist school management and teachers in more readily seeing school counsellors as a resource in supporting adolescents.
- It could encourage a review by schools of their structure towards encompassing a more positive framework.
- It could shed light on the role of the school counsellor and the challenges they face in the school context.
- It could create an awareness of the prevalence of the deficit view of adolescence and how to counteract this.
- It could highlight the importance of creating a community of support for the adolescent.

This study may also have implications for government policy, specifically that relating to the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Health, by creating an awareness of the benefits of counsellors and strength-based counselling in a school context. This in turn could encourage:

- An acknowledgement of the importance of the school counsellor's role.
- The allocation or increase in a guidance staffing component reserved specifically for school counsellors so that schools can employ more counsellors, increasing the counsellor to student ratio.

- Regarding counsellors as the hub of a network of pastoral care in schools and seeing them as having an active part to play in establishing school policy.
- The provision of greater resources for school counsellors to use for supervision and professional development.
- A review of the school counsellor training curriculum, focusing on the teaching of strength-based counselling modalities from a more holistic perspective.

Strength-based counselling approaches with adolescents should also be considered a valuable component for initial counsellor education, mentoring and professional development programmes.

While the narratives of the school counsellors in this study were told within a New Zealand context, they may also be relevant to school counselling researchers working in similar contexts abroad. By highlighting the different challenges and tensions inherent in New Zealand school counsellors' practice, the contexts they work in, and the metanarratives that impact on their counselling practice, this study adds to the existing body of knowledge on school counsellors and strength-based counselling.

Furthermore, while this thesis relates specifically to strength-based secondary school counsellors, it may nonetheless be relevant to all school counsellors and counsellors, irrespective of the modalities they use. Implications relate to:

- Providing counsellors with the opportunity to reflect on their counselling practice and to consider the potential factors within their work environment, such as the ethos and policies, management and colleagues' views of the counsellor, and the resourcing available for counselling that influences his or her practice.
- Encouraging counsellors to think about their own background, philosophy on counselling, and any pre-existing attitudes they have that may have implications for their counselling practice. These include their view of strength-based counselling and other modalities, adolescents, parents, teachers, school management, religion, and certain community and cultural groups.
- Making counsellors aware of some of the inherent tensions within their counselling practice between the knowledge they have of strength-based counselling and the deficit filter that may slip into their practice.
- Creating an awareness and giving a voice to the multifaceted nature of counselling and bringing its tensions and challenges to the fore.

- Providing counsellors with a strength-based model for co-creating wellbeing.

This study also has implications that are relevant to the parents and caregivers of adolescents and the broader community:

- The importance of the school counsellors and the role of counselling for adolescents in the school context.
- The factors that are supportive of adolescent wellbeing.
- Importance of creating a community of support for the adolescent.
- Fostering, for the adolescent, a sense of being understood.

I have presented the general contributions of this study above, however I would like to highlight more specifically the following contributions I consider to be the most significant:

- In this study I constructed a unique method of narrative analysis in two stages: Narrative storyboards for form and content; and Narrative storyboards for context and metanarratives.
- I designed several iterations of a heuristic device as a narrative tool to aid in the interpretation of school counsellors' narratives. The final heuristic device I used represented the multiple interlinking contexts in which school counsellors work
- Alongside the final heuristic device, I designed several iterations of a story-map grid as a second narrative tool to aid the interpretation process.
- Drawing from counsellor's narratives and processes I designed a unique strength-based model for co-creating adolescent wellbeing that can be followed and implemented by other counsellors.
- In this study, I highlighted the multifaceted and complex nature of counselling within a school context and recognised certain tensions inherent therein.

To conclude this section, I would like to emphasise that I interpreted the narratives of only a small number of strength-based counsellors in secondary schools and thus this study cannot be said to be representative of all school counsellors. However, the information presented in this study is nonetheless significant and has the potential to make contributions on the national as well as international level in both the education and health sectors.

### **13.7 Challenges and recommendations for future research**

In reading the participants' transcripts, I recognised that school counsellors' narratives were rich and included a depth of information that was not suited to a cursory narrative analysis.

I thus constructed a method of narrative analysis by repeatedly reading school counsellors' transcripts – initially for form and content and then also for metanarratives and context. This construction of a method of narrative analysis occurred in conjunction with the interpretation of school counsellors' narratives and was a fluid process, with both occurring simultaneously.

The final method of narrative analysis I arrived at explored the categorical-content across counsellors' narratives and recognised the narrative categories and contexts. Presenting school counsellors' narratives under the narrative categories of the counsellor context, the school context, the adolescent context, and community metanarratives, counselling and the family context meant that, while I accessed information pertinent to each narrative category across all school counsellors' narratives, this information was limited in that it did not focus on school counsellors' individual narratives in a holistic sense.

Furthermore, I used narrative excerpts from individual counsellors' transcripts for each narrative category and sub-categories to illustrate my argument, and since these excerpts were not presented as part of a counsellor's narrative in its entirety, some of the emphasis and nuances may have been lost. Perhaps future studies could look more specifically at the holistic-form and holistic-content of school counsellors' narratives rather than focusing on categorical-content. I do emphasise however that the choice of a categorical-content mode of interpreting school counsellors' narratives, while potentially limited in its holistic view, was ideally suited to my thesis and the areas explored therein.

In terms of the interview process, interviews were conducted on site at the counsellors' schools for all but one of the participants, and this may have impacted on what school counsellors chose to share with me. Furthermore, the fact that I have practised as a school counsellor myself may also have impacted on the research process, despite the precautions taken to manage this. The potential benefits of there being common ground and rapport between myself and my participants may however have mitigated these possible limits in that participants were more willing to share their stories with me (Hollway & Jefferson, 2004; Zilber et al., 2008).

The context in which this research was conducted was very specific. This research focused on the experiences of strength-based secondary school counsellors within a school context, working with adolescents. Thus, its applicability to other counselling contexts with

a different client base may be limited. While some of the school counsellors' experiences may be transferable to other counselling contexts, future studies may benefit from focusing on the experiences of counsellors working in different contexts, with different client bases and with different counselling modalities. With reference to context it must also be stressed again that this research was conducted in Auckland, New Zealand, and that school counsellors practising strength-based counselling in other cities and countries may have a different experience given the different school structures, policies and ethos.

The use of a strength-based counselling practice in working with adolescents was the focus of this research. The outcomes of this study may have been different if school counsellors had been interviewed in schools catering to a different age group, for example primary or intermediate schools, since the effect and implications of counselling may be age-specific, dependent on setting and context, and may be influenced by different pedagogical views.

The overall aim in this study was to examine the multiple metanarratives (embedded narratives/discourses) available to counsellors in an Auckland, New Zealand, secondary school context and was approached from a school counsellor's perspective. This singular perspective may have been limiting because of its non-inclusion of the perspectives of other role-players in the school context. School management, teachers, adolescent and parent perspectives would provide different dimensions to the understandings of school counsellors' strength-based practices in a secondary school context.

Future studies in the New Zealand context could potentially include parents' perspectives on strength-based counselling to gain further understanding of how strength-based counselling impacts on an adolescent beyond the counselling setting. This knowledge could then assist school counsellors in honing their strength-based practice with adolescents. School managements and teachers' stories could also be gathered to understand the implications of strength-based counselling within the school context from their perspectives and could potentially contribute towards alleviating some of the tensions experienced by secondary school counsellors within their practice. Furthermore, other studies could include adolescents' perspectives on strength-based counselling in the school context to enhance school counsellors' practice with adolescents and contribute towards increasing adolescent wellbeing.



Another caveat regarding this research is that while care was taken with reflexivity, rigour and consultation with supervisors, the interpretation of school counsellors' narratives was from my perspective.

### 13.8 Closing the narrative

In this research metanarratives of both deficit and strength have been recognised within the school and counselling contexts in relation to school counsellors' strength-based practices in promoting adolescent wellbeing. The interplay of understandings, contexts and metanarratives creates a unique system of counselling within schools. In exploring this system, we gain valuable insights into the ambiguity and complexity of the school counsellor's practice. These insights may engender a deeper understanding of the role of the school counsellor, the intricacy of the school context, and the noteworthy task of supporting adolescent wellbeing in a climate where the prevalence of mental health issues is high and the risk of harm to self among adolescents is of grave concern.

An important narrative category recognised in this study was the tension between schools' and counsellors' orientations towards the practice of counselling in schools. I found the words of one school counsellor particularly salient with regards to this tension:

*Thomas: As a school counsellor, there are two core businesses. One is the school's idea of core business, which is learning outcomes, which is valid for me too. The other is helping the student get to a place where they can meet life in a better way. There is a gap between the school and the counsellors because both are standing for different things. The school's there for education and counsellors are there for the student. It is how to make that gap as small as possible or to have them both enhancing each other.*

This study may be part of the impetus towards closing that relational gap as it makes a contribution to our understanding of the diverse, complex and multifaceted nature of school counsellors' strength-based practices in secondary schools. By acknowledging the multiple metanarratives that support and/or diminish a school counsellor's practice, being mindful of the contexts school counsellors negotiate, and embracing the understandings that can be gleaned from their narratives, we may be more able to enhance our ability to address the prevalence of mental health issues for adolescents and enhance adolescent wellbeing.

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## Appendix A – Glossary

### *Narrative:*

Narratives are stories that grant access to people's inner experiences. Lieblich et al., (1998) suggest that the most efficient way to learn about people's *"inner world is through verbal accounts and stories"* (p.7).

### *Categorical-content and narrative categories:*

Lieblich et al.'s (1998), categorical-content mode is a form of content analysis. Narrative categories within the research topic are constructed and sections of transcripts from all the participants' narratives are assigned to these categories. In this way, the narratives are processed analytically by dividing the text into *"small units of content and submitting them to either descriptive or statistical treatment"* (p. 112).

### *Metanarrative:*

Stephens and McCallum (1998) view the metanarrative as *"a global or totalizing cultural narrative schema which orders and explains knowledge and experience"* (p. 6). The word metanarrative has two component parts: meta meaning *"layer," "beyond" or "about,"* and a narrative is a story. Given these meanings, metanarrative may be seen as a story with layers that can be interpreted, the pervasive story beyond the story that is told, or a story about a story that creates the overriding schemas into which other *"little stories"* are corralled.

### *Context:*

Context refers to the environment in which the stories we tell are situated or positioned. Zilber et al. (2008) state that *"context is dynamic, socially and politically embedded, and ever evolving"* (p. 1048).

### *Secondary school counsellor:*

A counsellor whose practice is based in a secondary school.

*Adolescence:*

The term “adolescence” refers developmentally to a stage in the lifespan, usually between the ages of 12 and 18 years, that is often seen as a time of striving for autonomy and independence (Erikson, 1968).

*Wellbeing:*

In positive psychology wellbeing is a construct that has five measurable elements (PERMA) that contribute towards it: Positive emotion (Of which happiness and life satisfaction are a part), engagement, relationships, meaning and purpose and accomplishment. No one element defines wellbeing, but each contributes to it (Seligman, 2011).

*Happiness:*

In authentic happiness theory, happiness is defined by the measurement of life satisfaction. Happiness has three aspects: positive emotion, engagement, and meaning, each of which feeds into life satisfaction and is measured entirely by subjective report (Seligman, 2011).

*Strength:*

A strength is a capacity or skill we have for something that we excel at (Park & Peterson, 2008). In positive psychology, the Values in Action (VIA) Survey of Character Strengths, known as the un-DSM, aims to classify human strengths rather than looking at weakness. According to Seligman’s authentic happiness theory, the 24-character strengths support engagement. You go into a state of flow when you use your strengths to meet challenges. In wellbeing theory, the 24 strengths underpin all five elements of wellbeing: using your highest strengths leads to more positive emotion, to more meaning, to more accomplishment, and to better relationships (Seligman, 2011).

*Deficit:*

Deficit descriptions describe a problem so that it can be dealt with. This in of itself is not problematic if all deficit descriptions lead to favourable changes for those to whom they were given. However, the issue lies in the ease with which we can access deficit descriptions that “direct us to look for pathology rather than for competence or health”

(Winslade & Monk, 1999, p. 60). The deficit metanarrative focuses on what is going wrong, what feels bad and what is perceived as being inherently “negative” and/or “detrimental” to adolescent wellbeing.

*Resilience:*

Resilience is described as “*the process of, capacity for, or outcome of successful adaptation despite challenging or threatening circumstances*” (Masten, Best, & Garmezy, 1990, p. 426).

*Strength-based counselling:*

Strength-based counselling draws from the ethos of positive psychology and focuses on promoting a client’s strengths to enhance their wellbeing rather than focusing on a client’s limitations and problems (Franklin, 2015).

## Appendix B – Interview schedule

### Direct Questions:

1. Is New Zealand your country of origin?	
2. If not, how long have you lived in New Zealand? And	
3. What country do you come from?	
4. What is your age?	
5. What is your formal counselling qualification?	
6. Where did you complete your training?	
7. How many years' experience do you have working as a school counsellor?	
8. How long have you used strength based counselling?	
9. How long have you been at your current school?	
10. What is the school decile number/roll?	
11. How many hours a week do you currently counsel students?	
12. How many counsellors does your school employ and what is the school roll?	
13. Do you attend supervision, if so how often?	
14. Are you registered with the NZAC?	
15. Are you a trained teacher?	
16. Are you registered with the NZ teachers' Board?	
17. How many years teaching experience do you have?	
18. What subjects do you teach?	
19. How many hours a week, do you currently teach?	
20. Are you required to contribute to extra mural activities? How many hours?	

**Open-Ended Prompts:**

1. What made you decide to become a counsellor?
2. In your opinion, what is strength based counselling?
3. What training have you receive in strength based counselling?
4. What is your core business as a school counsellor?
5. What strength based counselling approaches do you use?
6. Tell me about a recent counselling experience in which you used a strength based counselling approach with a student, from start to finish?
7. What stands out for you most from this counselling experience?
8. Can you tell me your favourite story about one of your adolescent clients that you counselled using strength based counselling?
9. What do you like best about strength based counselling?
10. Tell me about your best experience of using strength based counselling?
11. What resources and tools do you use as part of the strength based counselling process?
12. What assessment tools do you use in conjunction with strength based counselling?
13. Tell me about any instances where you think the use of strength based counselling would not be appropriate?
14. What do you think of using strength based counselling with adolescence?
15. Can you relate any specific instances where the use of strength based counselling did not work?
16. In your opinion, what is adolescent wellbeingwell-being?
17. In what way, if any does strength based counselling contribute to adolescent wellbeing?
18. What first attracted you to using strength based counselling approaches?
19. With regards to strength based counselling, what part of the counselling process do you think adolescent clients value most?
20. What makes strength based counselling different from other approaches?



21. Can you tell me about an instance where strength based counselling worked well in conjunction with other counselling approaches?
22. Do you do any group work using strength based counselling?
23. Is the use of a strength based counselling approach supported within your school environment?
24. Are you aware of the teachers at your school who use a strength based approach within their teaching?
25. Do you think a strength based approach should be used in the classroom?
26. How do you think a strength based approach could be introduced into schools?
27. What part of your role as a school counsellor are you the proudest of?
28. Which of your skills as a school counsellor are you called on to use most often?
29. In what way, if any has your counselling practice changed since you first started practicing?
30. How do you know when you've done a good job with an adolescent client?
31. How is counselling in a single gender school different compared to a co-ed school?
32. What do you think is at the heart of successful school counselling?
33. What makes your relationship with adolescent clients' work?
34. What strengths best help you with your role as a school counsellor?
35. How would you describe your counselling philosophy?
36. If I came back to visit you in five years, how do you think your counselling practice would have changed?
37. If other school counsellors wanted to learn from your experience, what's the best advice you could give them?

## **Appendix C – Interview schedule organised thematically for interpretation**

### **The Counselling Practice**

- What made you decide to become a counsellor? (personal ideology)
- In your opinion, what is strength based counselling?
- What training have you received in strength based counselling?
- What is your core business as a school counsellor? (Practice discourses?)
- What strength based counselling approaches do you use?
- Tell me about a recent counselling experience in which you used a strength based counselling approach with a student, from start to finish?
- What stands out for you most from this counselling experience?
- Can you tell me your favourite story about one of your adolescent clients that you counselled using strength based counselling?
- What do you like best about strength based counselling?
- Tell me about your best experience of using strength based counselling?
- What resources and tools do you use as part of the strength based counselling process?
- What assessment tools do you use in conjunction with strength based counselling?
- Tell me about any instances where you think the use of strength based counselling would not be appropriate?
- Can you relate any specific instances where the use of strength based counselling did not work?
- What first attracted you to using strength based counselling approaches? (personal ideology)
- What makes strength based counselling different from other approaches? (Appropriateness of strength based counselling comes under categories)
- Can you tell me about an instance where strength based counselling worked well in conjunction with other counselling approaches? (Appropriateness of strength based counselling comes under categories)
- Do you do any group work using strength based counselling? (Appropriateness of strength based counselling comes under categories)
- What part of your role as a school counsellor are you the most proud of? (personal ideology)
- Which of your skills as a school counsellor are you called on to use most often? (personal ideology)
- In what way, if any has your counselling practice changed since you first started practicing? (plot structure)
- What do you think is at the heart of successful school counselling? (core message)
- What strengths best help you with your role as a school counsellor? (personal ideology)
- How would you describe your counselling philosophy? (personal ideology)

- If I came back to visit you in five years, how do you think your counselling practice would have changed? (plot structure)
- If other school counsellors wanted to learn from your experience, what's the best advice you could give them? (practice discourses)

### **The Adolescent Student**

- What do you think of using strength based counselling with adolescence? (adolescent discourses?)
- In your opinion, what is adolescent wellbeing?
- In what way, if any does strength based counselling contribute to adolescent wellbeing?
- With regards to strength based counselling, what part of the counselling process do you think adolescent clients value most? (adolescent discourses)
- How do you know when you've done a good job with an adolescent client? (adolescent discourses)
- What makes your relationship with adolescent clients' work? (adolescent discourses)

### **The School Context**

- Is the use of a strength based counselling approach supported within your school environment? (PP curriculum)
- Are you aware of the teachers at your school who use a strength based approach within their teaching? (PP curriculum)
- Do you think a strength based approach should be used in the classroom? (PP curriculum)
- How do you think a strength based approach could be introduced into schools? (PP curriculum)
- How is counselling in a single gender school different compared to a co-ed school? (practice discourses)

## **Appendix D - Initial categories noted within participant transcripts**

- Counselling modalities
- Practice experiences of strength-based counselling
- Support
- Partnership
- Openness
- Appropriateness of strength-based counselling
- Assessment tools used
- Comments on school curriculum and positive psychology
- Significant influences on practice
- Skills needed
- Stresses and problems
- Triumphs
- Adolescent wellbeing
- Counsellors' perceptions/definitions of adolescent wellbeing
- Outcomes of counselling

## Appendix E – Participant information sheet

# Participant Information Sheet



Date Information Sheet Produced: *22 November 2010*

Project Title: New Zealand secondary school counsellors: Reflections on strength based counselling practices.

### **An Invitation:**

Good day, I am Charmaine Bright and I would like to invite you to take part in this research study which is being undertaken as part of the requirement for the completion of the Doctorate of Education programme at AUT University. The study explores the narratives of secondary school counsellors who use aspects of narrative, solution-focused and/or positive psychology strength based counselling approaches as part of their professional practice.

During this study, you will have the opportunity to share your experiences of strength based counselling with me in a conversational, story like manner. The documentation of your story may provide unique insights into the use of strength based counselling approaches in secondary schools. This will in turn contribute towards school counselling literature on positive outcomes, as a result of counselling, for young people and will act as a stepping-stone for future research in this area.

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary and you may withdraw from this study with no adverse consequences at any time prior to the completion of narrative data collection.

Your participation would be very much appreciated and most welcomed.

### **What is the purpose of this research?**

In focusing on school counsellors' narratives and the strength based approaches you use in your professional practice with adolescents, I hope to contribute to research in the areas of school counselling and positive outcomes for youth in New Zealand.

Furthermore, by exploring your stories regarding the strength based counselling approaches you use, I hope to discover how these approaches contribute to adolescent wellbeing.

As already indicated the completion of this research will result in a Doctorate of Education qualification.

Publications resulting from this research may provide school counsellors and school counselling with some valuable insights.

### **How was I identified and why am I being invited to participate in this research?**

I have several professional contacts with secondary school counsellors who use aspects of strength based counselling approaches as part of their professional practice. You may be one of my professional contacts and have thus been invited via e-mail to participate (should you meet the selection criteria).

I have also asked my professional contacts to forward the e-mail invitation to other secondary school counsellors who may be interested in participating in this research and you may be one of these school counsellors who have indicated to me via return e-mail that you are interested in participating.

The selection criteria for participation in this study are that you must be the appointed counsellor in a secondary school and a registered member of the New Zealand Association of Counsellors (NZAC).

Furthermore, you need to have received some type of training in and use aspects of narrative, solution focused and/or positive psychology strength based counselling approaches as part of your counselling practice.

There are no restrictions regarding age, ethnicity, gender, socio-economic status or health status.

A maximum of twenty participants is required and you will be selected on a first come first serve basis provided you meet the selection criteria and agree to participate within one week of receipt of this information pack. Should you fall outside the maximum number of participants I need for this study you have the option of being placed on a list to be contacted in the event that further participants are needed.

### **What will happen in this research?**

Once you have consenting to participate in this research, you will be invited to an individual face to face interview with me, the researcher.

Privacy will be required for the interviews and they should take place in a quiet and private space. You may like to select a place in which you feel comfortable on a day and time of your choosing. However, if you choose to be interviewed at your school the interviews will be conducted after hours. This is to ensure that the interview does not encroach on your counselling duties and so that your confidentiality is maintained. I am more than happy to travel to your location whether in or outside of Auckland.

Alternatively, if you prefer, the interviews can also be conducted in my office at AUT University (AR Building, Room AR330, 90 Akoranga Drive, Northcote, North Shore, Auckland) at a time and day of your choosing.

The interview should take approximately 90 minutes and will be audio taped with your permission and transcribe later after the interview. During the interview session, you will be asked open-ended questions to prompt the flow of conversation that invite you to share your experiences of using strength based counselling approaches with me in a story like manner. The environment will be informal and the interview itself will be unstructured so that you can relax and express your experiences comfortably, as you view them.

Please either post me your signed consent form or bring it with you to the interview.

The findings from this study may be used for publication purposes in the future such as for publication in scholarly journals (see section on protection of privacy below).

### **What are the discomforts and risks?**

Reflecting on your counselling practice in a story like manner during the interview process may result in the emergence of unanticipated or upsetting issues for you.

### **How will these discomforts and risks be alleviated?**

I will take the utmost care in conducting the interview with you and am interested in listening to your stories, as you wish to tell them, with empathy and respect. You will be given the opportunity to share with me only what you feel comfortable with.

Conversation will be a continual process of negotiation as the interview unfolds. You will be given all the information necessary so that you can make informed choices. I will ask for

your signed consent however you have the right to withdrawal from this study at any time during the narrative collection part of this research.

You can do this via email notification to me, the researcher, and there will be no discrimination against you in any way if you do choose to withdraw.

By consenting to participate in my research you place your trust in me, the researcher and I will make every effort to be worthy of your trust by maintaining strict ethical standards.

The interview process may bring forth issues of an unanticipated or upsetting nature which could lead to emotional distress and you may wish to access counselling services.

As a member of the New Zealand Association of Counsellors (NZAC) you may already be receiving supervision and may wish to discuss these issues with your supervisor. However, should you want to access alternative support, or if supervision is not available to you, you are entitled to counselling through AUT Counselling Services. This service is free of charge and entitles you to three free sessions. In addition, you do not need to inform the researcher should you wish to utilise these services.

This was confirmed by the AUT Head of Counselling, Kevin Baker (RGON, Dip Psychotherapy, PG Cert). Services can be utilised on both AUT campuses and can be accessed as follows:

- You will need to contact our centres at WB219 or AS104 or phone to make an appointment
- 09 921 9992 City Campus or 09 921 9998 North Shore campus
- You will need to let the receptionist know that they are a research participant
- You will need to provide your contact details to confirm this
- You can access further information about our counsellors and the option of online counselling on our website:

[http://www.aut.ac.nz/students/student\\_services/health\\_counselling\\_and\\_wellbeing](http://www.aut.ac.nz/students/student_services/health_counselling_and_wellbeing)

Finally, if you find these provisions to be inadequate you can contact Lifeline New Zealand. Lifeline New Zealand is a free, confidential and non-judgemental telephone counselling service that operates 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

- Toll free phone number 0800 543 354
- You can access further information about Lifeline on their website:

<http://www.lifeline.co.nz/>



### **What are the benefits?**

There are no direct benefits from participating in this research however you may feel a sense of satisfaction in sharing your experiences. Often people find benefit and gain certain insights by telling their stories and this may be the case in this study.

Furthermore, the documentation of your story may provide unique insights into the use of strength based counselling approaches in secondary schools. This will in turn contribute towards school counselling literature on positive outcomes, as a result of counselling, for young people and will act as a stepping-stone for future research in this area.

In addition, your participation will benefit the researcher as this research fulfils the requirements for the completion of the Doctorate of Education. It is also acknowledged that the researcher, a former school counsellor, may come to understand her story as a school counsellor better by listening to your story.

### **How will my privacy be protected?**

Confidentiality and privacy will be strictly adhered to. To protect your privacy, no identifiable information will be included in any publication or presentation based on this study, and from the stories told, excerpts only will be included. Names, places and any other identifying information will be altered to preserve your confidentiality.

In addition, all computerised documentation will have password protection, audiotapes and written documents will be under strict lock and key and unwanted information will be shredded and discarded accordingly.

### **What are the costs of participating in this research?**

There will be no financial costs to you for taking part in this study. In terms of your time, you will need to be available for approximately 90 minutes for one interview session with the researcher. A second interview should not be required, but if deemed necessary can be negotiated on a one to one basis.

### **What opportunity do I have to consider this invitation?**

If you are interested in participating in this research please indicate your interest to the researcher within one week from the date of receiving the information pack.

Should you require any further information regarding this research please feel free to contact the researcher (contact details below).

As already indicated, participation is entirely voluntary and you are free to withdraw from this research at any time during the narrative collection part of this research without needing to give a reason.

### **How do I agree to participate in this research?**

You have been sent this information pack as you have expressed, via return e-mail, your potential interest in participating in this study.

I will make a follow up phone call to you in a week's time to give you an opportunity to ask any questions about the research, and to see if you are still amenable to participating in the research. If you are, I will then arrange to meet with you at your convenience to conduct the interview.

Please complete and sign the written consent form contained within this information pack and either return it to me by mail at the postal address listed below or at the interview before it commences.

### **Will I receive feedback on the results of this research?**

You will receive a copy of your transcribed interview via email for review, to sign off on it and to make any changes should you so desire. Your feedback will be respected and amendments will be made accordingly.

At the completion of the research the researcher will email you to ask if you are interested in receiving a summary of the research findings.

### **What do I do if I have concerns about this research?**

Any concerns regarding the nature of this project should be notified in the first instance to the Project Supervisor, Dr Elizabeth du Preez, Psychology Department, AUT University, Private Bag 92006, Auckland, email: [elizabeth.dupreez@aut.ac.nz](mailto:elizabeth.dupreez@aut.ac.nz) , phone: (09) 921 9999 ext 7692

Concerns regarding the conduct of the research should be notified to the Executive Secretary, AUTEK, Madeline Banda, email: [madeline.banda@aut.ac.nz](mailto:madeline.banda@aut.ac.nz) , phone: (09) 921 9999 ext 8044.

**Whom do I contact for further information about this research?**

*Researcher:* Charmaine Bright

*Address:* P. O. Box 31323, Milford, 0741, North Shore

*Email:* [charmaine.bright@aut.ac.nz](mailto:charmaine.bright@aut.ac.nz) **or**  
[char.bright@yahoo.co.nz](mailto:char.bright@yahoo.co.nz),

*Phone:* (09) 921 9999 ext 7613 (Office hours)

*Mobile:* 027 4759697

*Primary Supervisor:* Prof Nesta Devine, Associate Professor

*Address:* Education Department, AUT University, Private Bag 92006, Auckland

*Email:* [nesta.devine@aut.ac.nz](mailto:nesta.devine@aut.ac.nz)

*Phone:* (09) 921 9999 ext 7361 (Office hours)

*Secondary Supervisor:* Dr Elizabeth du Preez, Senior Lecturer

*Address:* Psychology Department, AUT University, Private Bag 92006, Auckland

*Email:* [elizabeth.dupreez@aut.ac.nz](mailto:elizabeth.dupreez@aut.ac.nz)

*Phone:* (09) 921 9999 ext 7692 (Office hours)

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet and for considering the invitation to participate in this research study. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me.

**Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on the 4<sup>th</sup> of  
February 2011 AUTEK Reference number 10/295**

## Appendix F – Consent form

# Consent Form



*Project title:* **New Zealand secondary school counsellors: Reflections on strength based counselling practices.**

*Project Supervisors:* **Dr Nesta Devine and Dr Elizabeth Du Preez**

*Researcher:* **Charmaine Bright**

- I have read and understood the information provided about this research project in the Participant Information Sheet dated 22 November 2010.
- I have had an opportunity to ask questions and to have them answered.
- I understand that notes will be taken during the interviews and that they will also be audio-taped and transcribed.
- I understand that I may withdraw myself or any information that I have provided for this project at any time prior to completion of data collection, without being disadvantaged in any way.
- If I withdraw, I understand that all relevant information including tapes and transcripts, or parts thereof, will be destroyed.
- I understand that if I wish to withdraw I must notify the researcher via email (details in participant information sheet).
- I agree to take part in this research.
- I wish to receive a summary of the research findings from the research (please tick one):

**Yes ☐**

**No ☐**

**Participant's signature:**

.....

**Participant's name:**

.....

**Participant's Contact Details (if appropriate):**

.....

**Date:**

***Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on the 4<sup>th</sup> of  
February 2011 AUTEK Reference number 10/295***

## Appendix G – Confidentiality agreement

### Confidentiality Agreement



*Project title:* **New Zealand secondary school counsellors: Reflections on strength based counselling practices.**

*Project Supervisors:* **Dr Elizabeth Du Preez  
Dr Nesta Devine**

*Researcher:* **Charmaine Bright**

- ☐ I understand that all the material I will be asked to transcribe is confidential.
- ☐ I understand that the contents of the tapes or recordings can only be discussed with the researchers.
- ☐ I will not keep any copies of the transcripts nor allow third parties access to them.

Transcriber's Andrew Lavery signature:

Transcriber's ANDREW LAVERY name:

Transcriber's Contact Details (if appropriate):

ACADEMIC CONSULTING LTD

Date: 18 APRIL, 2011.

**Project Secondary supervisor's Contact Details:**

Dr Elizabeth du Preez, Senior Lecturer  
Psychology Department, AUT University, Private Bag 92006, Auckland,  
Phone: (09) 921 9999 ext 7692, email: [elizabeth.dupreez@aut.ac.nz](mailto:elizabeth.dupreez@aut.ac.nz)

**Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on the 4<sup>th</sup> of February  
2011 AUTEK Reference number 10/295**

*Note: The Transcriber should retain a copy of this form.*

# Confidentiality Agreement



*Project title:* **New Zealand secondary school counsellors: Reflections on strength based counselling practices.**

*Project Supervisors:* **Dr Elizabeth Du Preez  
Dr Nesta Devine**

*Researcher:* **Charmaine Bright**

- ☐ I understand that all the material I will be asked to transcribe is confidential.
- ☐ I understand that the contents of the tapes or recordings can only be discussed with the researchers.
- ☐ I will not keep any copies of the transcripts nor allow third parties access to them.

Transcriber's

signature:

Transcriber's

Korina Tuahine

name:

Transcriber's Contact Details (if appropriate):

Academic Consulting Ltd

.....

.....

.....

Date: 18/4/11

## Project Secondary supervisor's Contact Details:

Dr Elizabeth du Preez, Senior Lecturer  
Psychology Department, AUT University, Private Bag 92006, Auckland,  
Phone: (09) 921 9999 ext 7692, email: [elizabeth.dupreez@aut.ac.nz](mailto:elizabeth.dupreez@aut.ac.nz)

**Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on the 4<sup>th</sup> of February  
2011 AUTEK Reference number 10/295**

*Note: The Transcriber should retain a copy of this form.*

# Confidentiality Agreement



**Project title:** New Zealand secondary school counsellors: Reflections on strength based counselling practices.

**Project Supervisors:** Dr Elizabeth Du Preez  
Dr Nesta Devine

**Researcher:** Charmaine Bright

- ☒ I understand that all the material I will be asked to transcribe is confidential.
- ☒ I understand that the contents of the tapes or recordings can only be discussed with the researchers.
- ☒ I will not keep any copies of the transcripts nor allow third parties access to them.

Transcriber's

signature:

Transcriber's

CATHERINE POLMAN

name:

Transcriber's Contact Details (if appropriate):

ACADEMIC CONSULTING LTD.

Date: 18 APRIL, 2011

## Project Secondary supervisor's Contact Details:

Dr Elizabeth du Preez, Senior Lecturer  
Psychology Department, AUT University, Private Bag 92006, Auckland,  
Phone: (09) 921 9999 ext 7692, email: [elizabeth.dupreez@aut.ac.nz](mailto:elizabeth.dupreez@aut.ac.nz)

**Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on the 4<sup>th</sup> of February  
2011 AUTEK Reference number 10/295**

*Note: The Transcriber should retain a copy of this form.*

**Appendix H – Memorandum from AUT University Health and  
Counselling**



## MEMORANDUM

<b>TO</b>	Charmaine Bright
<b>FROM</b>	Kevin Baker
<b>SUBJECT</b>	Psychological support for research participants
<b>DATE</b>	12 November 2010

Dear Charmaine

I would like to confirm that Health, Counselling and Wellbeing are able to offer confidential counselling support for the participants in your AUT research project entitled:

*“New Zealand secondary school counsellors: Reflections on strength based counselling practices.”*

The free counselling will be provided by our professional counsellors for a maximum of three sessions and must be in relation to issues arising from their participation in your research project.

Please inform your participants:

- They will need to contact our centres at WB219 or AS104 or phone 09 921 9992 City Campus or 09 921 9998 North Shore campus to make an appointment
- They will need to let the receptionist know that they are a research participant
- They will need to provide your contact details to confirm this
- They can find out more information about our counsellors and the option of online counselling on our website:  
[http://www.aut.ac.nz/students/student\\_services/health\\_counselling\\_and\\_wellbeing](http://www.aut.ac.nz/students/student_services/health_counselling_and_wellbeing)

Yours sincerely

Kevin Baker

Head of Counselling - Health, Counselling and Wellbeing



## **Appendix I – Holistic-form interpretation: Pam’s story**

*It takes a positive village to raise a child.*

### **Narrative Essence: What is the story about?**

Pam is in her forties and holds a Master’s degree in Counselling. She has been at her current school for the past 2 years. Pam has a background in nursing and worked in mental health for several years.

Pam reflects on her career thus far and conveys, “I always had an interest in problem solving and supporting patients. I was much more interested in the chatting than giving out pills.” Pam started counselling part time and “learnt on the job” before completing her counselling qualification. Pam has fourteen years counselling experience. She has been using strength based counselling within her counselling practice for the past 10 years. Pam describes much of her counselling role as involving “social work.” Pam finds her role as a counsellor to be varied, “You’re kind of a jack of all trades as a school counsellor, but... that’s good.” Pam especially enjoys working with the juniors as she is able to work more preventatively with them and says strength based counselling is “a great preventative approach.”

### **Narrative Essence: What are the narrator’s assumptions?**

When exploring Pam’s underlying assumptions about her counselling practice several different discourses were constructed which gives us some insight into the impetus behind Pam’s counselling practice.

#### ***Practice discourse.***

Practice discourses explore the underlying assumptions that form the foundation of each school counsellor’s counselling practice. The researcher constructed several practice discourses within Pam’s counselling narrative.

#### ***Affirmative strength based discourse.***

According to literature, deficit discourses tend to permeate school and counselling environments (Winslade & Monk, 1999). This however, was not the case in Pam’s counselling narrative, as her underlying assumptions regarding her counselling practice

with young people were predominantly positive and strength based. Pam talks of strength based counselling as “not pathologising in any way.” Instead she reflects that strength based counselling “gives hope.” Pam continues to reflect on the advantages of a strength based counselling approach and says, “The biggest thing for any person I work with is the fact that it’s not blaming.” Pam asserts:

I love the fact that strength-based counselling is not about pathologising. That it’s about focusing...on strengths and what young people are doing well ... drawing on their previous experiences of strength. And yeah, that it’s very much a focus on a glass half full, rather than looking at deficits and pathologising. And I find this approach so non-blaming, so the kids get on board quickly.

Pam works with students using the counselling modalities of cognitive behavioural therapy and several strength-based approaches. She explains to students the impact that “helpful and unhelpful thoughts” have on their wellbeing. Pam directs students to look for “the good things in situations” moving from a deficit discourse to a more affirmative discourse. Pam reflects, “My thoughts around strength based counselling is that it’s about supporting young people ... to recognise their resources and strengths and know how to tap into those to cope with different challenges in their lives.”

Pam assigns “a little homework task” for all students she counsels. They are asked to keep a diary of their thoughts and to give “specific examples” where they have been able to “bounce back” from unhelpful thinking. These homework tasks give students responsibility for their own wellbeing and make them the experts in their own lives. This is a shift in the traditional discourse from the counsellor as the expert to the student as expert (Winslade & Monk, 1999).

Pam also reflects on the use of a strength based language that gives a message of hope. This strength based language focuses on what students are doing well instead of focusing purely on the deficit or problem. Pam shares that “what stands out for me is that this particular strength based language enables the kids to engage and take an interest quite quickly, they get it!” Pam encourages the parents she works with to use this same strength based language with their children, “I’m really encouraging her mum to ...use some of the same language, and ...some of the skills that we’re using.” Talking about students she has counselled Pam reflects on using strength based language and positive reinforcement:

What was making a difference was some of the different messages ...he was able to tell himself and how his parents were able to actually encourage him to stay focused on what he was capable of achieving...and give him some hope. The thing that worked well with him was lots of rewards and praise and focusing on what he was achieving and the progress that he was making. So, each week we'd kind of celebrate and make a big deal of things with him, just to reinforce the achievement that he was making.

Pam reflects on her counselling practice and says that sometimes she is not even aware she is using strength based counselling it just comes naturally:

When I slowed down to think about it of course I'm using a strength based approach with them...I always start the session with asking them what ...it was like when things were going really well.

Pam asserts, "There has never been a situation where I've felt, gosh I needed to have used another approach there." Pam felt justified in her use of a strength based approach as it is based on empirical research evidence, she says "it works well and ... has been measured and proven to have an impact on a young person's mental health."

The use of a strength based language is about changing the focus from exploring what is going wrong to look at what is working. This subtle change in language promotes a more affirmative discourse.

*Discourse of partnership, openness and support.*

Throughout Pam's counselling narrative the underlying assumption she makes is that as a counsellor she cannot work in isolation and needs the support of teachers, parents and the community to best serve the students she counsels. Pam recalls:

When I first started working here I'd work in isolation with the kids, and I found that they were quite enthusiastic and passionate about what we were doing, but by the time they left my office they'd forgotten a lot of it.

Pam continues, "So I guess what's really important in my work ... is that I've got the parents working alongside me. So, as well as one-to-one work, I've been regularly meeting with the mum."

Pam refers to the importance of partnering with parents several times and then talks of the importance of having the teachers support as indicated by the following quotes:

- “I mean having the parents on board is everything.”
- “And again, as I said having parents on board.”
- “So, having parents on board, but also having the teachers involved is really useful as well.”

Pam mentions the potential challenge of bringing “parents on board” where the traditional discourse of a child being seen by the school counsellor is deficit based focusing on what the child is doing wrong, as opposed to using a strength based approach where the discourse is one of affirmation and focusing on what the child is doing well:

The parents feel quite comfortable about it. Because a lot of the parents that I work with understandably when they hear that I’m involved, or that there’s a problem, they can sometimes become anxious, or a little bit defensive. But I find that when I’m able to explain the ways that I’m wanting to work, that they’re quite comfortable with that and quite engaged and quite excited as well.

Pam concedes that bringing the parents on board does not always have the desired outcome but indicates that this is not a reflection on the use of a strength based counselling approach:

I’m thinking of a family I’m working with now and I don’t feel like I’m making as much progress as I’d like to. But the main reason for that is because they’ve got significant issues as a family, and the kids are away from school a lot and the parents are questioning the value of counselling. And so, I wonder whether the parents are actually encouraging the kids to engage properly when they’re with me.

In terms of being a counsellor in a school environment Pam talks about the “beauty” of having access to numerous sources of information about the student and discloses that:

The beauty of working in a school is I can check in with teachers. I can read their latest school report and see if they’re making some progress, if there’s been some improvement there. I can check in with teachers, we regularly liaise with the deans and things, and some of the times they know students that we’re working with, ‘cause they’ve referred them to us, or a student’s been happy for us to talk with them. So, the deans will often flag to us if something wasn’t going so well, or if they’ve noticed some improvement, so. And also, in the junior school, I regularly ask parents for feedback as well, so I’m quite lucky I’ve got quite a lot of different sources to go by.

Pam sees this access to information from several different sources as a good thing. While the information about the student comes predominately from within the school environment which tends to be deficit based (Winslade & Monk, 1999), Pam's counselling narrative is very much strength focused. Pam is thus able to utilise deficit descriptions of students she counsels and yet focus on their wellbeing and strength.

While a strength based approach focuses on an adolescent's wellbeing and strength this is only part of the process. Pam talks of the importance of having teachers who support the counselling process. In some schools, teachers have a negative view of the counsellor and the counselling process and this can have a negative impact on the student:

In a school, not having teachers put pressure on kids not to miss classes. Again, it's that whole thing about the culture you're working in. If you've got teachers who don't mind their students missing the odd class to come and develop skills to be able to go back into class and focus on what they're supposed to be doing that makes a big difference.

In terms of partnership Pam talks of "being linked into the community and the different resources" which the community provides." Pam again stresses, "I can't as a clinician work in isolation because I don't have the skills or qualifications to be managing some of the big stuff and in a school system it's integral to work well with the key staff because there are so many people involved and having an impact on the life of that young person."

Closely aligned with the discourse of partnerships is the discourse within Pam's narrative that strength based counselling is about providing support. Pam reflects, "My thoughts around strength based counselling is it's about supporting young people to recognise their resources and strengths and know how to tap into those to cope with different challenges in their lives." Pam continues, "I guess it's about being able to meet the student where they're at."

In addition, Pam feels it is important to have a "skilled and qualified counsellors who have the ability to actually really engage with young people in a purposeful way. Because you can have all the training in the world, but if you can't develop a rapport you will not be an effective counsellor."

Pam mentions the colleagues at her school and fellow school counsellors at other schools with whom she has contact and reflects on the importance of openness and sharing.

The advice she would give to other counsellors “is to read widely and share resources.” She reflects that “a lot of my counselling colleagues have done the narrative training so they’re a lot more skilled in that than I am. But a lot of them aren’t that familiar with a positive psychology movement, and so I’ve been sharing some of the information with them.”

*Adolescent discourse.*

When exploring school counsellors’ narrative for the discourses they held around adolescent I looked for the underlying assumptions about working with adolescent students.

Pam reflects on her counselling practice with adolescent students and talks about the importance of creating an environment where there is no judgement, where the problem is seen as external to the student and the focus is on identifying a student’s strengths:

I think that adolescents value not being judged. I think they value any conversation in which we’re able to externalise the problem. I think they value being supported to look at problems differently. I think they appreciate conversations which focus on drawing out their strengths and competencies. Because I think that in a lot of situations in the home environment and sometimes in the classroom as well, it’s much more of a deficit model around what the child’s not doing well. The parents tell them off and reprimand them and sometimes it happens in the classroom as well. I hope that when I talk to teenagers they leave my office feeling empowered and hopeful.

When asked how she assesses the effectiveness of the counselling process Pam places this task in the hand of the student and asks them to gauge how they think they are progressing in terms of mood. In doing this the common discourse of the counsellor as expert is shifted making the student the expert in their own life:

We often review how things have been going since we’ve last met in relation to the particular areas we’re working on. I’d usually spend the first part of the session talking about what’s been going well and how they’ve met any of the challenges that have come their way that week. And often I use a little mood scale. We often start the session by saying how are things going today, how would you rate that? Have things been an eight out of ten for happiness...or a little bit lower or a little bit higher?

Pam talks about using a strength based approach to counselling and her underlying assumption is that this type of approach facilitates the counselling process:

If a young person feels comfortable and feels that they can trust me I think that using a strength-based approach helps to make things work. Because I think it enables kids to engage and not to feel judged and to feel hopeful and to invest in the process.

In terms of the one on one counselling work that Pam does with adolescent students she talks about the importance of establishing a rapport with students but also the need to be flexible:

As far as my individual work with young people it's about initially demystifying counselling, so they're comfortable enough to actually come and walk in the door. It's about supporting them to feel safe with me and to trust me, and that's obviously how I build rapport, but also about talking to them about confidentiality and things like that. It's about me having the skills to be able to meet the student whether they're at that day. Because I do find with students, things can change on a day-to-day basis, and one day you might see them and their whole world's falling apart but they have actually remarkably managed to bounce back by the next time you see them. So, it's about being able to meet them where they're at. And it's about being able to be creative enough to figure out a plan of support which is going to be most useful for them, and which is going to keep them engaged.

Pam also reflects on the unpredictable nature of counselling adolescence:

You can make an attempt to start a therapeutic process with the young person ... but something might come up and you mightn't end up seeing them again for several months because something's happened in their life, or they're paying attention to something else, or it doesn't seem to be an issue any more.

Overall, the adolescent discourse reflected in Pam's narrative focuses on identifying a student's strengths and uses a strength-based approach to make them the expert in their own lives.

### *Occupation and training discourse.*

Talking about her decision to become a school counsellor Pam reveals:

I had been working as a nurse and working in the area of mental health and so I always had an interest in problem solving and supporting patients. I was much more

interested in the chatting than the giving out pills. I worked in a HIV and Aids unit for a couple of years and ended up supporting another staff member to do some group work with some of the patients and that just kind of peaked my interest. And from then I did a little bit of training overseas and I decided to come back and formalise it. So, it kind of just evolved as a result of nursing.

When asked about the training she received in strength based counselling Pam says, “The majority of what I’ve learnt I’ve taught myself. There was a little bit around solution focused counselling but I completed my training over ten years ago now, so the majority of what I have learnt has been on the job.”

Pam reflects on the number of years of experience she has in using a strength based counselling approach:

I’ve been particularly interested in understanding more about it for the past year, but I’ve been interested in solution focused counselling properly for about the past five years or so, or maybe even longer than five years. I could say ten years. I’m trying to remember, I read that book by Robert Manthei...I found that useful when I was first starting, so probably about ten years.

Both Pam’s training as a school counsellor and her experience of using strength based counselling has evolved over time:

Okay, a really, really wide range of skills, I mean ‘cause as, I mean I can talk about the skills that I use with, in my one-to-one work with the student, but I also need to be quite skilled at working within a system. So, I need to be able to have quite strong skills in advocating for students and liaising with teachers. Because yeah, I mean, I just I guess I like to work as systemically as possible and so that means as much as students are comfortable, including teachers in the process, but also an important skill for me to have is to be able to get parents on board as well.

For Pam school counselling is different to being in private practice. Pam says, “there can be quite a lot of putting on band-aids” as there is often not enough time for lengthy counselling and the nature of adolescence is such that they may not want or be able to commit to long term counselling.



***Deficit discourse.***

Although the predominant discourse underlying Pam's narrative is affirmative and strength based the influence of a deficit discourse is still evident. It could be argued that a deficit discourse in relation to counselling, schools and adolescence is so ingrained in the language used that its influence may take some time to dissipate. Although Pam uses a strength based approach and advocates for a strength based language within her counselling practice she continues to use deficit language and metaphors with a deficit focus (See section below on metaphors that focus on deficit) in her narrative and talks of students "who are at risk" and "in absolute crisis or absolutely falling apart." As mentioned, Pam describes "the reality of school counselling" as "quite a lot of putting on band-aids" which supports a deficit discourse.

**Narrative voice: Who is telling the story?**

Narrative voice conveys a sense of the narrator's identity through the assumptions they make, the tone of the narrative and the type of language used.

***Archetypal image.***

In looking at the way in which Pam presents herself as the protagonist of her own story it appears that her sense of identity is most represented by archetypal image of the Mentor. According to Roberts (1999), the Mentor is someone who imparts wisdom to and shares knowledge with a less experienced person. The author further explains that the modern use of the word refers to a trusted friend, counsellor or teacher, usually a more experienced person. Pam fulfils the role of Mentor by supporting both students and colleagues within the school environment. The archetypal image of Pam as the Mentor is further supported by the tone of her narrative and the personal ideology and metaphors with which her narrative is imbued.

***Tone.***

The tone of a narrative conveys emotions and gives some insight into the person behind the words. The overall tone of Pam's narrative is positive and enthusiastic. Pam talks about her counselling practice and the support she offers adolescent students in a confident, affirmative manner. This is reflected in the statements Pam uses when describing her

counselling practice and is particularly apparent under the section exploring affirmative strength based discourse (see above).

***Personal Ideology.***

During my reading of Pam's narrative, I looked for statements to enable me to form an impression of Pam's personal ideology and belief system to gain further insight into the person behind the story. Pam talks of her role as school counsellor and what she is most proud of:

I'm proud of the fact that kids are comfortable to come and talk about hard and personal stuff. It's quite a humbling position to in knowing that a lot of young people don't always have someone they can talk to without being judged. Another part of the role that I'm proud of is being able to support young kids who have the beginnings of possible mental health problems and supporting them to develop the skills to avoid them becoming more of a significant part of their lives.

Underlying this sense of pride appears to be a personal belief system that young people should have someone to talk to who will not be judgemental. Furthermore, those person's students do choose to talk to should be humbled at having the opportunity to support young people in overcoming significant challenges.

Pam ideology is further reflected in her philosophy around school counselling, which she explains as follows:

My philosophy around school counselling is about what I see my role as being, a person available to support young people to manage the hard times and maximise their potential in a complementary way to the support that they get within the school and family system.

Here it is apparent that Pam believes in not only providing support to young people during challenging life experiences but also in the importance of helping students be the best version of themselves. Pam continues to reflect on her philosophy around how she works within her practice and says:

My philosophy around how I work is about supporting and encouraging young people to believe in their abilities, and to minimise the impact of stress and distress, or ups and downs, or trauma, or whatever it may be in their life by encouraging them to tap into their support systems, into their own inner strengths and resources.

Once again, a belief in the importance of providing support for young people is apparent but also a belief in providing support in a way that removes the focus from the counsellor as expert who is going to solve all your problems and encourages and teaches young people to be the experts in their own lives.

Reflecting on strengths that best help her in her role as a school counsellor Pam says, “I think there’s probably two, compassion but also determination, they’re two quite different things but you need to be both.” The strengths of compassion and a sense of determination are reflected in the discourses that underpin Pam’s narrative. Pam is very aware of the importance of providing a safe, supportive and non-judgemental environment for the students she counsels. At the same time Pam runs her practice with a steely determination in a manner that best accommodates a counselling process that achieves its desired outcome.

### ***Metaphors.***

Metaphors shape narrative meaning. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) suggest that images symbols and metaphors used as part of the spoken word add a greater depth of meaning to each narrative. Furthermore, the metaphors used in a narrative may reveal some of the underlying assumptions made by the narrator.

In exploring school counsellors’ narratives, I was interested in determining any themes in the metaphors used and whether there were any commonalties or differences in the metaphors used by counsellors who used strength based counselling.

Pam uses numerous metaphors not only to describe her counselling practice but also within the counselling processes she uses with young people. In exploring Pam’s metaphors, I could group them together according to the meanings they evoked and in so doing was able to open a greater understanding of Pam’s narrative voice.

### ***Metaphors with a positive focus.***

Pam uses several positive metaphors in working with young people to help them overcome obstacles, to persevere and to focus on the good in difficult situations:

- She’s learning *to ride her bike*, usually when she’s first learning... she’ll fall off ... but she’ll *get straight back on the bike* and keep practicing and eventually she’ll master it.

- She does tend to be a *glass half empty*, rather than a *glass half full* kind of girl so we talked about looking for the good things in situations.

Pam also uses metaphors that focus on strength and harmony and that draw from the strength based counselling approaches she uses when counselling young people:

- I try to minimise the impact of stress and distress, or ups and downs, or trauma, or whatever it may be in their life by encouraging them to *tap into their support systems*, into their own inner strengths and resources.
- It's very much a *focus on glass half full*, rather than on deficits and pathologising.
- They appreciate conversations which focus on *drawing out* their strengths and competencies.
- Adolescent wellbeing is to me a young person's *sense of mastery* of a stage of development.
- It enables kids to engage and not to feel judged and to feel hopeful and *to invest in the process*.

Various metaphors in Pam's narrative focus on resiliency and growth:

- She's unbelievably resilient... I have been able to do a little bit of work with her around reflecting on what it is that's enabled her to get where she is today. Because she is unbelievably internally resourceful and how her ability to be caring and compassionate towards her siblings when her mother hasn't been there and how she's been able to stay focused on achieving these goals that she has for herself. And we looked at some *metaphors* around that with the goals being *something to hold on to when everything else is falling apart*.
- We talked about examples in nature if there are bush fire's ... *eventually other trees grow*; the little green shoots start to come through.
- Their ability to manage challenges and to come away from those challenges feeling positive...like they've grown on their *journey towards young adulthood*.
- With students. things can change on a day-to-day basis, and one day you might see them and their whole world's falling apart but they have actually *remarkably managed to bounce back* by the next time you see them.

All these metaphors have a positive focus and emphasise Pam's personal ideology of supporting and encouraging young people within her practice as a school counsellor.

*Metaphors for partnership and collaboration.*

Pam also refers to numerous metaphors that have to do with partnership and collaboration:

- I can't work in isolation because I don't have the skills or qualifications to be managing some of the big stuff... *it takes a positive village to raise a child*... so I see myself as just one person in their *journey*.
- Under the *social umbrella* there are also family and wider social systems and my belief is that if those areas are in harmony that helps to strengthen adolescent wellbeing.
- The *beauty* of working in a school is I have the ability to also check in with teachers.
- So, the deans will often *flag* us if something wasn't going so well, or if they've noticed some improvement.

It appears from these metaphors that in addition to maintaining a positive focus within her counselling practice Pam believes in the importance of collaborating with a student's parents or caregivers and with her colleagues within the school environment in order to strengthen and promote adolescent wellbeing.

#### *Metaphors for the practice of counselling.*

Pam uses a "general, eclectic approach" to counselling and applies several strength-based counselling modalities, programmes, tools and resources within her practice. "I work pretty eclectically so if I feel like something isn't working I will *grab some other tools*. But there is no particular case where strength based counselling hasn't worked well."

The counselling modalities Pam uses include cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), dialectical behavioural therapy (DBT), solution focused counselling, positive psychology and narrative therapy. Pam also relies on strength based programmes, including the Incredible Years Programme and the Friends for Life Programme. The resources, tools and books Pam uses include Bounce Back, Think Good Feel Good and the St Luke's resources (including strength cards and the mates' traits). In addition, Pam makes use of informal tools such as mood scales and other rating scales that measure feelings.

These counselling approaches, tools and resources will be discussed further under the chapter on categorical-content looking at counselling modalities. I refer to them in this chapter looking at the holistic-form of Pam's narrative because of the number of metaphors Pam uses to refer to them. These metaphors have the common theme of *weaving* and

illustrate how Pam uses the various tools and approaches within her counselling practice. Some of the statements Pam makes in relation to the tools she uses and how she “*weaves*” them into her practice include:

- Solution focused counselling would probably be the approach that I’m most comfortable with, but as I read more about positive psychology I am trying to *weave* in some of those ideas.
- I refer a lot to the manual that was put out by the Ministry of Health Education... about working with at risk students. And I’ve also got a few different tools that I use for assessing depression and mood related issues. But usually I just *weave* it into the conversation; I don’t necessarily use formalised psychological tools.

I *weave* some of the tools of strength based counselling into the group work I do. Talking about when she would use a strength based approach Pam says, “I might not necessarily start *weaving* it in straightaway... but it would absolutely eventually be a part of that therapeutic process.” Then when asked whether or not a strength based approach should be used in the classroom Pam reflects on her own school where management are already interested in applying positive psychology principles:

It’s a great idea... It’s exciting being a part of the school with a principal who’s interested in positive psychology... That says a lot if management is starting to take an interest in wanting to look at ways to *weave* some of the ideas into the curriculum and encourage staff to take it on board. I think that some of the naturally skilled teachers who connect positively with the kids already do, but I’m not sure that it’s conscious.

The underlying assumption in the use of the metaphor of weaving in relation to her counselling practice appears to reflect that while counsellors may have several tools and approaches to draw from they must also be skilled in knowing which tools and approaches to use in any given situation. Furthermore, in certain circumstances school counsellors may need to draw from many different tools and approaches at varying times during the counselling process.

*Metaphors for unpredictability of counselling students.*

Pam utilises metaphors in talking about counselling students in a school environment to explain the fluid and unpredictable nature of school counselling and the time constraints

involved:

- The minute they *leave my door* they've got other things on their mind.
- Often that might only be one session and I won't see them again, but usually that's a *good sign*.
- Sometimes it's really difficult trying to see students weekly and there have been quite big gaps in between, so I don't feel like it's *flowing* particularly well.
- You're kind of a *Jack of all trades* as a school counsellor, but that's good.
- What happens in a session isn't as important as what happens outside the session. What they then take away with them. *It's not rocket science* it's obvious but I do find in working with kids what might happen in the session is meaningful and they might be engaged, but it doesn't necessarily follow them out when *they leave my door*.

Through these metaphors Pam reveals the challenges inherent in school counselling and while her narrative voice and identity as a school counsellor are predominately positive she is not ignorant of the difficulties involved in counselling in a school environment.

*Metaphors that focus on deficit.*

Pam uses metaphors when referring to how students cope with life's challenges as a way of pinpointing the particular issue without having to go into a detailed description (See Kielhofner p.112 chp 9). The underlying assumptions of these metaphors suggests that as a society we are familiar with the use of metaphors that assign meaning (Kielhofner) to difficult situations. These metaphors draw from and support a deficit discourse in society.

Pam reflects:

- One of the students ... has had some difficulties in the past with anxiety and it often manifested with him *melting down* in the classroom... We've done quite a lot of work around him being able to recognise the *triggers* and ... the unhelpful thoughts that come with this and how he can recognise the *impact* this has on him physically and the emotions that come with this... And, unfortunately for him, this teacher who is his support person has recently resigned and so we've been working on some of the grief that he's experiencing with that, he's absolutely *shattered*.

- There are great resources for supporting kids to understand more about their emotions and start to recognise the different *little warning signs* that we have in our body when we're starting to become anxious.
- For a lot of teenagers when things are bad they feel like *it's the end of the world*, they feel like they're all alone and there's nobody there.

When referring to the numerous challenges adolescents face in today's society Pam sighs, "That's a *sign of the times* I guess," the underlying assumption being that adolescents is a difficult time of the lifespan and adolescents today perhaps face more challenges than they did in the past. In describing counselling in a school environment Pam confides, "The reality is that school counselling is different from being in private practice because there can be quite a lot of *putting on Band-Aids*.'" The assumption being that in school counselling counsellors have limited time to counsel students and out of necessity tend to focus on the presenting problem without necessarily addressing the underlying cause.

Although as mentioned before, the predominant discourse underlying Pam's narrative is affirmative the fundamental discourse in counselling still tends to be that of deficit. This is apparent in Pam's narrative in the continued use of deficit language and metaphors that have a deficit focus (See section above on deficit discourse).

### **Narrative style: What kind of story is this?**

#### ***Past Experiences, Present Realities, Future Hopes.***

Looking at the key events in Pam's career as a school counsellor I focused on Pam's past experience, present realities and future hopes for her counselling practice.

The school counsellors' narratives represent a slice of life narrative rather than a life story narrative and the question 'what kind of story is this?' focuses on each school counsellors' experiences of being a school counsellor.

In terms of past experiences and as discussed under the section on occupation and training discourses, Pam came to school counselling later in life once she already had an established career in the area of mental health. Pam is therefore not just starting out in her career and thus brings varied life and professional experience to her counselling practice. This assists in answering the question what kind of story is this by revealing some of who the protagonist in the story is.



With respect to her current counselling practice Pam reflects on the importance of having support within the school from management and teaching colleagues as well as having support outside the school from parents, caregivers and the community (see section above on the discourse of partnership, openness and support). As part of her current counselling practice Pam also reflects on her role in educating teachers in order to promote strength-based counselling:

A big part of my role is around educating teachers and helping them understand what might be going on for the young person, but also importantly helping them understand the things that I'm doing to try and support them. And encouraging the teachers to try and translate some of that into the classroom and supporting them with some basic strategies for encouraging the students, helping the students to better manage their stress, or feel good about their achievement, or whatever it might be. So a big part of my role is around education for the teachers.

Pam's role as a school counsellor goes beyond counselling students and providing teachers with support. Pam also talks of the significance of being supported by school management and being involved at the level of policy making within the school:

Making sure that I'm included in things like the development of education plans and things like that, and making sure that deans and principals are on board and providing that little bit of extra support. I work closely with the deans because they have quite a significant pastoral role, so ensuring that they're on board as well.

When asked what the best advice Pam could currently give other school counsellors she replies, "To read widely and sharing resources." Pam reflects that while many of her counselling colleagues are very skilled in narrative counselling, "a lot of them aren't that familiar with the positive psychology movement." Pam reports that she has been sharing information about positive psychology with them, "Talking about the bounce back resources, Martin Seligman's book 'The Optimistic Child' and encouraging them to read that as an initial starting point."

Talking about what her counselling practice would be like in 5 years' time Pam confides:

I think my counselling practice would have changed for the better, because one of the things I know that's happening is that the principal is really keen to look at how we might integrate more of the concepts of positive psychology right through the

schools. He's keen for us to go to some conferences and things this year and start to look at what we might be able to kick off next year. As a result of that, what we do throughout the curriculum will also obviously impact on me as a counsellor. So, in five years' time I would hope to be a lot more skilled and to have access to a lot more resources.

Another hope that Pam holds for the future of her counselling practice is that strength based approaches will be used more by teachers on a day to day basis.

In examining the past, present and future of Pam's counselling practice I gained some insight into what kind of story Pam tells. This in turn gave me insight into the plot structure of Pam's narrative.

### ***Plot structure.***

At this stage in her counselling practice the plot structure of Pam's narrative is progressive (Gergen & Gergen, 1998). As Pam has gained more counselling experience the narrative of her counselling practice has advanced steadily in an upward trend. The consistent pattern of events throughout Pam's counselling narrative is that of supporting young people and giving them the necessary tools to overcome the challenges they are presented with. In addition, Pam is continually improving her counselling practice and looks to the future with hope.

### ***Genre.***

Pam's counselling narrative echoes the archetypal story forms of the rebirth and the quest (Booker, 2010). Looking at the section on Pam's occupation and training discourse it is apparent that her career underwent a rebirth. Pam realised, that while she had become a nurse to help others, this role no longer fulfilled her and she was more interested in supporting others on a one to one basis. As in the classic rebirth story Pam experienced dissatisfaction with her current situation and had to face the obstacles of retraining as a counsellor and letting go of her previous career in order to reinvented herself and bring about the rebirth of her career.

In her role as school counsellor Pam strives to provide continued support for her students and in doing so has to deal with obstacles in the culture of the school, the school system and teachers who may not have faith in the legitimacy of the school counsellor's role. Furthermore, Pam also has to contend with the time constraints of counselling students in a

school environment. In this sense Pam's counselling narrative resembles the archetypal story form of the quest which centres on a central protagonist determined to reach a significant goal. The protagonist cannot stop until this goal is achieved. Along the way the protagonist meets with obstacles trying to stop him or her from achieving this goal.

**Narrative significance: What can we learn from this story?**

*Core messages.*

Pam's narrative gives an overwhelmingly positive message that is tinged with shades of a deficit discourse.

When asked what was at the heart of successful school counselling for her, Pam replied:

At the heart of successful school counselling is being fortunate enough to work in a school where the management and the staff and the parent community understand the importance of our role and value it and support it. I think that is just critical. There's lots of other things I could talk about as well, but to me that's the most important thing, and then obviously having skilled and qualified counsellors who have the ability to actually really engage with young people in a purposeful way. Because you can kind of have all the training in the world, but if you can't develop a rapport with them... Also being linked into the community and the different resources within the community because we should never work in isolation.

In looking at the holistic-form of Pam's narrative the central messages that emerged were:

- The necessity of supporting adolescents in a non-blaming way to give hope for the future.
- The importance of the school counsellor having support from colleagues, parents and the community.
- The flexibility required by school counsellors to deal with the unpredictable nature of school counselling.

## Appendix J – Progression of storyboards and research questions

### Chapter 7

#### 7.6 Storyboard one: A holistic-form construction to introduce the story

23 April 2009

*Holistic-form*

Title number 3: An appreciative narrative inquiry into nine New Zealand secondary school guidance counsellors' stories of their "best" practice

The potential stories I am interested in exploring are:

- **Stories of best practice:** Revealing secondary school guidance counsellors' reflections on their own practice in terms of their perceived strengths.
- **Stories of favourable interactions:** How do secondary school guidance counsellors perceive the interactive relationship with students in terms of fostering strengths and promoting wellbeing and resilience?
- **Success stories:** Exploring student case studies in which secondary school guidance counsellors perceive positive outcomes and talking around what they did to achieve these outcomes.

This left me with the questions:

- What strategies or tools used in the counselling relationship with adolescent students best promoted wellbeing?
- As a school counsellor how do you facilitate the use of positive coping mechanisms and enhance perceived strengths for adolescent students?
- Under what circumstances do adolescent students flourish?
- Why do some adolescent students cope with adverse circumstances regardless of whether or not they have the necessary support?
- Do the above questions have implications in terms of designing an effective intervention strategy for school guidance counsellors to be used with adolescent students?

16 May 2009

*Holistic-form*

Title number 6: New Zealand secondary school guidance counsellors: Perceptions of what works. A narrative inquiry into stories of practice (see chapter 7)

Research topic:

Which philosophies are reflected in the narrative of school counsellors who use strength based counselling approaches as part of their professional practice?

Research areas:

**Stories of context and practice:** Inquiring into secondary school counsellors' training and experience; and revealing reflections on their own practice within the educational context in which they work. The questions to be asked are:

- What training do school counsellors receive and what experience do they have?

- In what way, if any, does the educational context in which counsellors' work influence their practice?

**Stories of interactions:** Identifying secondary school counsellors' perceptions of the reciprocal relationship they have with students and various stakeholders in education; and inquiring about the potential influences, if any, these interactions have on their practice.

The questions to be asked are:

- What are counsellors' perceptions of the reciprocal relationships they have with stakeholders in education?
- How do these relationships influence school counsellors' practise?

**Success stories:** Exploring school counsellors' perceptions of good practice. Investigating positive outcomes and talking around what they did to achieve these outcomes. The questions to be asked are:

- What positive outcomes do school counsellors' experience because of their practise?
- How do school counsellors achieve these positive outcomes?

**4 January 2010**

**Holistic-form**

Title number 7: A narrative inquiry into the perceptions and practices of New Zealand secondary school counsellors: A place for positive psychology?

Research Topic

Which counselling philosophies are reflected in the narrative of school counsellors who use strength based counselling approaches as part of their professional practice?

Research areas

- **Stories of context and practice:** Inquiring into secondary school guidance counsellors' training and experiences, and revealing reflections on their practice within the educational context in which they work with the various stakeholders in education.
- **Stories of initiative and interaction:** Revealing guidance initiatives within the school, uncovering secondary school guidance counsellors' perceptions of the reciprocal relationship they have with adolescent students; and inquiring about the potential influences, if any, these initiatives and interactions have on their practice.
- **Success stories:** Exploring school counsellors' perceptions of good practice by investigating the positive outcomes achieved, with adolescent students, within individual educational contexts.

**14 September 2010**

**Holistic-form**

Title number 11: New Zealand secondary school counselling: A narrative exploration of counsellor and student experiences

Research Topic

Which philosophies are reflected in the narrative of school counsellors who use strength based counselling approaches as part of their professional practice?

### Research areas

- **Counsellor stories of counselling:** Narrative interviews exploring school counsellors' experiences of counselling students at individual level, group level (initiatives within the school), and within mentoring processes (educational versus therapeutic).
- **Counsellor stories of training and experience:** Inquiring into secondary school counsellors' training and experiences, and revealing reflections on their practice within the educational context
- **Student stories of counselling:** Narrative interviews exploring students' experiences of school counselling at individual level, group level (initiatives within the school), and within mentoring processes.

### **7.7 Storyboard two: A holistic-content construction**

**December 2011**

**Holistic-content**

The Title shifted several times from –

Title number 12: New Zealand secondary school counsellors' perceptions of what works. A narrative exploration.

And under this storyboard, to:

Title number 18: New Zealand secondary school counsellors: Reflections on strength based counselling practices

### Research questions

- What theoretical assumptions do school counsellors appear to articulate?
- How do school counsellors incorporate these theoretical assumptions into their counselling practice?
- How do school counsellors define, measure and perceive the achievement of “positive outcomes” within their counselling practice?

### **7.8 Storyboard three: Introducing a categorical-content construction**

**December 2012**

**Categorical-content**

Title number 28: A narrative inquiry into secondary school counsellors' strength-based counselling practices in Auckland, New Zealand: Contributions to adolescent wellbeing.

### Research Questions

- What are counsellors' practice experiences of using strength-based counselling approaches with adolescents?
- How do school counsellors perceive adolescent wellbeing? and
- How do counsellors' strength-based counselling practices contribute to adolescent wellbeing?

## Chapter 8

### 8.1 Storyboard four: A categorical-content construction

**February 2014**

**Categorical-content**

Title number 34: Secondary school counsellors' strength-based practices: Constructions of adolescent wellbeing.

**Research Topic:**

In what way can school counsellors' narratives of strength-based counselling inform and/or restrict counselling practice promoting adolescent wellbeing?

**Research questions**

- What meta-narratives (discourses) shape school counsellors' views about strength-based practice?
- How do these meta-narratives (discourses) promote or restrict a school counsellor's practice?
- What are school counsellors' constructions of adolescent wellbeing?
- In what way, if any, do strength-based counselling approaches contribute to adolescent wellbeing?
- How does the school and/or community context promote or restrict a school counsellor's practice?

### 8.2 Storyboard five: A categorical-content construction revisited

**24 September 2014**

**Categorical-content**

Title number 33: Secondary school counsellors: Constructions of strength-based practice

**Research question**

How do the multiple meta-narratives (discourses), which surround school counsellors, construct their strength-based counselling practice?

**Exploratory questions**

- What influence do my meta-narratives (discourses) as researcher have on the research process?
- How do the meta-narratives (discourses) that surround school counsellors construct their thinking concerning their practice?
  - How do the meta-narratives (discourses) that surround school counsellors influence their use of a strength-based approach to counselling?
- How do the meta-narratives (discourses) of the school context influence a school counsellor's practice?
- What are school counsellors' constructions of adolescent wellbeing?
- How do school counsellors perceive their practice as influencing adolescent wellbeing?
- How do the meta-narratives (discourses) of the broader community (within which an adolescent is embedded) influence a school counsellor's practice?

#### 8.4 Storyboard six: A categorical-content construction and exploration of context and metanarratives

14 July 2016

Categorical-content

Title number 34: Secondary school counsellors' strength-based practices: Constructions of adolescent wellbeing.

Finally shifted to:

Title number 39: Counsellors' strength-based practices in secondary schools: Managing multiple metanarratives (see appendix title progression).

Research topic:

How do the multiple metanarratives (discourses), which are available to school counsellors, construct their strength-based counselling practice?

Research questions:

- What influence do my assumptions, biases and metanarratives (discourses) as researcher have on the research process?
- Which metanarratives (discourses) are drawn on to construct school counsellors' practice stories?
- How do the metanarratives (discourses) of the school context influence a school counsellor's practice?
- What are school counsellors' constructions of adolescent wellbeing?
- How do school counsellors describe their strength-based practice as co-creating adolescent wellbeing?
- How do the metanarratives (discourses) of the broader community (within which an adolescent is embedded) influence a school counsellor's practice?
- What are school counsellors' experiences of the adolescent's family during the counselling process?



## **Appendix K – Progression of thesis title from 2009 to 2017**

1. A narrative inquiry into the practise of promoting adolescent wellbeing among secondary school guidance counsellors in New Zealand.
2. A narrative inquiry into New Zealand secondary school guidance counsellors' practice, and their perceptions of the interactive relationship they have with adolescence students in terms of fostering adolescent strengths, wellbeing and resilience.
3. An appreciative narrative inquiry into nine New Zealand secondary school guidance counsellors' stories of their "best" practice.
4. Secondary school counsellor and adolescent stories of counselling in a secondary school: Positive elements of the experience.
5. A narrative exploration of secondary school counsellor and adolescent perceived favourable experiences derived from counselling practice.
6. New Zealand secondary school counsellors: Perceptions of what works. A narrative inquiry into stories of practice.
7. A narrative inquiry into the perceptions and practices of New Zealand secondary school counsellors: A place for positive psychology?
8. New Zealand secondary school counselling: A narrative exploration of counsellor and student experiences.
9. New Zealand secondary school counsellors' perceptions of what works. A narrative exploration.
10. New Zealand secondary school counselling: A narrative exploration of counsellor experiences of counselling approaches they use within their practice.
11. A narrative exploration of New Zealand secondary school counsellors' stories of practice, the language they use to frame their stories and the underlying therapeutic discourses their stories reveal.
12. New Zealand secondary school counselling: A narrative exploration of stories of practice, the language in which stories are framed and the underlying therapeutic discourses revealed.
13. A narrative exploration of New Zealand secondary school counsellors: Stories of practice, language used to frame stories and underlying therapeutic discourses revealed.
14. A narrative exploration of counsellors' stories of practice, the language in which they are framed and the underlying therapeutic discourses they reveal.
15. New Zealand secondary school counselling: A narrative exploration of stories of practice and the underlying therapeutic discourses they reveal.
16. New Zealand secondary school counsellors: Reflections on strength based practice, providing adolescent support and underlying metanarratives.
17. New Zealand secondary school counsellors: Reflections of practice
18. New Zealand secondary school counsellors: Reflections on strength based counselling practices.
19. New Zealand secondary school counselling: The Individual and collective reflections on strength based counselling by eight Auckland based school counsellors.

20. A narrative study of the individual and collective story of secondary school counsellors about strength based counselling in Auckland, New Zealand.
21. A narrative inquiry of the individual and collective story of secondary school counsellors about their strength based counselling practice in Auckland, New Zealand.
22. A narrative inquiry of the individual and collective story of secondary school counsellor's strength based counselling practice in Auckland, New Zealand.
23. A narrative inquiry into the discourses of secondary school counsellor's strength based counselling practices in Auckland, New Zealand.
24. A narrative analysis of the discourses of secondary school counsellor's strength based counselling practices in Auckland, New Zealand.
25. A narrative inquiry into the discourses of secondary school counsellors' strength based counselling practices in Auckland, New Zealand and its influence on adolescent wellbeing.
26. A narrative inquiry into the discourses of secondary school counsellors' strength-based counselling practices in Auckland, New Zealand: Implications for adolescent wellbeing.
27. A narrative inquiry into secondary school counsellors' strength-based counselling practices in Auckland, New Zealand: Implications for adolescent wellbeing.
28. A narrative inquiry into secondary school counsellors' strength-based counselling practices in Auckland, New Zealand: Contributions to adolescent wellbeing.
29. Secondary school counsellors' strength-based counselling practices: Contributions to adolescent wellbeing.
30. Secondary school counsellors' strength-based counselling practices: Implications for adolescent wellbeing.
31. Secondary school counsellors' strength-based practices: Constructions of adolescent wellbeing.
32. The social construction of secondary school counsellors' strength-based practices
33. Secondary school counsellors: Constructions of strength-based practices.
34. Secondary school counsellors' strength-based practices: Constructions of adolescent wellbeing.
35. Counsellors' strength-based practices in secondary schools: Constructions of adolescent wellbeing.
36. Counsellors' strength-based practices in secondary schools: Content, context and metanarratives.
37. Counsellors' strength-based practices in secondary schools: Context, metanarratives and constructions of adolescent wellbeing.
38. Counsellors' strength-based practices in secondary schools: Metanarratives, contexts and understandings.
39. Counsellors' strength-based practices in secondary schools: Managing multiple metanarratives.

## Appendix L – Holistic-form interpretation: Gabrielle’s story - A story of empowerment

*“It felt to me like it brought all the paths of my life together into one place”*

Gabrielle’s story is one of empowerment.

Gabrielle started off her **career** in education as a teacher and in later years took on the role of dean. Gabrielle felt that in this role she had to wear “*the discipline hat*” and that being a disciplinarian did not align with her core values. When the vacancy of school counsellor arose at her school Gabrielle applied and got the position. Gabrielle says the transition from dean to counsellor was easy for her as the counselling role aligns with her values. It did take her some time however to win the trust of students and some colleagues who felt she may not be suited to the role. The students and teachers had only seen her as a disciplinarian and the students were wary of confiding in her but slowly they started to see the compassion and understanding she brought to the counselling role.

Gabrielle’s is the only counsellor at the school and her counselling suite is **located** in the administration building near the reception area and senior management’s offices. The **counselling room’s decor** is very “*busy*” with lots of colourful posters and motivational quotes on the walls. One quote drew my attention and read “*This room is a character assassination free zone. The person is not the problem. The problem is the problem.*” A desk is situated to one side facing the door with a computer and phone on it. The counselling area consists of two straight back chairs and a couch with a small table in the middle with a collection of candles on it. There are fluffy animals scattered around the room and several play-doh cartons for the students to play with. The **overall impression** I get is of warm chaos and I can see that teenage girls would feel comfortable here. During the interview, we have three interruptions and Gabrielle is a little distracted about a student whom she is counselling who required her attention. As a result, my interview with Gabrielle is only 51 minutes but I gained some useful insights and **found Gabrielle to be** very open, honest and humorous.

The **counselling modalities** Gabrielle uses are predominately narrative counselling with some solutions focused brief therapy and cognitive behavioural therapy. Gabrielle does a lot of group work with her students and makes use of the restorative justice process. As a parent, she was involved with Playcentre where “parents take responsibility” to

manage the Playcentre for their children. Gabrielle says Playcentre is “also a very positive approach” and she draws on the training and experiences she received at Playcentre to assist her with group work. Even when students come for “one-on-one counselling” Gabrielle reveals they often bring a support person with them. She confides that, “it’s not very often that you would have just me and a student but I do have that, or they’ll come in a group because it’s a group problem.”

Gabrielle draws on the **work of** David Epston and Michael White to sustain her counselling practice. On a practical level, Gabrielle is supported in her counselling practice by her supervisor receiving fortnightly **supervision**. She has been working in the secondary education sector for the past 37 years, first as a teacher, then 10 years as a dean and has worked as a school counsellor for the past 7 years.

The **issues she deals with** include among others sexual abuse, self-harm, friendship difficulties, bullying (which is the main issue), anxiety, stress, unrealistic expectations, body image issues and eating disorders. Gabrielle does not use **formal assessment tools** and laughed when I asked her if she did. She does have a **counselling toolkit** she uses that includes play doh, toys, cards with emotions/quotes and cartoon pictures that explore various issues. She awards certificates and gives parties for students so they can celebrate their successes with friends. Gabrielle also draws extensively from the tools of narrative counselling including writing letters to students and rescued speech poetry work. Gabrielle says she is demonstrative and uses touch and hugs to show caring. As she works in an all-girls school Gabrielle deems this touch appropriate.

Gabrielle’s **counselling philosophy** is simply, caring for her students and having a belief in their strength to take charge of their own lives. According to Gabrielle, the part of the counselling process adolescents’ **value most** is the relationship. She reflects, “The relationship that they know there’s somebody that cares is really important.”

Gabrielle thinks that **adolescence is** about making mistakes, pushing the boundaries and taking a certain amount of risk. **Adolescent wellbeing** is the ability to learn from these mistakes and having the inner strength and resilience to deal with problems. It is the ability to draw from healthy coping mechanisms rather than resorting to drugs and alcohol, and without “getting pushed down a hole and being unable to climb back out again.”

According to Gabrielle **strength based counselling contributes to adolescent wellbeing** by acknowledging and making adolescents aware of their strengths and

providing them with an alternative way of seeing and dealing with their problems. “It gives them belief in themselves and helps them have the ability to come back and try again.”

When asked what she thinks of **using a strength based approach with adolescents in particular** Gabrielle answers that “to me it’s the way to go because so much of their world can be seen as deficit.” She reflects that the teachers at the school “try to be really encouraging” but in the classroom environment students can “still come away feeling bad about themselves.” Gabrielle says a strength based approach assists students “to build on their strengths” and can help them “start realising that they have control over themselves and control over their world. That’s powerful stuff and it’s what we should be doing.”

Gabrielle considers that **the best facet of a strength based counselling approach** is that “it’s treating people with the respect that they should be treated with.” Gabrielle believes the students she counsels “are people with strengths and qualities and they’re not this patient we have to treat. We’re doing it together and they’ve got more work to do than I have.”

When asked how strength based counselling is **different to other approaches** Gabrielle replies, “I don’t know that it is really different but some people can get caught in the **power thing**.” Gabrielle believes “counselling shouldn’t be about power” and counsellors shouldn’t wield any power over the students they counsel. Gabrielle sees the counselling dynamic “as a more equal relationship” and thinks that a strength based approach emphasises this.

Gabrielle views much of society’s **message about adolescence as deficit based**. She affirms that “none of the girls here who are all beautiful would feel good about themselves” and she asserts “they don’t need any more deficits stuff do they?” She points out that the media in particular communicates certain messages that adolescents try to live up to which cause negativity especially with regards to body image for girls. Gabrielle endeavours, using strength based counselling and narrative language to move away from a **deficit model** and to work with the student to create a new positive story. Within her counselling practice her **underlying assumptions** about adolescents is *“a belief that the girls have the strength and the qualities to actually be the master of their own lives.”*

Gabrielle strongly believes that the presenting problem must be externalised and in so doing the problem is normalised. Gabrielle stresses “don’t make the problem the person,” instead co-create with the student an alternative story to the problem story and in

so doing open other avenues for them to deal with the problem. Gabrielle explains, *“We create the meanings, but the meanings can change so there are lots of different stories out there that we can choose. We can buy into being a victim but we don’t have to stay in that story, there are other stories about us that we can enlarge and believe in and that can become us.”* Co-Creating a new story with the student as well as strongly acknowledging their strengths empowers each student to take charge of their own life and own problems.

Gabrielle believes that **counselling is a choice** that a student makes. Students can be required to attend counselling sessions but you cannot force them to receive counselling. Gabrielle sees each student as the expert in their own life; the counsellor is not the expert and does not have the answers. Gabrielle believes that this is quite freeing and allows the counsellor to establish a relationship with the students based on an equal partnership.

Gabrielle says:

I can’t fix it, we’ve got to work together... it’s not here’s some pills away you go and that’ll make it better. I’m not the expert and it’s actually quite freeing... it’s not up to me, it’s up to us, it’s a shared thing.

For Gabrielle, the counselling relationship must be based on mutual respect and trust.

Gabrielle feels that **strength based counselling** is very effective in working with adolescents and she thinks that it would be an **appropriate** approach to employ in all circumstances provided the student and their parents are open to counselling. The challenge arises when the student, parents or both have a negative perspective of the counselling process. The student must want to invest in the counselling process and having **support** from parents enhances the chances of a positive outcome for the student. Gabrielle does not assess the effectiveness of her counselling practice formally and when asked how she knows she has done a “good job” she jests, “I guess when they come back.” Gabrielle then clarifies and says, “I mean, you don’t want them to come back” but sometimes I will see them in passing and “if they smile and say hello” you know you did well. Sometimes Gabrielle says, “You get a note” or somebody will just slip a poem under her door anonymously and “it’s precious.”

Gabrielle confides that the **outcome** of a strength based counselling session may not always be positive and can actually result in more turmoil initially because once the problem is addressed further related issues may arise as is the case with sexual abuse.

However, Gabrielle feels, strength based counselling opens-up a safe space within which problems can be addressed and ultimately results in a stronger more resilient young person. In terms of introducing a **strength based approach school wide** Gabrielle feels it needs to come from the top down and the principal in particular needs to be invested. At her school Gabrielle feels that a strength based approach is encouraged school wide and that the majority of teachers employ a strength based approach **within their teaching**. Taking a strength based approach is supported by the principal and stems from the core values and ethos of the school which is a Catholic School that upholds Mercy School values. Gabrielle states these values are *“respect for human dignity, compassion, service, social justice and care for the poor and vulnerable, but it’s the social justice, the compassion and the respect for human dignity for me would be the very important ones.”*

Gabrielle feels that *“the foundations”* of a strength based approach and Mercy school values *“knit really closely together.”* Gabrielle stresses, this does not mean that everyone in the school is invested in a strength based approach but says, *“I certainly get to know who the kids feel aren’t.”*

The **skills Gabrielle thinks are needed most by counsellors** is the ability to establish a relationship of absolute trust based on mutual respect, really caring and having compassion for students and being able to listen without judgement. Other skills Gabrielle thinks are important are letting go of the need to control, be the expert and making a choice for the student and the ability to externalise so that you don’t make the person the problem.

Of her role as school counsellor Gabrielle is **most proud** of the fact that she is in touch with her own values. She reflects, I am *“acting out my own values, whereas teaching I wasn’t always doing that. It’s being in tune with myself and most of the girls recognise that.”* Her **message to other counsellors** is also *“to be true to yourself.”* She encourages counsellors to find a modality they believe in because if they don’t believe in what they are doing they won’t help anyone.

Gabrielle feels that care is at the **heart of successful school counselling** and reflects, *“I think that’s what the kids want most of all is to know that somebody cares.”*

In terms of the **future development** of her counselling practice Gabrielle thinks that given that she is in her late sixties “retirement might be beckoning.” The **strength she relies on most** as a counsellor is her ability to really listen, being able to identify the “real” issue and to externalise it. Gabrielle discloses that she has “very strong rules” in her

counselling room and others are spoken about with respect, “we speak about the problem not the person. Gabrielle continues that “we solve the problem between us, we speak about other people as we would like to be spoken of and we listen to understand other people’s points of view.”

The **tone** of Gabrielle’s story is humble but one filled with a great deal of passion, humour and caring.

Gabrielle says, “Narrative brought all the paths of my life together into one place. As a teacher, you’re always trying to encourage the kids and get the best out of them.”

Gabrielle seeks to guide her students to “be masters of their own lives.” She achieves this using strength based counselling to preclude adolescents from defining themselves according to their deficits and inspires them instead to embrace their strengths. Her message is one of hope and empowerment and as such the discourse of her story is as she elevates her students from powerlessness to a place where they can become the experts in their own lives.

#### **Themes and General notes from transcript (Gabrielle)**

##### **Main Themes:**

Relationship/Partnership, Empowerment, Caring, Student as expert/(Personal agency)

##### **Other themes:**

Externalising problem, moving away from deficit, talks about stories, providing adolescents with choices  
Acknowledging strengths, absolute trust, power “thing”

**Genre:** Story of empowerment/Rags to riches in terms of doing something that aligns with her values/Transition from teacher and dean to counsellor

**Archetypal image:** Wise woman

##### **Tone**

Frustration, Passionate, Humble, and Humorous – lots of laughter – young at heart, Light, Optimistic, Caring, and Compassionate

##### **My comments within transcripts**

Participant’s narrative told from perspective of narrative modality  
Uses narrative language  
Wearing different hats  
Frustration as a dean having to discipline students  
Deficit discourse  
Student as expert  
Passionate about SBC  
Externalising problem  
Co-creating stories with student  
Group work  
Friends intervene  
Working together



Students and parents have to buy in  
 Uses narrative language  
 Writing as externalising activity  
 Resistance to counselling by students and parents  
 Expressing emotions in a safe environment  
 Respect  
 Personalise treatment  
 Not about pills  
 Counsellor not expert  
 Student does most of the work  
 Focus on existing strengths  
 Direction counselling takes in student's choice  
 SBC is empowering – gives students the power  
 Participant shows concern for students' wishes  
 Treatment is students' choice

### **Strength-based counselling**

Separates person from the problem  
 Builds an alternative story  
 Acknowledges strengths  
 Choice  
 Outcomes not necessarily good initially can result in further turmoil as student comes to terms with the problem  
 Participant thinks it is always appropriate to use strength based counselling  
 Uses tools to help students relax and talk.  
 Normalising problems  
 Problem is named/externalised  
 Use own words of student for poems – makes it meaningful  
 Party as a rite of passage  
 Move away from deficit  
 Not without challenges  
 There are negative attitudes towards counselling/discourses  
 Students need to commit to counselling process  
 Counselling is the co-creation of meaning  
 Counselling is about changing the focus from a deficit to a strengths based story  
 New story opens up options  
 Media's message strong impact on Adolescents  
 Relationship in counselling process important/having someone who cares  
 Counsellors must not be caught up in having power over others  
 Emphasis on equal relationships/partnership  
 Counselling process need ground rules  
 Counselling process in school supported by school philosophy and by principal's ethos (mercy school values)  
 Feels a SB approach should be used within schools/Needs to come from the top  
 Had to deal with transition from dean to counsellor – was important to align values with what she did. Not comfortable with discipline hat. Some teething problems during this transition.  
 Counselling about building trust  
 SBC is all inclusive – it does not exclude anyone see line 514  
 Feedback about outcome of counselling process is informal from students.  
 Goes the extra mile as a counsellor  
 As a counsellor, it is important to use a counselling modality that suites you. You have to believe in what you are doing.

- Laughed about the thought of using formal assessment tools

### **Qualities of a good counsellor mentioned by participant**

Caring, Compassion Listening Respect Developing trust Letting go of need to choose for the student Letting go of need to control and be the expert, Ability to externalise – don't make the person the problem

### **To think about and review**

Think about structure of participant's narrative as a circle with different segments? I.e. counsellors' skills.  
 Does participant's' counselling philosophy align with the philosophy of narrative counselling?  
 Do most of my participants use counselling methodology?  
 See David Epstein's book and website  
 Look up restorative justice and play centre  
 Think about 3 circles: Maybe empowerment, relationship and care?



All counsellors appear to have started off their careers doing something else?  
 Look at any transitions in counsellors' career.  
 Interview 1 and 6 see reference to pills (int 6 line 196)  
 Look for articles on differences between counsellors and psychologists in terms of philosophy? (is this relevant?)  
 What background do I bring to my research? Write my own story.

### **Holistic-Form**

When looking at holistic-form have an overall synopsis for each participant (core message).  
 Explore the unique themes in each narrative  
 Select 1 or 2 metaphors that epitomize story.

## **Appendix M – Holistic-form interpretation: Thomas’s story - Seeing the inherent good in all**

*I just see that we’re born good and we take on beliefs about ourselves from  
this field of beliefs around us ... the work is to become aware of that process  
and to separate yourself out from it.*

Thomas’s story of his counselling practice has brought him full circle to a place which enables him to see the inherent good in all.

Arriving at the school I find Thomas’s **counselling room** located near the square in the middle of the school. There are two counsellors and each have their own office located in a small building that serves as a separate counselling suite. The counselling rooms themselves are private but the location of the counselling suite is very prominent within the school and does not offered much privacy to students going to see the counsellor. Thomas’s office has a desk with computer and phone against one wall and then two hard backed chairs with a side table between them. The counselling room is basic but functional. During our interview, we had one interruption and there was some ambient noise outside that was somewhat distracting but did not detract from the overall interview process. I found Thomas to be very friendly and more than happy to answer my questions although at times his answers were overly succinct and required further prompting. As a result, the interview was brief compared to the others and lasted only 41 minutes. Thomas was very mindful of student confidentiality and only shared stories of his counselling experiences with students in a very general sense. Despite the brevity of the interview and the succinctness of response valuable insights were gleaned from the interview.

Thomas tells that he **did not set out to be a counsellor** and came to it by accident through a friend who had just qualified as a counsellor. She needed his assistance working with the male partners in a post-natal depression group. Thomas found he had an aptitude for helping others and started doing a little bit of training on the side before training officially as a counsellor.

Thomas **uses primarily narrative counselling** in his counselling practice which he blends with solution focused brief therapy and cognitive behavioural therapy. Speaking of these different strength-based approaches Thomas states, “I take elements of each but to me they’re all inherent in the same approach.” Reflecting on these approaches Thomas thinks that solution focused therapy is “much more of a narrow process” whereas narrative

counselling is “a much wider thing.” Thomas says he may use the miracle question or version of it from the solution focused approach but his approach is more overtly a narrative counselling approach. Thomas uses cognitive behavioural therapy to gain an “understanding of thinking processes” and the “unhelpful ways” students see things and then alongside this approach he “looks at their strength and how they think about” their strengths. He does concede however that strength based approaches “all overlap.” Thomas does not do much group work at the school but the school does run the Travellers programme which he has assisted with in the past (include in lit review). Thomas has been a counsellor for eleven years working in private practice and has been counselling on a part time basis in a school environment for the past 3 ½ years. The remainder of his time he still spends counselling privately.

Intellectually, Thomas **draws from** the writings of Harlene Andersons, Jonella Bird, David Epston and Michael White to assist with his counselling practice. At a practical level Thomas seeks assistance with his practice from his fellow school counsellor and supervisor, attending **supervision** monthly, both of whom are narrative practitioners.

Thomas reveals that his **core business** as a school counsellor can be viewed through two different lenses; what the management of the school require of him as a counsellor and what the students need. The management of the school require students to achieve academically and to be free of behavioural issues so that they can excel at learning outcomes set for them. It falls to the counsellor to “fix” those students who do not fall within this prevue. On the other hand, as a counsellor Thomas feels he wants to assist students to get to a place where they can deal with life in a better way. Thomas says this can create “a gap between the school and the counsellors because both are standing for different things.” According to Thomas, the challenge is to find a balance between the two, “to make that gap as small as possible” so that both the needs of school and the needs of the students are met optimally and “to have them both enhancing each other.”

Thomas does not use **formal assessment tools** but does use an informal rating scale where he asks students to rate certain issues on a scale of 0 to 10. Zero on the rating scales indicates the issue has no influence and ten indicates it is influential in the student’s life. In addition to this rating scale, Thomas also uses a comparative rating scenario where students are asked to look at the good and bad in possible choices they could make in order to weigh each of their choices against each other before making a decision. Thomas takes notes

during the counselling process and notes down student's strengths as they arise. Thomas uses this list of the student's strengths to "build a picture" of the student's competencies. Thomas's **counselling toolkit** includes the narrative counselling techniques of externalising the problem and looking for exceptions to the problem. To assist in externalising the problem, especially with the boys he counsels who play computer games, Thomas asks them to use computer games as an analogy for their problem. "We look at his life in the narrative externalise. Instead of, I'm a bad person, it's How would I do this in my game. So, he thinks about himself in a whole different way." Thomas further utilises the narrative therapeutic letter which he writes and sends to students to invite them "to see themselves from a strength based perspective."

Thomas' **counselling philosophy** assumes that everyone is inherently good; "I see people as healthy and well and well meaning. Everyone's born good as far as I'm concerned." Thomas reflects that life's experiences impose upon us "very unhelpful ideas" about ourselves and in order to deal with our experiences we "construct a whole problem" out of them and this problem is not the essence of who we are "it is just a construct" of our own making. Thomas says that he likes narrative counselling because "it separates the problem from the person" and as a strength based approach returns us to a place of wellness.

Over the years Thomas reveals that as a counsellor he has become more aware of the **complexities that exist within the counselling relationship**. A major element of this according to Thomas is the **power dynamics** that exists therein. Thomas believes that as a counsellor "even when you think you're not exerting or having a position of authority, of power in a situation you actually are and becoming aware of that in a really deep way is very important." Thinking about the power he wields in the counselling relationship Thomas reflects that it occurs on many different levels, "the power as an older male, as a therapist and as an authority figure in the school" and then "the subtler one is the power as the therapist."

Thomas believes that many counsellors are not cognisant of the power dynamics within their relationship with student and they may think "they are being even-handed but, you need to be very attentive to make sure you really are." To ensure that he is continually aware of the power dynamic and that he is being "even-handed" Thomas asks the student at the beginning of the counselling process "how will know if this isn't feeling right for you?"

and “how will you be able to tell me you're not feeling that this is right?” Thomas says it is important to spend some time with the student on these questions to ensure that they genuinely understand them and can answer them honestly without feeling intimidated. According to Thomas getting the students to answer these questions requires a lot of work “because it’s shifting the way they relate to power dynamics themselves.”

A contributing factor to the power dynamic in the counselling relationship is the fact that often the student is required to attend counselling sessions and has not chosen to see the counsellor of their own volition. In these instances, Thomas might say, “You are not in trouble, someone’s concerned about you. You’ve been ordered to come and you know you had to come here but I’m here to help you so you don’t get into trouble anymore.” Thomas then discusses with the student what he has been told about their referral to him and he will ask them why they think they have been sent to him. During this process Thomas explores how the student perceives what has occurred and believes that; “Underneath most of the problems students have is unfairness or perceived unfairness and perceived injustice or real injustice, either for others or for themselves.” He reflects that from the onset of the counselling process he explores “what they're standing for in the problem.” Rather than focusing on the problem alone, “I go to the values, what values were they standing for, even if they weren’t aware, in the trouble they had?” Thomas believes that there is an underlying basis for all the issues that students present to counselling with and at the heart of many of these issues is the student’s need to defend the ideals they hold.

According to Thomas, the part of the counselling process **adolescents’ value most** is the relationship that is forged, “I think the relationship is a very big thing.” Thomas believes his counselling philosophy of seeing each student as “a good person” whose “view of themselves in life has been constructed by their environment” helps build this relationship. Furthermore, despite his sixty-two years Thomas reflects that, “I’m pretty young at heart” and “I don’t consider myself mainstream.” Thomas says that students who are in trouble also “don’t feel like they're part of the mainstream” and they can therefore relate to the difference they see in him. Thomas believes his “genuine curiosity for who they are and what they are” also helps foster the relationship he develops with students he counsels making “the age difference an irrelevancy almost”.

Thomas sees **adolescent wellbeing** as:

Having a healthy sense of self, a healthy ability to deal with the world. The realistic sense of what the world is, access to support, people to talk to about things, as well as physical and spiritual wellbeing, whatever their definition might be of that. A large part of it is that they are on the road to being able to be themselves, not somebody else's version of who they are.

Thomas believes **strength based counselling contributes to adolescent wellbeing** by helping students focus on their immediate strengths to deal with the problem at hand but also in allowing them to see beyond the problem to "the way they approach their life" as a whole. In so doing, Thomas thinks students may be able to utilise the strengths that were constructed and developed during the counselling process in other areas of their lives.

When asked what he thinks of **using a strength based approach with adolescents** in particular Thomas answers that it's "a very good way to go." He reflects that many of the students he counsels "are in an environment where they're told they haven't got any strength and they're really bad and they're not getting any positive feedback." A strength based approach examines, "the way the student constructs their story, what the stories do and the effect they have" in the student's life and then assists the student in questioning these constructs to "put their attention in a better place."

Thomas considers that the **best aspect of using a strength based counselling approach** is that it "doesn't focus on the negative." Thomas states that many of the students he counsel "have got no sense that they're good at anything." Furthermore, he believes that "most people have got so much saturation in a negative description of themselves that anything that stands counter to that has got to be good." A strength based approach, and narrative counselling, externalises the problem and focuses on the existing strengths in people by "looking for the exceptions to the description that they're living by" and using their strengths as "an existing base" to build on and move forward towards a sense of wellness.

Thomas thinks strength based counselling is **different from other approaches** "because it inherently knows there's nothing wrong with the person." He says many of the traditional approaches "see the person as having being the problem, being flawed in some way whereas I think strength based sees the strong healthy good person that's there underneath the overlaid problem." Thomas **sees strength based counselling as looking** "for the strength of the person you're working with even if they don't know they have them,

especially if they don't know they have them." These strengths are "things they do well, understandings they have, and practices that are helpful and useful... anything that stands against the description they have of themselves as being weak or useless."

Given Thomas's **counselling philosophy** and his views on strength based counselling it appears that within his counselling practice he moves away from a deficit discourse and embraces a narrative that stands counter to that deficit. Thomas does not however have a Pollyanna view of the world and acknowledges that strength based counselling may **not always be appropriate**. In a crisis focusing immediately on strengths can shift the focus "away from the problem" that needs to be attended to. However, once the crisis is being managed "then you might have a look at the strength they're using to managing the crisis." In addition to not always being the appropriate counselling approach to use, sometimes a strength based approach "won't take." If a student "doesn't want to be in a different place to where they are because it serves them really well" they will not be open to the counselling process and the shift that can result from using a strength based approach. Thomas suggests that when this happens unless it is a crisis, "you just have to leave them with it" as investing in the counselling process is ultimately the student's decision.

Thomas assesses the **effectiveness of his strength based counselling** practice by using a rating scale from zero to ten; asking students what was helpful in what was talked about; considering the nature of problem that brought the student to counselling and asking if it has changed, looking to see if the student is "starting to act for themselves" and whether "they have personal agency where they didn't before."

Thomas thinks that sometimes you may have "a really good **outcome**" using strength based counselling but then the environment sort of fritters that away" if the student has no outside support. According to Thomas, that is why part of the narrative counselling process focuses on "the community that the person's in." He asks students, "who else in their community, either near family or further knows what things are like for them, who can they talk to, who might they enlist to get help." This **community support** is a strength the student can tap into but it more than that. Thomas encourages students to ask themselves how they can in turn help their community. Thomas believes, "it's a mutual thing" which often students aren't aware of. It is important that students "know that their actions can help their family members too."



In terms of the **school environment** that Thomas works in feels that a strength based approach is supported in a general sense as the school does “look for the strength in the students and build on that.” In terms of introducing a strength based approach into the school more formally Thomas thinks it would have to be adopted by the PPTA or the New Zealand school system and become part of the school ethos. In addition, Thomas believes a strength based approach needs to be part of teacher education so that “the student is seen as a good person inherently, not the troublemaker.” He believes that students often get into trouble because “the teachers don’t have either the time or the understanding to see past the bad behaviour.” In Thomas’s experience, there is “usually always something the student is standing for” and it is important to ask, “What was the good thing in the bad behaviour.” Thomas says that if teachers “could come from that place it would be a much more helpful place for them.”

Thomas considers the tendency to focus on the **deficit in adolescents** as part of “the whole human condition.” He concedes that for teachers, “there’s not the resources, there’s not the time, there’s a curriculum to follow” but he thinks it is a “wider issue.” In terms of having a deficit based view of adolescents he says, “It’s a whole society that’s like that and teachers just manifest variations of that but it’s mainly in the culture of the country and in the teacher training.”

With regards to the term ‘strength based counselling’ Thomas says he doesn’t refer to his practice as strength based, “it’s just part of what I use, a big part of it, but I don’t see it as just a strength based approach.” He seems to contradict himself when he continues that his approach is strength based in a literal sense because he is “looking for the strength and ability to see your life in a whole new way.” When asked for clarification on this Thomas cautions that practitioners who use strengths based counselling need to move beyond purely externalising the presenting problem and looking for a list of strengths in their clients. Thomas feels strongly that “there needs to be some understanding of the source of the issues.” Thomas stresses that there is a danger in therapy of moving too quickly to focus on strengths and not spending enough time with the client in gaining an “awareness of what’s created the situation.” When this happens, there is the potential that the presenting problem may be dealt with in the “short term but it doesn’t deal longer term with the issues.” Thomas says focusing solely on a list of your clients’ strengths “is good for certain

situations but doesn't bring in the other strength of the ability to see your situation with more awareness" which he thinks "is in fact a bigger strength."

The **skills** Thomas reasons are needed most by a counsellor is the ability to establish a relationship, engage with and act as an advocate for students. He is passionate about the need for a counsellor to help students find ways to empower themselves by encouraging personal agency. Furthermore, as a counsellor Thomas feels you need to be aware of where you stand relative to the student and consider the power dynamics inherent in your relationship with them so that you ensure that you are "even-handed" in your interactions. Additional skills Thomas thinks are important is having a genuine curiosity for who the student is and being able to listen to the student with integrity and an open mind by being aware of and being able to put aside preconceived notions you may have about the student.

Of his role as school counsellor Thomas is **most proud** of "being a positive person in the students' lives where they often may not have one" and of being someone who sees the student "as a good person inherently." His **message to other counsellors** is they should consider training in a narrative counselling approach as it is a very good approach to use in the school setting being "creative and open" to "whatever the student brings" to the counselling process.

Thomas feels that seeing the student for who they are at their core is at the heart of successful school counselling. As a counsellor, Thomas reflects, that you have to "like every-one" of the students' you counsel and if you don't like them then you really need to look at your practice. Thomas says with regards to his own practice, "I come from a place of really, really knowing that there's a good person there, no matter what is going on seemingly. So, the heart of it is where you stand relative to them about what they are or who they are as a person."

In terms of the **future development** of his counselling practice and the counselling approach he uses Thomas says that it is continually developing and changing as he seeks ways to improve and enhance the effectiveness of his practice. He does not have a plan as to how he will enhance counselling practice over the coming years but has faith that the doors he needs to pass through to improve his practice will open as needed as they have in the past. When reflecting on how his counselling practice has evolved over time he reflects "in a genuine way I have become more and more aware of the beautiful, strong person I'm dealing with. It's more and more real than it used to be." The **strength that Thomas relies**

**on most** as a counsellor is a genuine curiosity about human nature and the circumstances that “makes us who we are” along with continued self-examination to foster understanding of himself so that he “can be as honest and available with students as possible.”

The overall **tone** of Thomas’ story is at once both open and explorative. His tone is at times pensive and he thinks deeply about the questions put to him. The tone he uses when speaking about the use of a strength based approach that looks purely at a list of strengths and does not move beyond this to look at greater issues, is ambivalent and sceptical. When reflecting on the benefits of a strength based counselling, that encompasses both the strengths of the individual and the strength of awareness of the problem, the tone is emphatic. Finally, when talking about the students he counsels his tone is empathetic and genuine.

Thomas’s counselling philosophy and approach have indeed evolved and been transformed over time. He has arrived at a place where he can implement strength based and other counselling approaches most appropriately to the situations he encounters. Thomas has transformed the formalised counselling modalities he was trained in into an approach that is of his own making and that works best for him. The way in which Thomas forges relationships with his adolescent clients has matured and developed and his practice has become more meaningful to him. He has relied on the intellectual counselling greats before him and on his supervisor and counselling peers for guidance with his practice and assistance with the challenges that have befallen said practice. The voyage through his years of counselling experience has indeed changed him and Thomas now finds himself in a stronger, more resilient place where he is able to offer much to his peers and students alike.

Thomas’s counselling practice that stands counter to a deficit discourse and sees the inherent good in all. Thomas guides his students to develop, mature and transform themselves into a better place of being. He uses strength based counselling to this end and encourages adolescents to embrace life. Finally, Thomas inspires adolescents to explore the implications that the deeper meaning behind their circumstances reveals about a potential new approach to life.

### **Themes and General notes from transcript (Thomas)**

**Main Themes:** Relationship (all themes and sub themes call fall under relationship?), empowerment, personal agency/(student as expert), seeing the inherent good in all

**Other themes:** Support, Valuing the adolescent, Values, Community – reaching out to get support from the community is part of a narrative counselling approach see line 463 to 473, Advocacy, Power relations line 273/281 – Power as a therapist (see **Foucault** Archaeology of Knowledge)

**Genre:** Voyage and Return. Link story genre to the discourse underlying it.

**Archetypal image:** Sage (Sophos), a Stoic wise person and/or figure/advisor

### **Tone**

Matter of fact line 9, Open/Explorative line 390, Emphatic line 118, Ambivalent, Empathetic line, Passionate line 162, Thoughtful/pensive/reflective line 275/299, Hesitant line 220, Sceptical around focusing only on strengths see line 497, Humorous line 436

### **My comments within transcripts**

Externalising problem, Moving away from deficit

Openness/Explorative

Person not the problem

What is the student standing for? What are their values?

Ask the question during counselling – what does the student value most?

Look beyond a list of strengths. Having an awareness of the situation as a whole and being able to see what the problem is – that is strength.

Counsels mainly boys

Uses a game analogy when counselling students (metaphor)

Life as a game – transfer skills from game to real life

Builds on an existing base of strengths –asks how can we do this differently

Started as a counsellor in private practice by accident

See participant's definition of strengths lines 9 to 14

Stands against a deficit discourse – see line no's highlighted in pink

School wants student to achieve and meet learning outcomes/counsellor wants to “help student to get to a place where they can meet life in a better way”

Engagement important

Narrative counselling is about changing thinking – works from an existing base of strength

Sometimes a good outcome in counselling can be negatively impacted by the environment to which the student returns

Students are encouraged to use their strengths to help others – community

Narrative counselling externalises the problem and moves away from a deficit discourse

Students must want to change – they must take ownership of the counselling process

As a counsellor, you must learn to let go and respect the students' wishes if they do not want to engage in counselling except when it is urgent or a crisis

Adolescents need support and people to talk to – in their community or the counsellor

SBC helps students look at the way they approach their life

The adolescents value the relationship with the counsellor during counselling most

Participant sees all adolescents and people as inherently good

The view adolescents have of themselves is constructed by their environment – social constructionism line 176

SBC moves away from deficit

Externalising problems and looking for exceptions important

Uses informal measuring tools

Traditional approaches are deficit based

Line 191 talks about modern vs. postmodern and deficit vs. strength discourse

Teachers need to move away from a deficit viewpoint

Counsellors need to let go of the need to hold all the power in the relationship with the adolescent - line 281 – can do this by asking student certain questions about the counselling process to shift the power dynamic see line 293

Counsellors must be aware of their own strengths and weaknesses – have therapy

Problems are just a construct of society line 358

The participant is continually looking for better ways to do things

All strength based approaches are linked/use element of each approach

Solution focused is narrow while narrative is broader

At the start of the counselling process put the ball in the students' court/student as expert/put student at ease

Ask what is the student standing for, what are their values?

Narrative counselling is also looking for the community that the person is in (see narrative counselling process – White, Jonella Bird)

Support from family, friends and wider community important

Gap between school and counsellor – they stand for different things – see core business line 21

Being able to recognise and acknowledge students' strengths should be part of teacher training

Our predominant culture is deficit based line 495

SBC use as a tool to identify the bigger issues line 498

It is important to look at the problem too line 501

The ability to look at and understand what created the problem in the first place is also a strength

NB. SBC is important not just so that you can list what your strengths are but also having the strength to see life in a different way line 519

Training line 537

Using a narrative counselling approach naturally lead the counsellor to use analogies in his work

Contradicts himself – says on one hand that SB counselling would not be appropriate when there's too much of a crisis situation and it takes attention away from the problem. Line 105 – Later on can look at the strength they used to manage the crisis.

Short term in a crisis it is okay to just look for strengths to deal with the situation but you need to move beyond strengths to have an awareness of the situation as a whole – see line 501

Doesn't see what he does as just looking for strengths it goes beyond strengths see line 512

See Metaphor line 150 on adolescent well being

SBC is supported by the school in a general sense.

Thinks a SB approach should be part of teacher training

Works half of the time in the school and half of the time in private practice – explore further??

See four points on how counsellor knows he has done a good job – line 306

Age is irrelevant – young at heart

Narrative counselling is good for the school environment line 395

Look at what stories adolescents tell themselves line 420

On average sees each student about 5 times about a particular problem

Look at how counsellor starts the counselling process line 436

Says of how he fell into narrative counselling – “I lucked in so pleasingly well” line 545

**Qualities of a good counsellor mentioned by participant:** Being able to engage with students, having a genuine curiosity for who the student is, Being able to establish a relationship, As a counsellor being able to see where you stand relative to the student, Encouraging personal agency, Help students find ways to empower themselves, being an advocate for students, Listening, Being aware of power dynamics in relationships, Being even-handed

### **To think about and review**

Think about 3 circles: **Participations, protection, partnership OR empowerment, relationship**





Māori Twist:

***Represent the 3 themes a Māori twist? Look at the Māori concept of relationship (take pū/ūta)***

- The twist with its crisscross form represents the many paths of life and love and as such is regarded as the original eternity symbol. The single twist shows the joining together of two people for eternity. Even though they sometimes move away from each other on their own journeys, they will always come together again sharing their lives and blending to become one. It tells how the strength of bond of friendship, loyalty and love will last forever. The double and triple twists have a similar meaning but refer more to the joining of two peoples or cultures rather than individuals. They also refer the three baskets of knowledge.
- See Snowden article about archetypes and article about ATA (relationships)
- Look up Harlene Anderson in relation to brief therapy
- Look at research questions especially the one around discourses

## **Appendix N – Details of school counsellors’ practice**

### **Counselling qualifications**

- Masters of counselling education
- Bachelor of social practice majoring in counselling
- Postgraduate diploma in guidance and counselling
- Postgraduate diploma in Health Science with child, adolescent and cognitive behaviour therapy speciality
- Honours degree in counselling
- Masters in counselling
- Postgraduate diploma in counselling
- Graduate diploma in counselling

### **Counselling modalities trained in during counselling qualification:**

- Narrative therapy
- Solution-focused therapy
- Collaborative language systems
- Cognitive behavioural therapy

### **Counselling modalities used in counselling practice:**

- Eclectic approaches
- Collaborative strength-based approaches
- Narrative therapy, solution-focused therapy, positive psychology therapy, restorative justice, Rogerian therapy/person-centred approaches, brief therapy
- Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), dialectical behaviour therapy (DBT), rational emotive behaviour therapy (REBT)
- Family therapy
- Reality therapy
- Gestalt therapy
- Interactive drawing therapy, expressive or creative therapy, play therapy
- Mindfulness
- Group work

- Te Whare Tapa What model of wellbeing

**Counselling programmes counsellors have introduced in to schools:**

- Bounce back programme
- Friends for life programme
- Think good, feel good programme
- Travellers programme
- Future selves programme
- Incredible years parenting programme
- Cool school's programme
- Play centre based group work
- Maudsley approach (family therapy treatment for anorexia)
- Peer mediators, peer support and peer tutoring

**Counselling tool and techniques:**

- Ministry of Education manual for working with students at risk
- New Zealand Association of Counsellors' resources and tools
- Bounce back online resources and books
- Restorative justice process
- Note taking, four-column approach, using a white board to outline conversations and stories
- Individual action plans for each student, life map for each student, asking students to keep a diary, writing letters
- Narrative externalising, stories, rescued speech, therapeutic letters
- Strength-based language, positive affirmations, strength and mate's traits cards, list of student's strengths
- Drawing/drawing pad, sand tray, play-doh, toys
- Informal tools to measure mood such as Likert rating scales, informal mini-risk assessments
- Feeling and empowerment cards, visuals and pictures, emoticons and picture cards, diagrams,



- Giving our certificates, celebrating successes
- Preference questions, verbatim exercise
- Counting backwards, thought stopping
- Meditation and visualisation, breathing exercises and relaxation, progressive muscle relaxation

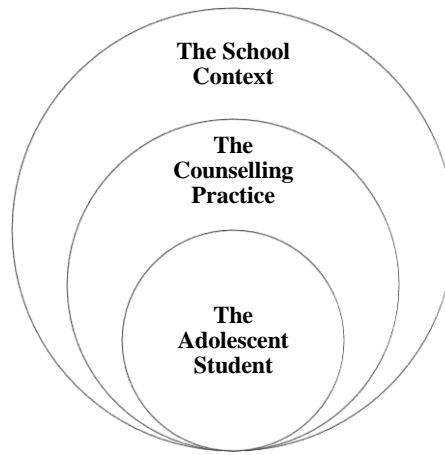
**Formal assessments:**

- Becks depression inventory, cognitive and risk assessment tools
- HEADSS assessment (SPINZ) – looks at home, education, eating, activities, drugs and alcohol, sexuality, depression, suicide and safety)

**Presenting problems and issues:**

- Suicidal tendencies, self-harming
- Safety issues
- Identity issues/sexual identity
- Sexual and physical abuse
- Bullying
- Anxiety and depression
- Friendship/peer issues
- Family dysfunction and parental crime
- Divorce/blended families
- Alcohol and drug abuse
- Teenage pregnancy/abortion
- Eating disorders and body image
- Obsessive compulsive disorder
- Poverty
- Adolescents in care

## **Appendix O – Holistic-content interpretation: Abbigail’s story - A story of cultural sensitivity and respect**



*I’ve heard it said that the relationship is 80% of counselling and I don’t know how you measure what percentage relationship is, but it certainly feels like the foundations on which everything else is built. You can imagine if something has wobbly foundations then that building isn’t going to stand up anyway. It doesn’t matter whether it’s 20% or 80% it’s vital.*

Abbigail’s story of counselling in a secondary school is about being culturally sensitive and establishing relationships based on mutual respect. The school context in which Abbigail counsels will be explored first since this context forms the backdrop to her counselling practice.

### **The School Context**

Abbigail does not teach officially at her school but says, “Sometimes a teacher will ask us in to teach about something that might be relevant to what’s going on in the classroom.”

When asked about her contribution to extramural activities Abbigail emphasises: It’s an unspoken expectation. Then there’s enrolling, that’s the other extra curricula that I’m expected to do without choice. And even although nobody ever wants to see me, I’m expected to be present during parent interview evenings, just in case. But the school counsellors are the last thing those kids want their parents to run into.

Abbigail talks about teachers’ expectations that the counsellor is always available:

I have a diary with all the appointments in, but if a teacher brings over someone that they think needs to see me urgently... It's kind of like running a doctor's appointment book and running an emergency department at the same time. You've got to take whoever crashes through the door. I'm constantly weighing up and prioritising and reorganising the diary... I think teachers think I'm just sitting here waiting for them to bring someone through the door, whereas, in actual fact I'm fully booked. I'm always fully booked usually a week or two in advance, so if they bring someone over somebody's got to lose their booked appointment.

Reflecting on how a co-educational school is different from a single gender school Abbigail states:

One of my placements was in a Catholic Girls School. There was a smaller pool. I was going to say a smaller pool of situations, but that's not true either. Virtually all the staff was female so the idea of talking through problems wasn't such an anathema. The idea that you could go and talk to somebody and get some support for something I think is a pretty basic female way of operating. So as a counsellor I didn't feel such a square peg in a round hole as I do in a co-ed school where there's a bit of a, harden up and get on with it kind of thinking in some quarters or in all quarters sometimes.

Abbigail feels that a strength based approach is supported within the **school environment** in which she works:

By some people and not by others. When I first arrived at this school there were teachers in the school who wouldn't ever let students out to go to a counselling session. They didn't mind that the kid had counselling, that's their phrase, but they weren't going to miss their class to do it. Their class was too important, even though they sometimes would refer students to counselling. Now everyone will let a student out of class to see me unless there's an assessment, in which case I wouldn't want them to miss the class. But that's completely turned around now. There might not always be trust in the counselling process, but they're more open to the possibility that this might help. And of course, some people think it's the bee's knees.

Asked if she is aware of teachers at her school who use a strength based approach in their teaching Abbigail reflects, "Yes absolutely, especially in maths it makes a huge difference."

Abbigail believes a strength based approach should be used as part of teaching:

But it's a slightly different situation because in teaching you are teaching students' information which was previously unknown, but then in other ways it's always like one small step up a ladder isn't it? You're always building on what has come before. I would say yes in conjunction with taking students to new places where they haven't been before. I'm not a trained secondary teacher but for me teaching was always about lighting fires of excitement and curiosity and interest and then teaching is easy if you can do that because the kids put the energy into it, they run with it.

Abbigail thinks that introducing a strength based approach into schools should start with teacher education:

Let me go back to the early 80's. One of my sisters and I were both training to be teachers. I was training to be a primary school teacher. My sister was training to be a secondary school teacher in languages. It was very evident to my sister and me that I was learning how to teach children, my sister was learning how to teach her subject... I really think in Secondary Teachers College they need to have one year where they're learning to teach their subject and they need a second year where they're learning to teach children. Where they're learning about child development and how children learn, the impact of trauma on learning and in particular how that affects the ability to do mathematics. They need to learn about the legal aspects of teaching, about CYFS and the school's responsibility in loco parentis, all these things that come with teaching that my sister never learned at Teachers College. She was learning how to teach French and German. So, I really think another year is needed at Secondary Teachers College. The training is woefully inadequate.

### **The Counselling Practice**

In exploring Abbigail's story of her counselling practice, I started our conversation by asking what made her decide to become a counsellor. She reveals:

It was first suggested I become a counsellor by one of my counsellors. At the time, I was an ex-primary teacher training in landscaping and I thought, "Who'd want to be a counsellor and listen to people tell you their problems all day?" I couldn't imagine a job I'd enjoy less. I co-authored a book with another teacher I worked with and we set up a support group and it's through that work and the encouragement of people I

was working with there that I trained as a counsellor. I only did it to support the work I was doing [with the support group] but while I was doing my training my marriage came to an end. So I needed a job that paid more than just a very small income. And the only practicums I could get were in schools, it was just so hard to get placements. I thought, “Well why don’t I become a school counsellor?” I had children at school so I thought it would work for my family. It would leave me at home during the school holidays so I would be able to care for my kids. Instead of having them run around the streets and become some other school counsellor’s problem. That’s really how I got into it. It wasn’t a plan. It was never a goal of mine to become a counsellor. But here I am and I’m doing it and I just love it and couldn’t imagine doing anything else.

Abbigail talks about her training as a counsellor:

I was trained in narrative at Unitec. That separates the person from the problem and looks at the problem as an external thing in its own right. You then look at the relative power the person has over the problem and how much power the problem has over the person. You look at how you can increase the person’s power over the problem. What things they’ve tried in the past and what they already know because they’re the experts in their own lives. What have they tried, what are the alternatives stories that tell them they can achieve this?

Abbigail **sees strength based counselling as**

Counselling that helps the client mine through their past experiences to find the examples where that demonstrate they can do a particular task, or think in a particular way, or have power over a particular situation which it seemed to them they were hopeless in the face of. Often, they’ll come with the dominant story that, “I can’t do this because, or I’m stuck here because, or this is all unfair because.” And so while that’s really dominant at the time, if you look through their past you can often find the alternative stories, that show them actually they have dealt with this before; they have succeeded here before and then look at ways they managed to do that. And support them while they find a particular way to do it in a particular situation which seems powerless. The other thing is about resiliency. Often students may have failed at something and people are looking at what they expected and what the student achieved, but in actual fact when you look at what the student’s

living with its amazing what was achieved. And so they've got this resiliency and you look at how you can grow that, or maybe make it more visible to the audience.

Abbigail continues:

A phrase I use, you're using the words strength based and it is strength based, but I also talk about taking agency for your own circumstances. And to me that is really an important point that young people who feel disempowered actually feel, not only enabled but, a sense of agency in their own lives.

Abbigail reflects on how she came to use strength based counselling:

I didn't know it existed, the counselling that I had was very much looking internally and what's wrong with me and why do I feel this. And oh how terrible - a process of always ripping off scabs that were healing and being in constant pain. I guess I didn't know there were other kinds of counselling. I enrolled at Unitec because it was the closest place I could find ... and when the early lectures explained how we don't look inside and we're not talking about what you're feeling and what's wrong with you, I thought, "Oh this sounds a bit weird, where have I landed, oh my goodness." And I thought, "Well don't panic just stay here for a year and if you think you've made a mistake you can apply for a different course next year and it won't matter." But during that year I came to realise what a treasure this was and I just felt, like God was looking after me and put me there. Because I don't think I would have chosen it if I had known. You apply to do a counselling course before you know that much about what counselling is. Some people might have the luxury of doing a whole lot of research, but I certainly applied in ignorance and my only experience was as a consumer of counselling. I would never have chosen to go anywhere else now that I know what I know.

Abbigail's **counselling philosophy** is based on the principles of narrative counselling:

It's about not being the expert, on the one hand and about separating the client from the problem. The client is not the problem the problem is the problem and that the problem is not situated inside them, so that leaves them as a competent person who either is or will be able to have power over that situation. It's looking at the problem as being somewhere in the system they're living in and seeing the problem as being there and looking at how the system can be changed. And sometimes it's only about where they stand, so if here's the problem and they're standing here, sometimes

they just need to go around it and have a look at the problem from different sides and then they're looking at it differently. Sometimes it's just a journey of discovery; it's not necessarily anything that needs to change.

I ask Abbigail if this journey is one the adolescent makes within but she clarifies: No, it's not a journey into themselves. One of the ideas I use is looking at their life as if it's a map and taking a journey around different places on the map of their life. Some places they don't go to very frequently. There might be this valley, they might draw it as a valley and so what does it look like from all points. And it could look quite differently from a place, they might spend a lot of time here but that problem, or that issue, might look very differently when they're looking at it from that side.

I comment that her example would be one of externalising the problem so you're not so embedded in it and can see all aspects thereof. Abbigail agrees:

For example, the problem might be in their relationship with their mother and they might be looking at, trying to imagine what it might be like for their mother to be experiencing that. And then I might ask some questions around, "So in twenty times when you've got a fifteen-year-old daughter who has got that problem, how might you deal with it?" And then often that will help them to see that mum's trying her best, or that what mum needs is dad to come on side and help too.

Reflecting on other **counselling modalities** she uses Abbigail says, "I use different modalities but I do it all from a narrative perspective ...in the sense that I see the person as competent and the problem is the problem. I don't accept descriptions of students that are deficit saturated."

Later on in our conversation Abbigail reveals, "I use narrative to help the student find solutions. My goal is to never give advice because I think my client has to live their life with the choice that they've made."

Intellectually, Abbigail **draws from** the writings of Winslade and Monk to assist her in her counselling practice.

When asked if there is a situation where strength based counselling may **not always be appropriate** Abbigail replies:

I can't think of one ... if I'm not tall enough to reach a jar off the shelf then I've got to get a chair, but that's a resource I've got. Whereas other people might just be able to reach up and get a jar but we can only use the resources we've got.

Reflecting on instance where the counselling process itself may not be viable Abbigail assets:

There's times when the counselling never takes off, but I don't think that's anything to do with the fact that it's strength based, or otherwise. The times when I have found the counselling just never seems to come to life is when the student is referred by someone else. They didn't know about the referral, they're caught on the back foot and often the student thinks that the referral means that someone sees them as in deficit. They panic. Sometimes they'll come back and say they've changed their mind. I'm just reminded of the NZAC Code of Ethics where it says that you should not do counselling with an unwilling client. And yet that's not how our society operates, the courts, a school, usually around areas of discipline, can refer an unwilling client to counselling. That's an example of being the square peg in the round hole that I was mentioning earlier. The school just expects me to wave a magic wand and fix this kid with no understanding of what they might be dealing with in their everyday life. They just want the kid to stop bullying others, or stop talking back to their teachers and often these students have been incredibly traumatised in their early years of life and this is just their survival strategy. So I think they are using their strengths actually, it's just their strengths aren't working.

Abbigail discusses her **core business** as a school counsellor:

I see my core business as supporting students in any way I can in order to support their education process. The Youth 2000 Health Survey found that young people learn better when they're happy and healthy. We have a school nurse to help work on the health aspect and a school counsellor to work on that happiness aspect. Now happiness is not actually my goal for my students, but that word happy really is what we're heading for, which is basically good mental health, healthy thinking and probably contentment rather than happiness would be what I would be wanting to support my students to find for themselves.

When asked to elaborate further on how contentment and happiness are different, Abbigail explains:



I think people come to counselling because something's not right and they feel miserable about it. And until people think about it, they often think that the opposite of sadness or being miserable is happiness. And in a poetic sense I guess it is, but in terms of life experience I think the issue is whether we're content or not content with our circumstances and it's the not being content that can make us miserable. If we find the contentment then the misery can go away. One idea I really like is the Hebrew word shalom which means peace, it also means to be complete. And within the idea of that word is the idea that you cannot be complete without being peaceful, and you cannot be peaceful without being complete. Working to that sense of internal peace and completeness is the way forward through whichever problem has stopped us in our path. When we've worked our way forward through that problem that's when we'll reach, as far as possible, that peaceful state.

In terms of **presenting problems**, she deals with most often Abigail laughs and says:

You know, things come in waves, and every week the answer to this question would be different. You have weeks where it's all sexual abuse, or mostly sexual abuse and you have other weeks where it's such toxic family patterns that the young person can't live at home and they need help to find somewhere else to live. For the last couple of weeks, it's been peer issues, but that will change with the weather. Abigail reflects that while there is no specific problem that stands out: It's all about relationships and the difficulties that different kinds of relationships can bring for the young person who often has very little power in their own life. They're living with the results of decisions that adults make, or they're living with the way adults in their family are choosing to live. For example, parents who are both abusing drugs and alcohol, or parents who have committed crimes and are now in prison and the young person is in some kind of care and that may not be going very well. Young people have so many other people's decisions to contend with that impact majorly on their lives. And it may be about how adults see them. There's one boy who has been in trouble at school for drugs on more than one occasion, but he doesn't use. He lives in an area where there's a lot of dope use and he comes to school smelling like dope. But it's his clothes hanging on the line downwind of a family who grow and smoke their own.

Abigail considers how strength based counselling is **different from to approaches**:

In my experience as a consumer, other approaches are constantly focusing on the deficit: what's wrong with you and how come you've ended up there? When I hear stories, I'm thinking of one person who has been in counselling for five years getting more and more depressed and her counsellor is now threatening to report her to CYFS as an unfit mother because she's too depressed to take care of the children. And yet this counsellor is the person she's relying on to help her out of this place of depression. It just feels like every time she starts to heal the counselling rips the scabs off and she's back to raw. She's so dependent on this counsellor. She thinks this counsellor is the only way out of her circumstances. It's shocking. I'm so embarrassed to be a counsellor when I hear stories like that. Just like the situation I was in when I applied to train as a counsellor, most people out there don't understand the differences between the different styles of counselling and it's fair enough that that particular woman thinks that's what counselling is and that's how counsellors behave. She's a friend of someone I know a little bit and that person came and asked me what I thought. And I said, "Look I'm just shocked to hear that, to me that's abuse it's not therapeutic." The word therapeutic implies some kind of therapy, something that's good for you, something that makes life better, makes your circumstances better.

Later in our conversation Abbigail again refers to the above example of deficit based counselling:

I just feel concerned for the people out there who are doing the kind of counselling I told you about - that woman who'd been in therapy for five years. Clients don't know what counselling could be if they're getting that kind of counselling and aren't in a position to make changes, because they don't really have a choice if they don't know what else there is. Now I'm assuming that counsellor was seeing an external supervisor once a fortnight, how come things like that can continue? If we're talking about strengths based therapies then surely, we'd have to call what was going on there, weakness based therapy and that's really concerning. I can only assume that person was having supervision and how come the supervisor wasn't concerned that this person had been coming for five years. Surely that should ring alarm bells. I mean I see clients for an average of five sessions, now within that the range is one to twenty-five sessions. But still. This woman, she's kind of crippled

and she's living on a benefit on very little money and when I say crippled I don't mean physically. Just kind of paralysed like a rabbit in headlights and can't find the courage to say to her counsellor, "Actually I don't want to come back any more." I've been to a therapist, long before I trained as a counsellor, I didn't want to come back to and I didn't know how to tell her because she was so powerful. In the end, I just had to keep making excuses for not going to my next appointment, it was like nothing else seemed to work. And then finally I plucked up the courage to ring at night when I knew she wouldn't be there to leave a message to say I didn't want to come back. And that took eight weeks to do and I had a University Degree in Social Sciences!

Abbigail says she knows when she has **done a good job** with one of her clients, "Because of the feedback they give me, they're so effusive sometimes and it's never asked for."

Abbigail confirms that this feedback is informal:

I never ask for written feedback, there just isn't the time. There are two hundred and twenty-five school hours in the term and last term if each referral resulted in five counselling sessions, there were something like eight hundred and ninety counselling hours, so how do you do it? So therapeutic letters and written feedback, they're luxuries for people working in other circumstances. I can certainly see the point of them, especially the therapeutic letters. But I'm just not going to run myself into a hole in the ground to do that. We're a decile three school and poverty exacerbates everything and a lot of the people who live out here in West Auckland do so because they can't afford to live anywhere else. Not all our students are in a decile three home, a lot of my clients are in a decile one or two home.

The **skills** Abbigail thinks she is called on to use most often as a counsellor is her ability:

To calm down a situation which causes great distress to the student and even though at the end of the session the circumstances of their life haven't changed they feel differently about it. And they feel like this isn't so terrible anymore, something can be done about it.

The **strength that Abbigail relies on most** as a counsellor is:

I don't consider myself an expert. I consider the student to be the expert in their own lives and that they have to find an answer that's going to work for them. I don't lecture them, sometimes I say, "I'm just putting on my mum's hat for a moment and

I'm just going to tell you how important breakfast is and it'll only last a few minutes." Or I might say, "Well did you know I'm the breakfast police in the school?" But we do it in a funny way. I think if I had to feel like I was the expert in everything that would be a really heavy yolk to bear. I just can't imagine how that would be for the client or for me. So, I think the fact that I'm quite happy for the student to be the expert in their lives and for me, not to be the expert, to not know. I just really consider myself somebody who journeys along with them through part of their lives for a tiny little bit and we have some interesting conversations. And that they teach me as much as I teach them, they teach me more than I teach them probably. I think that, if you feel like you've got to put on big shoes and clomp around it must be horrible.

Of her role as school counsellor Abbigail is **most proud** of:

The relationships I form with students, the fact that they trust me and come to me when there is a big issue in their life. I might be someone way on the periphery of their life, they might just know about me that a friend came to see me or something like that and then something goes wrong in their life and they'll come and see me, they seek me out. It's always been my goal since I arrived at this school to increase the rate of self-referral which was incredibly low when I arrived. The self-referral tended to be large groups of drama queens and I don't get those students at all any more now. I get the students with the serious sexual abuse, the family violence, the depression, suicide, self-harming. All those things which were really hidden away with, and bundled together with helplessness and hopelessness and shame and kept out of sight while the drama queens had the spotlight. And the drama queens don't bother coming because they know I'll just say, "You have to wait three weeks." But I'm very careful to have a quick word to see what's going on because sometimes drama queens are victims of sexual abuse, or have been through something serious. So that's why I'm constantly prioritising.

**At the heart of successful school counselling Abbigail believes the first priority is:**

Accessibility, if students can't get to you then it doesn't matter whether you're a brilliant counsellor, or a dead beat. There's got to be accessibility. That means the school has to, to some degree, support students coming to counselling. And then second is the relationship, the rapport and the relationship.... I don't have a great

relationship with every student who comes. I work hard on every single one and some students are just easy to work with. I don't know that the deficit is anything to do with me, some students just are going to be harder work for whoever works with them, but I don't give up. I mean a student is free to go at any time if they wish. We had a boy come today with who, referred by a teacher and he just didn't want to be there but he treated us with respect and he was invited back at any time if that's what he wishes. And I wish teachers had a few lectures in their training about how counselling works and understood the idea that the right time for counselling is when the client is ready. And about the motivational interviewing, the wheel of change that you say at CADS, so to be pre-contemplative and then contemplative and then be ready for change and at that point that's when the client is ready to do the work. And if they send them over before then we're really wasting their time, wasting our time. I mean we could have a quick conversation with them about the benefits of change, but that's not counselling that's lecturing. I'd rather give them a pamphlet about that and, "I thought you might be interested in this, if you ever are please come back I'd love to talk some more with you."

Her **message to other counsellors** is:

Read. Especially a book by Winslade and Monk called Narrative Counselling for Schools. I've got the first edition. I think it's just delightful and makes narrative therapy very accessible even for people who don't actually want to become school counsellors in the end, I still think it's very worthwhile reading

When asked to reflect on how her counselling has **changed over the years** Abbigail says:

I think I've got more confidence to ask nosier questions. I was probably a bit timid when I first started, trying to be extremely respectful and while I don't feel any less respect I also feel that I can ask some of those sorts of deeper, more personal questions. I would probably ask more challenging questions now too. Whereas when I started I don't think I ever used a question that started with "why". I'm very careful how I use "why" but I will use it sometimes now. When I first started I was very meticulous about taking notes and leaving paper trails of everything, whereas I will do now if a student's suicidal, but often I'll ask students to take their own notes, or might just do a quick little diagram. Sometimes I'll just write the word, seen. I've never been a surfer but I've watched surfers, it's kind of bit more just like riding the

wave and you're feeling the energy following along with it and seeing where it takes you. You might end up on a different part of the shore from where you thought you were going, but that's fine it's. Whereas I think when I first started I felt a huge amount of responsibility, now I really do see how competent my clients are having seen how well they have handled their lives and their circumstances.

Abigail comments on how she thinks her **counselling practice would have changed in five years' time**, "I hope it would be more of the same actually. I hope I will have found ways to help students to have even more agency in their lives."

### **The Adolescent Student**

Throughout Abigail's narrative it is apparent that she has a great deal of respect and care for the adolescent's she counsels.

Asked what she thinks of **using a strength based approach with adolescents**

Abigail reflects:

I think they blossom as a result, often in lots of ways outside the classroom, outside my office as well. I think their self-confidence increases; they've often reported other issues that came with the main issue. For example, trouble getting on with their mother that just seems to disappear. So, it's like they find within themselves, or they access within themselves, all their strengths, not just the strengths that were required to work on that issue, but they start thinking in a strength based solution focused way, instead of in terms of deficits. It's kind of like it becomes a generalised way of thinking and living.

Abigail says that by using strength based counselling she helps students:

Think about things slightly differently. If you can stand up to a bully in the school yard, can you use that experience to stand up to a bully at home and what's the difference and how would you access that strength? So, it's repackaging to suit a new situation.

Abigail talks about **adolescent wellbeing** and how she perceives it:

I quite like the Māori view of Te Whare Tapa Wha, I think that applies to everybody irrelevant of language and culture. That's body, spirit, community and family wellbeing supporting overall wellbeing. You can get by if there's a bit missing, but if there's too much missing it all comes tumbling down. In which case,

it still exists but instead of being four walls with a roof on top, you have a pile of blocks and they can be a bit disconnected, but they're still all physically there. It's just a matter of finding a way to reconstruct the building, nothing is lost.

Abbigail believes **strength based counselling contributes to adolescent wellbeing**, “in each of those four areas,” body, spirit, community and family wellbeing. She explains:

Spiritual is a little bit harder in a school setting, especially in a government secular school situation. I had one practicum placement in a Catholic School which was lovely because you could bring in the spiritual aspect and you could pray with students. I have prayed with students here, but only Māori students, and that's when I brought in our head of Te Reo who has a strong pastoral relationship with the students. It was like following her lead and then joining in. The difference it made was enormous, it was huge. The student concerned had lost someone really close to them through suicide and had found out by text during morning break which was an hour before which was really shocking. So in terms of the physical body, I work quite closely with our school nurse where appropriate and I'm always sending students to her and she does the same. Probably 50% of the students that see me for depression would be helped just by me talking to them about what food they eat and when they eat and what they eat. By improving that their depression disappears. That often involves getting parents on board with making sure there's food they can have for breakfast, so that's the body. We also look at the need for sleep, teenagers need about nine hours a night sleep and often get only six, or seven. So the body, the spirit, the family - I'm also trained as a family therapist, so we do family therapy work here, not as often as I would like, usually because the students don't want their family involved. Or I probably offer it too little just because of the time factor, but certainly we do a lot of talking about the student being part of a system. The family being a system and helping them look at where they fit in that system and how their particular family's system work. And how they can use the knowledge they have to make the changes they would really like to have. And I often ask magic questions, “If you could wake up tomorrow and everything was just the way you wanted, what would it look like?” And we compare that with what they've got and then we look at how they can get there. I often use the language baby steps. “What's one little thing you could do? If you change just one little thing what would it be?” And so

they would tackle the issues one at a time and there's no sense of fixing the whole world in one go but just with lots of little interventions into their family systems.

Abbigail considers that the **best aspect of using a strength based counselling approach** is:

You're looking at something that is already there in the student. You're helping the student focus on a different aspect of themselves so they can use skills they already have to deal with a different kind of issue that they haven't dealt with before. It's very empowering to the student. It feels like it is life giving. But I'm not giving anything that they didn't have.

According to Abbigail, the part of the counselling process **adolescents' value most** is "having some agency in their own lives." When I enquire if there is anything else Abbigail laughs and replies, "I'll just say that three times actually."

In relating a counselling experience, she had with a young girl Abbigail reflects on the need to be aware of an adolescent's culture throughout the counselling process:

We had four appointments to complete the work. She was in tears on and off through the whole appointment as she was talking about her dysfunctional family. It turned out that, in her experience, the situation which was really causing everything else to happen was a younger brother who's also a student at our school. He has bullying kinds of behaviour over his mother and his sister; she's older than he is. Dad's not very well and wasn't intervening and mum was accepting it and so the daughter accepted it too, because this is what was being modelled. But it was breaking her heart. She's from a different culture from my culture, so we talked quite a bit about her culture. She told me ways that families operate within her culture. Then through that lens what she could do, what steps she could take. We explored a range of those and she was very clear that she didn't want to be disrespectful to her father because he wasn't stepping in. I explained that my concern was the kinds of behaviours her younger brother was demonstrating. They were the kinds of behaviours I used to see in men whose wives were ending up in Shine or Western Refuge and places like that, the same very narrow range of behaviours that men who abuse women demonstrate. And that I was concerned for her brother's wellbeing. If he was never challenged in his behaviour, what did this mean for his future wife and children? So she decided she would talk to her parents



and she did talk to her parents. There was a family talking and her parents were very concerned they didn't want her brother to grow up with this behaviour unchallenged. Through her approaching them they have spoken to the brother. And there was a course I offered to the brother. After the fourth appointment, she felt like a weight had been taken off her shoulders, because she had found a way to approach her family. In her first and second appointments, it seemed hopeless to her that within the context of her culture she could do anything at all. It seemed really quite bleak and hopeless. I had imagined that this work would be going on for a long time and she would need a lot of support to get through, especially considering how extremely upset she'd been in the first session. We're talking about a Year 13 girl here, not a little one so the tears were quite extreme and she wasn't the sort of girl you'd describe as a drama queen. And by the fourth session it had turned around a hundred and eighty degrees, her sense that it wasn't hopeless, there were things she could do and she took those steps and everything fell into place so quickly and easily, she was quite surprised.

Abbigail believes that an important part of the counselling process for adolescents is having **family support**. She reflects on two different counselling experiences where family support was significant:

He identified this older sister as someone he could go and talk to about his concerns. The older sister talked with the other siblings. It's another culture, not my own culture, a Māori family. And they met and had a whanau meeting about what was going on and the decision was made that it was time dad stopped his violent practices and with his family support dad has stopped... So instead of it being a negative experience for him being part of his family as it was a couple of years ago, it's now a positive experience, that's the family from which he draws his support and his strength.

She'd been seeing me off and on about things going on in her family. In Year 10 she decided she wasn't going to live with her abusive father anymore. She moved into grandma's house, so she was still in the family. That was done with everybody in the family agreeing. Then she enlisted grandma as an ally and grandma was so smitten by this, because she'd been in two abusive marriages, she decided that none of her daughters were ever going to be in abusive situations again,

victims of abuse again. It became three generational, three generations of women standing up to abuse... It was like turning on a light in the family and as the light gradually spread through the family the last pockets resisted them the hardest... But her and the grandma were standing staunch... it was really interesting to see, like rings in a puddle go out and out and out and to see her parents move further and further away from what was happening at the centre.

While Abbigail considers family support to be an important part of the counselling process she acknowledges that sometimes adolescents are reluctant to have their families involved:

Twice I've had students who have been extremely depressed and suicidal and they said, "There is no way I am to talk to their family about it because that will only make things worse." One was a girl and she has a step father. Mum is very embarrassed about her depression and if it's talked about in the family the step father is dismissive and he can't be bothered. He doesn't want to know about it and he hates the fact that this, very beautiful step daughter isn't perfect. I get the picture of running around in little circles after her husband. To refer to Marinoto requires parental consent and sometimes it's the only solution I can see and yet the student refuses to give permission for me to speak to the family about it. It feels like I have my arms chopped off and there's nothing I can do. And there was another senior boy, who said, "If I tell his family they'll just get angry." He was from another culture and in the end the family were informed by the school because he was attending school so irregularly and his father came and spoke to me and brought his son so there was more openness there.

Abbigail says in instances where there was no support from the family, the counselling process was hampered. "It impeded the counselling - the student's view that the father would be angry. In fact, that wasn't my experience. Although of course we don't know what happens when they leave my office and go home."

As to what makes her **relationship with adolescent clients' work**, Abbigail is humble in her reply, "I'm just me. I don't have any magic formula. I think they know that I care."

## **Appendix P – Holistic-content interpretation: Jessica’s story - A story with heart**

*I have a real heart for this place. I think the girls know  
I have a really big heart for them.*

Jessica’s story stands apart from the other counselling narratives in the sense that she is very aware of her counselling philosophy, values and the way in which she positions herself in relation to her counselling practice. As she tells the story of her counselling practice Jessica weaves together a tale founded on a strong philosophical position which she uses as the foundation for establishing relationships with the adolescents she counsels. The counselling modalities Jessica employs, also stem from her philosophical positioning, and are supported by her counselling experience and the techniques she uses to implement the counselling modalities she favours. Jessica’s philosophy, values and positioning, her relationships with adolescents, the counselling modalities she uses, her experience, counselling practice and techniques all weave together to tell the story that is her counselling practice. All these facets of her practice are represented separately in the above heuristic device and in the discussion below however the boundaries between them are permeable. Therefore, while these aspects are discussed under separate sections, for ease of reference, they all overlap.

### **The Counsellor**

#### **Philosophy, Positioning and values**

Jessica’s philosophical position stems from an innate wisdom that she has garnered through her life experience. She sees strength-based counselling practice as part of this wisdom:

*I think wisdom comes from a lot of places...it comes from research ... it comes from the commonality of the human experience and what makes a difference. I think strength based practice, has some knowledge about all of that. People leave uplifted, they’re not as burdened, they have something to work towards, and it’s a better place to be.*

Jessica’s initiation into the helping profession had its origins in her career as a nurse where she felt her skills were not being utilised adequately. After some self-reflection, Jessica decided to pursue a career in counselling which appears to be a more natural fit for her:

I was a nurse and decided that *my skills* were not *behind a mask, gown and operating theatre*. I had a little chat to God about what I wanted to do with my life. I did some studies at Unitec to see if counselling type subjects interested me and that was where I discovered that's what I wanted to do. I really believe this is the *right path* for me.

The metaphor "*behind a mask, gown and operating theatre*" that Jessica uses to describe her skills before becoming a counsellor are symbolic of a transformation process showing how her skills have evolved and moved from the background to take the forefront in her counselling practice.

Jessica's training as a counsellor involved both the acquisition of counselling skills and social work ideas. Jessica sees the social work aspect of her training as being imperative especially for school counsellors and is strongly in favour of counsellors being educated on social work concepts:

The social work practice programme at Unitec has social workers, community developers and counsellors who all do the same training for two years...the belief being that if you're a social worker you need to have counselling skills and if you're a counsellor, *particularly in a school*, you need to have some *awareness* around *social work ideas*.

Jessica explains that when she began her training as a counsellor she was neither aware that there were different counselling approaches nor that there were numerous counselling modalities from which to choose. Her choice of training programme happened by chance, and she credits her Christian faith and her belief in a higher calling for this choice. The training programme she chose was based primarily on a narrative strength-based approach to counselling. She draws on the principles of narrative counselling in explaining the impact that this training had on her life in empowering her to move away from, what in narrative counselling is called, a *problem* story and enabled her to create an *alternative* story:

I applied to Unitec and that is what the programme was. I did not have *any* awareness that there were particular modalities. I think it was divine intervention. It changed my life in terms of how I thought about myself; it was very *powerful* for me to be able to *story myself differently*.

Jessica is a narrative counsellor and her counselling philosophy is based on narrative counselling principles. She believes that it is important that each person's story be heard and that in the telling of their story adolescents *become* who they are and are able to forge their own sense of identity:

Why do I choose ... [narrative counselling]? Because ... it's about [students] *creating* a story of themselves and their lives that *they* want. They *self-determine* - they *speak* themselves into *existence*.

This philosophical positioning continues throughout Jessica's narrative and appears to be based in existential theory? Existentialism holds that we are who we choose to be rather than the labels, roles, stereotypes, definitions, or other preconceived categories that are imposed on us by societal discourse:

An opportunity to have a conversation with someone is an opportunity to *reacquaint* yourself with who you want to be. I am interested in, "Who do you want to be? How would you like to think you could be in that situation?"

Jessica reflects that when counselling a student, she listens to the problem story but does not dwell there. She believes it is more beneficial to encourage stories of hope. This positioning again stems from narrative counselling principles and signifies a strength-based approach rather than a deficit-focused approach to counselling:

I *don't* really work with *problem saturated approaches*. I hear problem stories, it's really important for me to hear the problem story. But I'm much more interested in hearing the *other stories* that are more *hope-filled*, stories that don't necessarily get heard.

The importance of stepping beyond the problem story and looking to the positive aspects in a person's life is a theme that Jessica continues to reiterate throughout her narrative:

Recognise and notice the good things in their life. If I had someone come with their problem saturated story, I'd want to know. "What's actually going well for you now?" It's not often that I don't hear something that's going well.

Jessica believes an important part of narrative counselling work is to listen to a person's problem story to gain an awareness of how people position themselves in relation to their problem. Furthermore, narrative counsellors need to consider how the problem story fits into the broader social context in which people live:

We [narrative counsellors] are interested in the stories that have *influenced* someone to *believe* what they believe about themselves. Problems are *not* within them ... I never see a problem within a person, there is a *social context* to it. I'm *interested* in exploring that social context. Sometimes I make assumptions about that [social context] and how students might *position* themselves, particularly for our Pasifika or international girls. They're a marginalised group.

Furthermore, the problem story that people tell may not be their story at all but may instead be part of a societal discourse that a person has made their own:

It's also a perspective that they have. It might not necessarily be their story but some other discourse they're operating under about who they're supposed to be. Strength based work is about wanting to know, is this what they think or what other people think? Does the story belong to them or is it some institutional framework, or expectations from family that say they're not good enough? It depends on what the context is, doesn't it?

When asked if a strength-based counselling approach is always appropriate Jessica replies in the affirmative and again reflects in the importance of moving people beyond their presenting problem to a more positive frame of mind:

I think it's *always* appropriate. It's really important to *hear* where people are at first... But I don't think it's helpful to keep people there... It is part of our responsibility to have someone experience *hope* in talking about what they're going through... Strength based work to me is making sure they're *supported*, know how to support themselves and know the things they need to bring *joy* into a hard day...

A fundamental requirement in counselling practice is to ensure the safety of your clients throughout the counselling process and to be as sure as possible that they are not a suicide risk. This is of particular significance for adolescents in New Zealand where suicide rates are extremely high:

I always ask safety questions, because we've had a student suicide, so I'm always on the alert with every student I see, "Are you safe, do you have thoughts about not wanting to live?"

Jessica's recalls a counselling session she had with a student and speaks of her ability to show genuine interest in the person before her. In addition, she shows an awareness of the temptation to judge a person based on what she sees but, through this awareness is able to

prevent herself from succumbing to judgement and remains open to how the adolescent chooses to position herself:

This young person came to see me, her hair was over her face, I could only see one eye, and I could have done some labelling around that but I chose not to. When I meet someone for the first time I'm really interested in knowing a lot about them, what's going well, not just the problem story. I look at how young people *position* themselves and I look at their feeling state and the context that they're living under.

Jessica sees herself as a leader in the school environment whose role it is to support, not only students but also, the school management and teaching staff. This duty of care stems from a sincere desire to assist those around her:

I'm a leader, I input into other people's development, deans and teachers, and support them into their potential and their strength. Supporting teachers who feel quite downtrodden by parent complaints or teacher complaints...I do that because I genuinely care about them and they know that.

Jessica reveals that while she takes on this leadership role in the school, no one at the school is truly aware of what she does. She embraces a positive discourse in her practice and does restorative relational work:

No one would really know what I do actually...I do relational restorative work.

Those are the themes that I work with. But it wasn't always easy with the person who's my senior.

Beyond being, a leader Jessica positions herself as a role model for establishing deferential relationships:

I model something in the school about respectful relationships and that's the best way that we can feel safe and realise our potential.

In terms of the students she counsels, again Jessica believes counsellors need to take a leadership role in supporting adolescents. Her practice is based on a strength-based discourse that sees people as being inherently good but subject to the circumstances in their lives:

We [counsellors] are here to *guide* young people. We're all made to be *good*, we are all good, but *things* trip us up.

Jessica is very aware of the need for counselling young people, especially for Māori and Pasifika students, and confides that she wishes she was of either Māori or Pasifika origin so that she would be better placed to meet the counselling needs of this group:

I remember having cultural supervision with a Tongan woman, I wished I'd had brown skin because I could work better with Māori and Pasifika, and I thought that was important, they were the most in need.

Instead of embracing the discourse that it is more advantageous for a person from a particular cultural group to be counselled by someone from the same cultural background, Jessica is told during cultural supervision that her power lies in embracing who she is. This aligns with what Jessica discusses above in relation to the need for students to be made aware of the societal discourses imposed on them and as a counsellor, allowing them to create their own story:

Someone said, "Jessica, it's who you are as a Pakeha or Palagi [European] that will make the difference. The fact that you're with them in that way as a white person that's where your power is."

Assisting adolescents in creating their own story is a strong driving force for in Jessica's counselling practice. However, Jessica is aware of what motivates her and reflects that she believes life is precious but does not foist these beliefs on the students she counsels:

I have a responsibility to *support* them to have the *best* story they can to believe in themselves, to learn and to be happy. Life's a special experience we're not here by chance. Those are *my* beliefs but I *don't* impose them on my kids.

In addition to being, a narrative counsellor Jessica is a family therapist. A role she believes is a rarity in a school environment but a beneficial one in that, during the course of a students' school career, a school counsellor can really become acquainted with the student and their families. The benefit of having first-hand knowledge of a student is not necessarily the case with family therapy that occurs outside the school:

I'm a family therapist. It's an example of what I bring to the school counselling role. ... How many other schools do family therapy? Many people refer out, but there's a real difference when you know a student, and then you work with their family, and they're here for the next seven years.

Jessica views strength based counselling as "anything that would make a *difference*." As a peace ambassador, Jessica positions herself in a strength-based discourse that promotes a



positive view of life. She sees strength based counselling as being closely related to her positioning around peace and her belief that life should be embraced:

Strength based work is all about keeping people *connected positively* to life, to people, to hope. I'm an ambassador for peace; the Cool Schools programme is done through the Peace Foundation. I take a *position*, I have an *intention* that people learn how to *manage* their lives well and that they sort out their *conflicts* and that they try to make the most of the experience while they have it.

Asked to reflect on her best experience of using strength based counselling Jessica explains that it affects students in different ways but regardless of the means through which it affects students, it has an impact on their lives:

There isn't a day or a session that goes by where I don't know that I've made a difference. It could be in a one-off conversation. It could be in one question that might turn someone's life around. It could be over a large chunk of associations over years at a school. Walking alongside girls who have experienced things like suicide in their family, murder in their family, and supporting them in that journey of trying to get their head around school and life and their own safety.

Strength based counselling is not confined to being solely a counselling approach Jessica uses as part of her practice but is fundamentally a part of her life. As such, Jessica draws from her life experience to assist her in her practice and has a keen awareness of the strengths she brings to the counselling role:

My strengths would be my resilience. I keep my work life balance because I burnt out a couple of years ago. [Building resilience] was part of mindfulness training so that I can be calm, present and available in times of crisis.

Jessica's strength is also her passion for what she does which is based on her philosophical position around fairness, harmony and deference:

Another of my strengths is the love that I have for the work and my positions around social justice, peace and respect

While confident of her ability as a counsellor Jessica, is also cognisant of those areas in her practice that require further learning and growth. As such, she actively seeks support from others who excel at what they do:

I'm very professional. I consult with people who are outstanding in their work.

Jessica is adept at dealing with the day-to-day issues that arise in her counselling practice but is also able to step back and gain a holistic view of what she does. In doing so, she is able to reflect that another of her strengths as a therapist is relationship building:

I have a big picture view of things. My strength in my work is the relationships I build as a therapist.

Jessica is a strong advocate for counselling in schools and her tongue in cheek advice to other school counsellors is to gain governmental support for the increase in the number of school counsellors:

I would suggest that they lobby parliament and get some more people in schools. Persuade the government to have a team in a school, because it would just make such a difference.

Jessica's view of the "*best aspect*" of using a strength based counselling approach is based on the discourses of humanistic and positive psychology. Humanistic psychology embraces a holistic approach to human existence, sees the inherent good in all and believes in the opportunity for each of us to achieve our highest potential. Positive psychology moves beyond purely treating mental illness and focuses on nurturing our strengths and making everyday existence more worthwhile (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

I like it [strength based counselling] because it's about what's *good* in people's lives. It's *not judgemental*, it's *accepting* of humanity, it supports *growth*; it supports *the soul's journey*. It helps people step in and *recreate* themselves.

While Jessica's values appear to be based on the discourses of humanistic and positive psychology she recognises the importance of being forthright in her counselling practice and is not a soft touch.

I'd worked in an alternative school where kids had been kicked out and they taught me a lot about how *not* to be too soft and gentle sometimes. I'm quite effective because I can be *straight up*, the kids like that. I'm a bit of a stalwart around *justice*, I will *challenge* people when I think something's not okay, but the way I do it is *acceptable* to young people.

Jessica holds strong Christian beliefs that have a significant influence on her counselling practice. These beliefs are upheld and supported by the context in which she works.

I work in a Catholic school, so strength work is also calling on spiritual practices or beliefs that people may be living by.

Jessica indicates that as a Catholic school the ethos is one of forgiveness, support and being non-judgemental (look up actual ethos of the school) which lends itself to a strength based rather than a punitive driven approach.

I have an influence on the student support team; it's pretty hard to keep a punitive line. But our school is also about forgiveness and I just need to ask the question, "Well what would Christ do?" And people know what that's going to be... So there's a spiritual component, which I consider a strength based practice ... where there's a particular way we're expected to be around here. It's not judgemental and it's being there for someone in their time of need.

Jessica sees her Christian beliefs are being complementary to a strength-based counselling approach. It is apparent that her employment as a counsellor in a Catholic school upholds her beliefs and allows her to draw on them when counselling students.

I wonder with them about spirituality and why they think we're here... When kids believe in God, which a lot do here, asking "what does God think about that, what would God want you to think?" that's a strength-based question... It aligns them with their values and they want to step into that.

### **Modalities**

Jessica draws from several different counselling modalities and views strength based counselling as an umbrella term, that describes several different approaches to counselling. This is evident from the number of counselling approaches Jessica uses in her practice under the label of strength based counselling.

I'm like a *magpie* where I pick up on effective ideas that research tells us are good practice. For me it's an *eclectic mix*, there's a *weaving* together of so many [approaches]. I try to put some of the threads on the page, but they all *come together* in some way. I'm not just doing, you know, *this* model.

While Jessica's strength based counselling, approach is drawn from several different ideas and approaches to counselling they all appear to have their basis in humanistic and positive psychology. Humanistic psychology focuses on each individual's potential and stresses the importance of growth and self-actualization. Positive Psychology focuses on what is going well in a person life and works with them to identify and nurture their strengths. Both these approaches supporting Jessica's core values, are based on a strength-based discourse and

align with Jessica's positioning of herself as Christian, ambassador for peace, narrative counsellor and family therapist.

The processes that I work with are definitely narrative, that's strong. Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) ideas are also really influential. But I wouldn't say that I do narrative strengths and CBT, its way wider than that. Drawing therapy would be strength based. The way that we ask questions narratively would have that strength focus.

Jessica tells the story of an adolescent she is counselling who is in an emotionally abusive home environment. Jessica is of the professional opinion that \*\*\* should be involved however, the student is reluctant for this to happen and Jessica is respecting her wishes.

I've been working with a young person who's got a really sad home life, a controlling dad who's started to drink. I want to make a \*\*\* referral, because her emotional needs aren't being met. But she doesn't want to do that and we're respecting her decision. working at her pace and readiness.

This situation causes the counsellor some anguish. Jessica is intent on upholding her position as a strength based counsellor who empowers students' and respects their right to make their own decisions but also believes that an intervention would be in the student's best interest.

I said to her, "It's really hard for me to know that you go home and you hate it, and you hate him." "Let us know when you would like us to give it a go at having a chat with Dad, because we think it might make a difference." So honouring her and not pushing her into somewhere she's not ready for, being real with her.

Jessica faces an ethical dilemma between staying true to her strength based positioning and her ethical duty of care as a counsellor to ensure that a student is safe and is not a suicide risk.

The question is how do you do it, how can you keep going home? So, drawing on her resilience and having her story that, because she isn't suicidal. But I need to know that, I need to know what her resilience is so that I know that she's safe.

Jessica appeared affronted by my question on what she thinks of using a strength-based counselling approach with adolescents. She appears to consider there to be no other alternative as a counsellor but to support and empower adolescents. It is part of her

professional responsibility and her response to me is defensive as if I were calling her professional status as a counsellor into question.

Why would there even be a question like that? We're responsible for guiding young people. It's a professional responsibility to support them to feel positive about themselves. They're vulnerable and they need to feel there's an answer to where they're at.

### **Practice, experience and counselling techniques**

Jessica emphasises the wisdom and knowledge she has gained through scholarly endeavours and her experience as a counsellor. According to Foucault (1970) this knowledge and wisdom and the ability it gives counsellors to empower adolescents is where the power of the counsellor resides (see literature review). (Note: *look up the word power in Jessica's narrative*).

We [counsellors] have knowledge about what helps people, through our reading and our knowledge around resilience, and they don't know that, so I feel hugely responsible for representing that wisdom in my work. I know what supports resilience – support and positive connections.

While Jessica bases her practice on the knowledge and wisdom, she has gained from various avenues it is not employed only in an abstract sense but in practical ways that assist adolescents:

My work is very practice focused. There are practices that we do to support adolescents to move on.

This knowledge and wisdom and the practical application thereof is not something that can be garnered solely through training and study. It comes with years of experience at counselling students.

That's being a master of what you do, rather than a novice; I didn't know all these things at the beginning.

Jessica talks about the narrative of a student who had an eating disorder. It is apparent in what she says that she looks beyond the student's story to the discourses that are operating under the telling thereof. This depth of insight is fostered by her experience and a strong self-knowledge of her own discursive positioning.

In narrative, we really have to understand the story. We are particularly interested in the discursive positioning, the discourses that people are operating under and wondering about the site of the beginning of her worries around her weight, and it was friendship, which can often be the case.

Jessica considers strength based counselling to be different from other counselling approaches in that it goes beyond focusing on a deficit discourse of merely fixing the problem. It repositions a person so that they are able to see their problem from a different perspective. It makes them more open to innovative ways in which to address their problem and moves them on to other avenues of opportunity.

It is *life giving*. The fact that it makes a *difference* for young people, it makes a difference for families. I think that is what strengths work does. People do not just get problems sorted; they *get more* than they come for. They are *positioned* into a new place, their relationship is in a different place and it has *new opportunities*.

Jessica explains that much of her strength based counselling work involves restorative justice. She sees this process as operating through a discourse of forgiveness, which aligns with the ethos and core values of the Catholic school where she is employed.

The ways that I work it's about justice; it's about finding that connection across culture. The discourse is around forgiveness, and being in a Catholic school the way that we handle it as a school is about restoring what's the harm. A lot of my strengths based work is restorative work, so restorative justice.

According to Buckley and Maxwell (2006) restorative practices in schools are: Those methods of discipline which attempt to focus on the "restoration of relationships" and the creation of a "culture of care" and "responsible citizenship", instead of solely meting out punishment. Restorative practices could include a conference between the bully and the person bullied, involving staff, families and community contacts. Such practices usually involve the acknowledgement of wrongdoing, accountability for actions, the repair of harm or some sort of reparation, and a plan to support both bully and bullied, in collaboration with wider support networks.

Jessica tells the story of a girl who had stolen something and how restorative justice practices were used to heal the harm that was caused. Jessica refers to the girl as "the thief" but is quick to qualify that she does not use this deficit-based term, rather it is how the

student positioned herself. Through this restorative process, not only is the girl's integrity restored but she also elevated to a place that is "*better*" than before. Jessica makes the connection between her Christian beliefs and the restorative justice process and sees it as divinely inspired.

There was this girl, the thief, *not* that we'd use those terms, but that's how she felt. They sit down face-to-face and she says sorry and we were all in tears. It was simple... and she got her "*mana*" re-established. She needed to be forgiven, not that you can expect it, but because she was genuine, sobbing, saying sorry, embarrassed, it *did more* than restore actually. It does more than what was there before, that's *divine intervention*.

Jessica reveals that what stood out for her from this experience was "the power of restoring things back, putting things *right* and *empowering* young people to make good choices."

Jessica reflects on instances where adolescents transgress and make mistakes. She views this, as an opportunity to apply restorative justice practices in order to educate adolescents and foster positive connections, rather than as an occasion to react punitively.

I use these opportunities to coach and teach young people rather than punish them. I think that's strengths based practice. They keep connected, because resilience is about having positive connections at home and at school. And using that opportunity to accept them unconditionally, which is actually why we say we are here, so walking the talk.

In addition to restorative justice practices, the techniques of cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) and woven into this counsellor's strength-based counselling practice. She challenges students to examine their thought processes and to consider alternative options to their usual automatic response.

When people are feeling something I say, "What are your thoughts?" I do some teaching around catching negative thoughts challenging them, changing them. I ask a preference question, that's strength based, "How does that thinking make you feel, what would you like to think? "What could you have done differently?" and try and do that during the week.

CBT is very viewed as an effective tool to use in working with adolescents:

Catching your thoughts, challenging them and changing them, that is a very powerful tool that young people catch onto and makes a big difference quite quickly.

CBT becomes so ingrained in the students that they naturally weigh up their choices before responding to a situation.

That [CBT] changed her life, she now does it automatically thinking about how she chooses to respond rather than reacting. It's giving them life skills and tools.

In addition to CBT, mindfulness practices are also used when counselling students.

Mindfulness is "about slowing down and conscious breathing." Jessica uses mindfulness techniques with adolescents to calm them before or after the counselling sessions:

I find myself teaching kids this. If someone is anxious, mindfulness helps them to be calm before we start talking or before they leave the room. The breathing alleviates their anxiety.

Mindfulness practice aligns with the counsellor's core values of acceptance and care of students, she counsels.

The things I love about mindfulness are the principles of accepting what is, even if you do not particularly like it. Quite a strength focus rather than a problem, looking at what hasn't happened focus.

Jessica talks about the mindfulness principle of being non-judgemental, another one of her core values, and gives an example of how mindfulness can be applied to assist adolescents.

Around self-harm it has helped kids to think about accepting what is, to not judge a situation, to do some conscious breathing and then from that place think about what's helpful. Often, they'll self-harm after a family row. So those things have stopped kids from cutting. It helps them to be more present, to get themselves back to that place before thought and feeling where they think, "Okay what do I want to do, what do I want to say. So, they can remember how to distract and take care of themselves.

This mindfulness technique of allowing an adolescent to be more present and giving them the ability to distract themselves from self-harming is reminiscent of the CBT approach of catching negative thoughts, challenging them and changing them.

This counsellor can reflect critically on her practice and confides that sometimes in her desire to help a student she is over zealous and wants to fix the problem instead of



allowing the student to come to his or her own resolution (Theme fix vs. help). This creates an internal conflict for Jessica between her desire to empower the student and the desire to impart knowledge that may assist the student.

The tension between a desire to step in and take charge, in order to assist the student, and the need to step back, in order to honour and empower the student to make their own choices, is evident throughout this narrative. The ability to find the balance between these choices is a particularly onerous one when there is a threat to a student's safety.

Sometimes in my desire to be helpful I did not listen long enough and let someone talk and share what they were thinking and feeling and what the experience was. I might be too eager to fix and offer ideas...

This counsellor's experience and her mindfulness training have enabled her to be present with the students she counsels. In doing so, students are given a "voice" and are empowered to process their own problems. (Philosophy behind giving someone a voice?)

Mindfulness training has helped me to see that I need to be still with people and be with where they're at, because in the telling of their story, having it respectfully heard, they might be able to process it themselves quite nicely without too much from me. So, let them have a *voice* but the work teaches you.

Another tool used for counselling is the therapeutic letter. In narrative counselling once, an alternative to the problem story has been recognised and told, it is important to reinforce this preferred story. A therapeutic letter written by the counsellor to the student is one of the ways in which to do this (Winslade & Monk, 1999).

There's a really interesting letter that I wrote her, we call it a *therapeutic letter* in *narrative counselling land*.

In using, the term "*narrative counselling land*" Jessica makes the point that the therapeutic letter she uses stems from a narrative counselling discourse. A narrative counselling discourse is one that praises, reaffirms, and encourages the adolescent's preferred story. The discourse is one that is both positive and uplifting.

It is clear from the narrative that the counsellor uses several techniques in her counselling practice and displays an intense commitment to these techniques, which are based on her counselling philosophy, core values and positioning.

In terms of the effect that this positive discourse has on people, the counsellor pauses to consider her answer before replying. She is hesitant in her response and appears to decide that the effect is one that occurs gradually as if by osmosis.

The way that I speak is very *positive*, talk about *positive psychology*. How does that affect people? Well I guess it has to doesn't it?

This number of different roles this counsellor fulfils in the school is alluded to throughout her narrative. These roles include among others those of counsellor, mentor, facilitator, mediator and peace ambassador (see other roles). Jessica however, views her primary role as the work she does with students and their families.

I've been employed more for my work with families. There's been a decision to employ me for those skills.

Jessica is passionate about the work she does with families and believes she has great success in working with them. She does express some frustration that families do not necessarily take her advice on board to assist an adolescent and once again, there is the tension between wanting to step in and take charge and the need to step back and allow the student to drive the counselling process.

My family work is very effective. ...I listen to [the situation] ... and there might be times when intervention isn't always effective. I just need to be with the student... That's not all I would want to do but that's what's most effective, because family are not going to necessarily be and do what I want them to do for the benefit of the young person

In subsequent discussion, it is confided that what this counsellor does goes beyond simply assisting a student and their family. Jessica reveals that she positions herself as wanting to make a contribution that extends beyond the traditional counselling role.

The ways that I *position* myself in the school, is wishing to contribute to peer culture, which is a very different role to face-to-face counselling. A school counsellor's role depends on what your *focus* is and my focus is *not* just on the work in the room.

To this end, she is actively involved in community development within the school, which starts with her work in promoting a sense of belonging and unity amongst the students. She comments that her counselling role is not confined to one-on-one counselling but extends beyond that to the broader school and community context.

This is very much a community development role. When I look at the work that I'm doing with peer culture, it's actually about developing a community and having a response at a community level. That's a bit broader than people might think in a school. I'm very much out of the room, in terms of my thinking.

An example of an initiative that the counsellor established is the body image leadership programme.

One of the issues in any school is the way girls perceive their bodies, so I set up a body image leadership programme so that we have student leadership and a voice around positive concepts of thinking about your body.

This initiative moves beyond attending to body image issues, it creates a peer culture and promotes a sense of community within the school. The importance of establishing a community of support is emphasised throughout the narrative. It promotes student leadership and gives students an outlet through which they can express themselves. Its primary function however, is to foster an environment that promotes student safety.

Jessica helps establish a community of support for her students and decentres herself from the student under her care so that she is not their sole source of support. This increases the chances of ensuring student safety, as the counsellor is unable to support an adolescent on a sustained basis outside of the school environment. Instead, some of the burden of responsibility is transferred from the counsellor to a wider community of care.

In terms of strength based practice for me it's things like creating communities of concern around people, either their friends, family, school, teachers, themselves, peers outside of school. So that their support's wide and they're safer. Decentred practice is the way to go, and knowing that other people are supporting my clients, that supports me to be able to not worry about them. I try to make myself redundant; otherwise I'll never go home.

Conflict resolution skills are very much in demand in this counsellor's practice and this frustrates her. The fact that she is called on to assist others who are unable to manage their own "emotional responses" alludes to her knowledge, wisdom and power as a counsellor. (Mention Foucault).

The skills that I'm called on for most often would have to be conflict resolution. I feel a bit saturated with staff and student conflict. I think, people don't know how to

deal with conflict and their own emotional responses, or they don't know how to keep themselves safe and stand up for themselves. It's usually about relationships. Asked to think about an aspect of the counselling role that she is most proud of the counsellor has trouble pinpointing just one. Jessica makes a large contribution to the broader school context and has a great passion for her counselling role, which she sees as not just a job but rather as a vocation.

The family work I do in schools. The student leadership and peer mediation team. Seeing those kids grow and starting to take up a position of leadership in the school around normalising conflict is a proud thing for me. The body image team we trained There are many things I'm proud of.

In terms of self-care this counsellor relies on her supervisors to not only keep her safe but also to provide professional guidance.

I put myself under really skilful supervisors, people that I really respect and that can help me to *grow*. The guidance and support of my supervision is really *critical*. Jessica's message to other counsellors is around the importance of self-care and the imperative that they have a good community of support. She alludes to the fact that the counselling profession is a high-pressure vocation that can be very isolating. Counsellors need to ensure that they establish clear boundaries to protect their own mental health and wellbeing so that they can carry out their role successfully.

Have good supervision, have good peers. For school counsellors who are very isolated it's really pivotal that they are well supported, that they consult, and are clear about what their role is that they are careful about what they take on.

Asking how she knows she has done a "*good job*" in counselling one of her students the counsellor ponders quietly before replying:

That would depend on the *context*. If it was family work, I'd know I'd done a good job because the family are *managing themselves* well the young person's back to *not* feeling suicidal, learning, looking happy, no longer depressed, self-harming, that sort of thing. Often, it's that I *don't* need to see them anymore which might be another indicator.

## **Relationship**

A strong theme throughout Jessica's narrative is one of relationship. Jessica reflects on the elements that are at the heart of successful school counselling and points out that in the first instance establishing a relationship with school management and teachers is imperative. This allows her to foster a connection of trust with her colleagues so that they will refer students to her for counselling.

That's multi-pronged, but I would have to start by saying my relationships with people. Having a relationship with the principal and the leadership team, and taking up leadership. My relationship with staff is important so that they will refer kids to me.

The counsellor remembers that this relationship building with her colleagues took time. When she first started at the school, she had to earn their respect and gain credibility as a counsellor within the school. The need to work on gaining credibility as a counsellor, points to a traditional deficit view of counsellors who are often viewed with suspicion and distrust.

When I first came to this school I was pretty timid, didn't quite know where to put myself, now I know the school. People know my work so there's respect built up and my influence is much wider. It takes a long time to gain credibility and to be visible.

Being visible as a counsellor is another element that is at the heart of successful school counselling. In addition, this counsellor talks about the importance of having a "voice" and of sharing her specialist knowledge. The "voice" of the counsellor and the wisdom conveyed is indicative of the power counsellors have in the counselling relationship. This notion of "power" aligns with Foucault's notion of power.

I think perhaps visibility would be at the heart of what a school counsellor needs to be. And having a voice on things and sharing the knowledge we have, we have amazing knowledge that young people and adults don't.

Jessica takes on a leadership role in relation to her colleagues and through her involvement in their professional development, shares her specialist knowledge about adolescent concerns with them.

Professional Development and promoting and educating staff about young people's issues and their [teachers] role in supporting them is also important.

Building a relationship and establishing connections with colleagues is important, however it is of even more significance for students. In fact, in this narrative, the relationship is the part of the counselling process that adolescents value most.

Coming into this space communicates something to them. You can have your strength-based practices and theories but what makes them effective is the relationship or connection that I build with them. The way I am with them is the thing that they appreciate most. I've always had feedback that it feels like they're talking to someone they know, it doesn't feel superior, it doesn't feel uncomfortable there's something I do in bridging the relational gaps. They know I really am here for them. I really care.

Jessica continues to reflect on the counselling relationship and says she takes a student-centred approach and negotiates the boundaries of the counselling process with the student.

I build strong relationships and my approach is youth centred... I negotiate with them, "What is it that you want to learn today?" It is the relational engagement that I have in that moment.

In this narrative, the visibility of the counsellor is seen as part of the success of establishing a relationship with students. This allows both counsellor and student a mutual knowledge of each other. Furthermore, this knowledge allows students to see the counsellor as a person and not just as a counsellor in the counselling suite.

My knowing the kids and the kids knowing who I am, that I'm not just someone who sits in a room. I network with all year levels. Kids see me as other than just a counsellor. I get to be known outside the room.

This counsellor uses every opportunity to increase her visibility within the school and to build connections. She reveals that she makes herself visible not only through her persona but also in how she conducts herself and in the way, she has chosen to set up her counselling suite.

All those opportunities that I have in the school. I make a point to build that connection. I smile, the way I dress, my demeanour; I don't look too old fashioned. The way that my room is.

Jessica's passionate reflection on establishing a rapport with the students she counsels shows the depth of care and concern she has for them. As mentioned before, her

counselling role appears to be more than just a job she does to earn a wage and is instead a vocation, one for which she is willing to give her all.

### **The Adolescent Student**

Jessica accepts the popular discourse on wellbeing and views it in a holistic sense. This holistic view on health and wellbeing has been with us for some time. The World Health Organization's (1948) put forward a holistic definition of health in the late 1940's.

Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.

This counsellor also understands the wellbeing of adolescents as being multi-layered. Her initial explanation of adolescent wellbeing focuses on all aspects of an adolescents' outer world.

Having a positive connection with family, friends and themselves. Being successful in their learning, feeling safe, having the ability to bounce back. Being part of something. Being allowed to have fun, knowing how to take care of themselves, getting the right amount of sleep, eating the right food.

Jessica is quiet for some time before she continues to explain her understanding of adolescent wellbeing. She then adds further depth to her explanation and describes wellbeing as also comprising of the inner world of adolescents.

Adolescent wellbeing is being able to stand up for yourself, to step into your own integrity, to make choices for yourself, to be reflective. To have some ideas about spirituality and who they are and what they want to contribute to the world. Having a voice, being honest, having the ability to express themselves that's a sign of wellbeing.

Wellbeing and resilience are seen as being interrelated.

I look at wellbeing and resilience holistically. Resilience is the ability to bounce back, to have resilience you must have a lifestyle of wellbeing.

Jessica received training in techniques for promoting wellbeing and resilience. She uses this knowledge to instruct students on how to foster both. She advocates addressing problems as they emerge and not allowing them to proliferate.

I coach students on what wellbeing looks like. I've done training around wellbeing resilience and am interested in practices of wellbeing and helping kids know what

things help us to be resilient. When you have a worry, deal with it when it's small.

Get some help so that the worry shrinks rather than grows?

Strength based counselling supports a holistic wellbeing story. Holistic wellbeing is achieved by making adolescents aware of what their strengths are and shifting their focus from the problem story to exploring alternative stories and options that can potentially bring about change.

If you ask them what they love about who they are or what their strengths are, they do not have a clue. If young people are only thinking about what's not working, they're not connected to the joy and the things that inspire their happiness. So we contextualise all of these, "What needs to happen at home, at school, what do you need to do to be happy?" It [Strength based counselling] changes their lives, it turns their lives around.

Jessica confides that, "many teachers in the school wouldn't know how to do the very practical things of supporting wellbeing." As the school counsellor, she is accountable for supporting and promoting much of the adolescent wellbeing at the school. In addition, she is responsible for the "leadership around student and staff wellbeing" and relates that she has "quite a bit of influence in the wellbeing discourse of the school."

What makes this counsellor's relationship with adolescent clients' work is the way in which she approaches even the most challenging conversations. She reveals, "I'm quite playful even around hard conversations." She believes that in order to manage the diverse group of students that attends you need to "support their [students] sense of feeling valued, connected and belonging in this school because we've got kids from all sorts of walks of life here."

Jessica reflects silently for a while on what adolescents' value most about counselling and her emphatic reply alludes to her underlying counselling philosophy.

I give them opportunities to *represent themselves* and *speak themselves* into *existence*."

The notion to "speak oneself into existence" is not an original concept and can be traced back to the philosophy around language and thought. The philosophy of language is interested in, among other things, the relationship between language and reality, as we perceive it. Lev Vygotsky's (1986) in his work "Mind and Society" views the relationship between thought, language or speech and reality as follows:



Thought is not merely expressed in words; it comes into existence through them. Every thought tends to connect something with something else, to establish a relation between things. Every thought moves, grows and develops, fulfils a function, solves a problem (p.218).

Furthermore, the idea that we are able to “speak ourselves into existence,” aligns with a social constructionist view of reality. Burr (1995) states that the way in which we observed the world is not objective; rather our observations are prejudiced by our experiences that are essentially interpreted through language. Crossley’s (2000) believes language is important to the construction of narratives in which the individual formulates, presents and expresses his or her self. The author believes that “Through narratives we define who we are, who we were and who we may become in the future” (p. 67). Burner (2002) concurs and declares, we constantly construct and reconstruct ourselves to meet the needs of the situation we encounter” (p. 64).

Social constructionist theories of language do not see the function of speech as narrating a given reality. Rather (social) reality is seen as being constructed through acts of speech. This theory is based on the premise that our reality arises from our thought processes and our thoughts are expressed through language. Language in turn is a social construct that aligns with the predominant social discourse deemed acceptable at the time. We can therefore be “programmed” by the language we use into accepting the constructed reality as if it were a “concrete” fact.

As mentioned previously, Jessica’s discourse on counselling is founded on strength-based narrative counselling principles. As discussed in the literature review, strength-based narrative counselling principles arise from a social constructionist perspective. This view allows students to re-construct or re-story their reality by changing their thoughts and words. Jessica, in saying that she provides her students with opportunities “to represent themselves and speak themselves into existence” is drawing from this social constructionist viewpoint.

Jessica takes a student-centred approach to counselling and is cognisant that she needs to be aware of the “student voice” in her counselling practice. She points out that it is important to respect a student’s knowledge about their situation and she has to be careful not to impose on them her own knowledge about what she things is “best.” This once again alludes to the tension, discussed earlier in Jessica’s narrative, between the desire to

empower students to take charge of their own lives and the need to step in to protect them and keep them safe.

I'm really interested in their ideas and I privilege students' knowledge over my own. I get them in, I consult with them about what they think is best. Honouring what a student knows about what would happen if we intervene.

In terms of empower students; Jessica is very proud of the peer mediator team she has trained in conflict resolution. This training teaches students on the peer mediation team how to self-examine and contemplate on the areas of discord in their own relationships. In so doing, they gain better insight into what lies at the basis of these conflicts and are instructed in ways in which to resolve them.

They [peer mediators] are trained to mediate conflict. They learn to look at themselves and their own relationship, with friends and family, and how they deal with conflict.

Once their peer mediation training is complete, peer mediators mediate conflict situations in the school between their peers. The peer mediators do not get involved in providing the conflicting party with solutions but rather support them in finding their own resolution to the conflict situation. This philosophy aligns with what Jessica does as part of her strength-based counselling practice in empowering and supporting a student's understanding of his or her situation over the counsellor's understanding of the situation.

Then they are taught how to manage a meeting with two people in conflict. They are students supporting students. They empower the person. They do not get involved in what the solution is but support the young person to find their own solution. It's pretty cool to see girls without any counselling training, not only managing mediations but managing their friendships differently, talking to their family differently their lives have changed because of it.

In empowering peer mediators to resolve conflicts between their peers, Jessica decentres herself as the primary support for conflict resolution at the school. By providing peer mediators with the skills and knowledge through which to resolve conflict, she is in effect surrendering some of her "power" as counsellor to peer mediators. There is an inherent tension in empowering peer mediators to act, in what is albeit a limited capacity, as counsellor. This tension is maintaining a balance between the aspiration of enabling students to take responsibility for themselves, and in this instance their peers, and knowing

as the counsellor when to step in and take back power to ensure that all students are kept safe.

I have a belief that its young people have to sort that [conflict] out. We have peace work at school and that's strength-based practice, where young people lead the school and try to create a more inclusive peaceful place.

### **The School Context**

Jessica considers that in introducing a strength-based approach into the school context the predominant focus should be on ensuring student safety. She reasons that due to the advent and prevalence of social networking, harassment and intimidation among adolescents has been compounded.

The globalisation of the Internet, texting and Facebook has opened up the opportunity for abusive practices amongst young people. Young people are growing up in a really tricky time. One of the fundamental things schools need to consider is around bullying. Kids can't learn unless they feel safe. Because schools' focus predominantly on ABC's and learning, what can often get overlooked is taking care of peer culture not the ethnicities.

To countermand the prevalence of bullying, schools need to focus on establishing a peer culture and a community of support for students. Furthermore, adolescents must be educated and informed on issues around bullying and the potential consequences thereof.

What schools need to do is to think about how they are going to manage relationships amongst young people. I think schools need to look at their peer culture and find ways to keep people feeling included, safe, and having a sense of belonging and knowing how to deal with acts of aggression.

Jessica believes her school sets an example against bullying by not resorting to punitive tactics and instead using a restorative process to deal with conflict. This shift from a deficit to a strength-based discourse was a gradual one that Jessica has instigated and nurtured over the past 9 years at the school.

We have stood kids down in the past particularly if they are not remorseful. But, they do community service at school now We do not stand kids down here; we try to put it right. We have that whole restorative process going.

Time constraints, limited staff and insufficient resources are a significant challenge for the counsellor working in a school context. Jessica confides that as a school counsellor, your job is never done and you need to make peace with this.

Schools are hideous place, there are no limits but you have to find the limits. It is all about an overload of crisis when you are the sole person in the school most of the time. There's no limit, we don't have a limit to the clients that come. Someone taught me to be time focused rather than task focused. You have to get comfortable with mess and not finishing.

In terms of the therapeutic process in schools, it is out of necessity often brief and short-lived.

In schools, you do brief therapy; you do not often have the privilege and luxury of working with someone over time. Doing extended therapy in school feels like a treat. Often, I only get ten or twenty-five minutes and you do your best with that it's not like they're coming to see you once a week.

Jessica talks about time constraints being a constant pressure and suggests that the pressure grows exponentially when you are counselling a student who is a suicide risk.

I would love to call her up tomorrow, but I will not have time. It's a public health service here; it's not a private service. I have a wad that big of kids to see. I am lucky I do not have suicidal kids that I am aware of, because that would be real pressure for me.

This counsellor does not teach in the classroom in a formal capacity but is extensively involved in the educating of students around issues pertaining to their health and wellbeing. Beyond her one-on-one counselling role, Jessica is tasked with the development of student leadership, peer mediation and body image leadership programmes as well as many other group programmes and processes. She is also expected to contribute to the school context extra-circularly and participates in the organisation and managing of Enviro-schools, the Kapa Haka group and the school show. Attending all parent-teacher interview evenings and assisting with student enrolment is another expectation placed on her. This requirement to be involved in all aspects of school life beyond, the counselling purview, speaks to the constant tension between the expectations that school management has of the counsellor and what the counsellor deems to be imperative to their role.

We have so many expectations of us as a school to do this and that, it's a great opportunity but most of the time the kids are in class learning a particular subject so there's so much that we could do and yet I think doing less is more effective.

Reflecting on the difference between single gender and co-educational school contexts, this counsellor says that the notion that counselling is more gender appropriate for girls is erroneous. Her experience is that both genders benefit equally from counselling, especially those students who have been excluded and who have issues around their sexual identity.

I have been in all types of schools. People have an idea that counselling is more for girls. When I was at a boys' school they were banging on my door. They loved an opportunity to be heard. Particularly kids that were marginalised like the gay boys or the kids who were in trouble at home or at school. In an all girls' school, the issues are different. In single sex schools, they say there are more issues with bullying or relational aggression.

The social pressure that both genders must face is very similar. This counsellor starts to say that girls are more sensitive than boys are, but quickly retracts that generalisation indicating a depth of self-awareness and self-critique in relation to her practice.

The social stuff that boys' schools and girls' schools are dealing with would be similar, around the drinking and drugs and the texting. Girls definitely gossip and feel for longer and in different ways than boys, and that's a generalisation that I could be corrected on just as soon as I think about it. Actually, you can have similar conversations with the guys and girls, but there are specific gender differences. We work with pregnancy and abortions, and talk and support around relationships differently than perhaps I would with guys.

The advantages of counselling in a co-educational school, as compared to a single gender school, are the interactions that are possible between genders. Jessica suggests that these interactions bring about a depth of understanding across genders that are not possible in a single gender school.

In a co-ed school, you have that option of having boys and girls talking together which would be powerful. You could move mountains with that opportunity. I think schools have their own different flavour.

Speaking of the challenges of managing a counselling practice within the school context Jessica reveals that adolescents may not be developmentally mature enough to self-reflect and to make the emotional effort needed during the counselling process.

Often in a school, you are working with kids who are not quite ready to do the emotional work, but she was and, she survived this school.

The comment on a student having “survived” the school leans toward a deficit-discourse of schools as challenging, unyielding environments. Throughout her narrative, this counsellor appears to be determined to counteract this deficit-discourse by embracing a more strength-based discourse in her counselling practice and in turn encouraging this discourse in the larger school context.

In this narrative, a strength-based approach is “definitely” supported within the school environment in which she works. She reflects that many of the teachers at her school use strength-based approaches in their teaching. However, she confides that teachers find it challenging to stay within this strength-based discourse when there are disciplinary issues since the more predominant discourse in a school context tends to be punitive.

I think many would. Where it gets tricky is when young people are considered to be rude or difficult then it’s not always easy for teachers to stay in a strength based approach.

Continuing to talk about using a strength-based approach within the school context Jessica says that while the language used for concepts in her school may not refer specifically to the term “strength-based” that is nonetheless what it is.

We have different names for it here. We would talk about what supports resilience and positive teacher-student relationships. We talk about having expectations of students’ work. There’s a little blurb about what resilience in the classroom looks like. It’s about ensuring participation, inclusion and that they’re succeeding. There’s a particular framework for the classroom that teachers model, not all of them would work towards that, but they have their training learning has to be supported by the warmth of a relationship. Everything we do is about relationship in the school.

This counsellor feels strongly that a strength-based approach should be used as part of teaching. She talks about drawing up a classroom treaty that is mutually agreed upon to give both teacher and students a common purpose. One might argue however, that this approach still supports the deficit view of policing students. The teacher, being in a position

of power, may unwittingly exerts her authority over students so that in negotiating the classroom treaty they tell her what she wants to hear.

[A strength-based approach should] definitely [be part of teaching]. They [Teacher and students] start with a classroom treaty, what is our treaty for how are we going to be together? Those are positive things that get put down. Sometimes when we have problems, we have circle time where people sit down and talk about how to solve the problem. In order to have solutions you have to be strengths focused, solution focused, otherwise you're just going to run around in the problem.

### **The Family and Community Context**

A theme that is present throughout this counsellor's narrative is the notion of a community of support and the imperative of establishing such a community for adolescents. This community of support opens up multiple avenues through which adolescents can seek help so that they do not develop an overreliance on the counsellor. Building and broadening the network of support around adolescents enhances their opportunity for positive engagement with others, which then increases their opportunity for experiencing positive emotion. This in turn buffers them from downward spirals of negativity (see lit review Garland, 2010). Furthermore, this community of support may preclude them from feeling socially isolated and excluded, which may then mitigate potential suicide risks.

The notion that positive emotions can enhance strength and resilience is supported by Barbara Fredrickson. She posits, in her broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions, that positive emotions such as "joy, interest, contentment, pride and love," broaden a person's "momentary thought-action repertoires" and create enhanced self-awareness that encourages new, inquiring, and diverse thoughts and actions (Fredrickson, 2001, p. 219). Over time, this broadened behavioural repertoire builds skills and "enduring personal resources" (p. 219) from which a person can draw during times of difficulty (Refer to Literature Review for further discussion on the broaden-and-build theory of positive emotion).

One of the things, that stands out for me in my work, is this idea of communities of support or concern, so that people have more than just me to support them. It is a family, it is a friendship group, and it is a teacher. If a kid doesn't have friends at school it's setting up a little team of people that will help her get to know people, so

that's she is centred in support outside of the room. I decentre myself in the work and I try and centre her with support with people that are in her life, so that I am not someone that she depends on, I am more of a consultant.

Jessica is passionate about the community in which she counsels. As has already been suggested, she does not view her counselling role as being limited to the counselling suite rather she takes an active interest and feels a deep affinity for the broader school and community context.

I have a real heart for the community. Being aware that this is a community and what we do impacts on the community.

According to Pérez (2008) our emotions are the basic building blocks of our human nature and are therefore inextricably a part of our lives. The author believes that the "heart" organ is highlighted as the location of our emotions. He further states that since the heart is viewed as being the location of our emotions we can infer the metaphor "The heart is a container of emotions (p. 31)." The author reflects on the use of the "heart" organ in metaphors and states:

As it is well known, metaphor is a useful means of expressing one thing in terms of another. Consequently, when it is difficult to express something we resort to it [metaphor]. Therefore, it is self-evident that such a rich field as emotions would make a frequent use of this expressive means and, if we consider the heart as its nucleus, it is no wonder that we find a great number of metaphoric and metonymic expressions with this organ as a source domain (p. 31).

Furthermore, Pérez (2008) suggests, that metaphors and metonyms "reflect a particular way of thinking, behaving and conceptualizing reality and experience" (p. 52). The use of one word or phrase in place of another, the so-called metonym, are so ingrained in our speech that their meaning is often inferred and it is assumed that others will understand that to which we refer (Tim O'Sullivan, *Key Concepts in Communication*, Taylor & Francis, 1983). Tim O'Sullivan, *Key Concepts in Communication*, Taylor & Francis, (1983) agrees that, "metonyms seem so natural that they are easily taken for granted." It follows then that since metaphors and metonyms are reflect our "reality" they can give us some insight into a person's underlying discourses and belief systems.

Jessica uses the metonym "real heart" to express the passion and affinity she feels for the community substituting the word "heart" in place of her emotion. Jessica applies



this metonym on several other occasions during her narrative, most notably when referring to the school, she works at, and the adolescents she works with.

I have a real heart for this place. I think the girls know I have a really big heart for them.

Jessica's metonym "a real heart," gives us some insight into the discourses of her counselling practice. We can infer from the metonym that, as a school counsellor, Jessica positions herself as, being more than just someone who watches the clock and gets the job done so that they can leave at the end of the day. She has a strong sense of commitment to what she does and shows a genuine care and compassion not only for the students she counsels but also for her colleagues and the greater community.

Jessica reflects on a case where she used the process of restorative justice to work with a mother and daughter from a Pasifika background.

A mother turned up, she had heard her daughter had stolen a phone. I had been working with this student and an issue like stealing has a mother feeling very *disappointed* and *disconnected* from her young person. She came to school believing that this was *proof* that she was not a good parent. She had survived a domestic violence relationship, she had been doing her utmost best, and this meant that she was *not* actually good enough. That was her *discourse* that was her thinking. I knew that because every time I get a Pacific family into the school they feel *shamed* and they think that this is about them. So, the way that I work it is about justice, it's about finding that *connection* across culture. I guess the *discourse* is around *forgiveness*.

In this story, Jessica shows a depth of awareness of the situation on several levels. She is aware of the challenges that are faced by a single parent but is also culturally sensitive to how someone from a Pasifika background positions himself or herself as a parent. In the Pasifika community, in particular, a child is seen as a reflection of the parent so that any action taken by the child is a direct testament to the parenting skills or lack thereof of the parent. A Pasifika student who is seen to be undertaking any wrongful action brings intense shame, disgrace and humiliation to the parents who blame themselves for being lacking in appropriate parenting skills.

Jessica uses a metaphor to help restore the mother's faith in her daughter and to reinstate her confidence in her parenting skills.

We were sitting at a shiny table and I asked, “What other times had your daughter let you down?” There was one other time last year. I said, “If we could imagine this shiny table top as your daughter’s life and that spot is her misdemeanour that she did yesterday.” That approach is very effective for her being able to *reclaim* the rest of who her daughter actually is. The process of that conversation *restored* the mother’s belief in herself and in her daughter, it was a very *healing* moment.

The table as an object of furniture has the literal qualities of being solid, concrete, secure, sturdy and robust. All these characteristics can be associated with abstract notions of integrity and honesty. The word “shiny” has connotations of being pure, clean and good. The incident of stealing is represented as a mere “spot” which is the only blemish on the otherwise “shiny table of the daughter’s life. Jessica’s use the phrase, “to reclaim the rest of who her daughter actually is,” is based on the narrative philosophy of externalising the problem. The act of stealing is seen as an act outside of the daughter, it is something she did but does not define who she is. Jessica’s use of metaphor, along with externalising the stealing behaviour, is restorative, healing and strength focused.

That’s an example of strength based practiced, it’s restorative justice, it’s repositioning that parent who’s marginalised so that she can stand tall in our school. The daughter’s life is presented to the mother as being predominantly good which restores the mother’s faith in her daughter and in her own ability as a parent. Jessica’s further use of metaphor to “stand tall” to describe how the parent is repositioned in terms of their parenting ability. This metaphor, to “stand tall” describes a straight posture, which is associated with proud bearing and is indicative of pride as opposed to a hunched posture, which is indicative of being withdrawn depressed and disappointed. Thus, enabling the mother to “stand tall in our school” restores her standing and her pride as a parent.

In recollecting the outcome of this case, Jessica reflects that her knowledge as a counsellor and her experience in working cross-culturally is what enabled her to bring about a positive resolution to the situation. In referring to her knowledge and experience as a counsellor, Jessica once again alludes to the power of the counsellor in terms of Foucault’s notion of power. The power Jessica wields, as a counsellor is apparent in this case and throughout her counselling narrative.

It was a beautiful bit of work that comes from experience and knowing, doing some work across culture and being aware of how they might feel when they come into the school.

Another counselling story that Jessica shares in her narrative demonstrates clearly the importance of establishing a community of support for adolescents during the counselling process.

This piece of work was with a young person who was borderline anorexic... It was me, the family, and the GP who formed a triangle, and wrapped support around the young person. The Maudsley approach recommends that. I did mother/daughter work, I did parent and daughter work. She would come regularly to me. She improved, but it was chipping away. We were lucky that she agreed to let her family be the ones that took care of the eating.

The image of a triangle of support wrapped around the adolescent brings to mind the depth of the support provided for the adolescent. They are literally surrounded on all three sides by different avenues of support. The metaphor of “chipping away” at the problem gives the clear message that the counselling process is a slow one that requires persistence. Progress is made incrementally similar to chipping away at a large block of wood bit by bit. Jessica’s use of the phrase, “we were lucky” implies that, in addition to providing the adolescent with support and working persistently at a problem, some of what happens is outside the counsellor’s control and the counselling process itself requires a measure of good fortune.

In terms of counselling outcomes, it is important to be realistic and aware of what is appropriate from one culture to the next.

What is reasonable hope is very different from one cultural situation to another. You do not want to set people up for pie in the sky things, but things that are actually reasonable, possible.

Jessica’s use of the idiom, “pie in the sky” expresses the importance of being real during the counselling process and taking care not to set people up with empty wishes or promises that are completely impractical.

The importance of establishing a community of support is apparent throughout this narrative. However, families are not always on board to support an adolescent during the counselling process. In instances like this, change may not be possible for the student without input from their family.

Sometimes they [the adolescent] cannot change things; families are the only ones that can turn that around.

Finally, in terms of obtaining support, Jessica reflects on the importance of positive feedback from others in an adolescent's life. She again, shows an awareness of different cultural discourses. In collective cultures, the wellbeing of the collective is seen as being more important than the wellbeing of the individual and who you are as a person is defined by how others perceive you. Thus, in a collective culture the importance of receiving positive feedback from others is even more imperative.

I might ask them whose opinion of them they value the most. It's important that they get positive input on who people think they are because; particularly in cultures that are more collective, you are who people think you are.

### **Themes and General notes from transcript:**

#### **Main Themes:**

Relationship/connection, empowerment, resilience, importance of culture, importance of context, social context.

#### **Power of:**

Counsellor, student, school, family, peers

#### **Tension between**

School and counsellor, tensions within the school, school dynamics have shifted to be more strength based

#### **Other themes:**

Community support, family support, student's choice, student as expert, honour the student, person not the problem, stand up for yourself, spirituality, visibility of counsellor, earning respect as counsellor, professional responsibility, care, interest and respect for students, safety of student.

#### **To think about and review:** Is the classroom a safe place?

## **Appendix Q – First attempt categorical-content interpretation:**

### **Valerie's narrative**

See fifth version of story-map grid for categorical-content in chapter 8, section 8.1.4.

Researchers questions are indicated in italics. Valerie's transcript was organised according to categories that I noticed in her narrative. A few select verbatim quotes are included under each of these categories to illustrate how this was done. However, during the interpretation process all relevant quotes were considered.

Four role-players were recognised in school counsellors' narratives: The counsellor, the adolescent, the school context and the family and community context. These role-players were used as categories for interpreting school counsellors' transcripts.

#### **The counsellor**

*What made you decide to become a counsellor?*

I think I was born [to be a counsellor] because even as a small child I can recall looking after people, specifically my brother. I was very protective, very nurturing because we had a difficult family. I consciously decided I would be his protector; I would make sure things that had happened to me wouldn't happen to him. It's always been like that. Other things were also influential. I was an English teacher in the days when student writing was boring and I began to get students to write from experience and from the heart. And then students started writing about their lives and I started thinking, "Oh my God these kids are having such a tough time." There are all these issues coming up for them and how can they possibly concentrate when they're worried about that? So yeah that's how I got really interested.

#### ***Supervision***

The aim was to do it once a fortnight and I have two supervisors. I have a CBT supervisor and I have a personal supervisor whom I've been with for many years. She knows me well and she's wonderful at talking about personal process, the counselling process, organisational workplace issues that sort of thing.

*Do you think extramural activities enhances your role as counsellor?*

I think it does because kids then see you as being more normal around the school. I wish I could do more but I'm just too busy. It gives you an informal chance to gauge the climate of the school; you can observe the students you're worried about in a non-threatening manner.

***Other counsellors in the school***

I think we need to be absolutely in sync with each other. We need to really trust each other and support each other and value each other's work and challenges. You need to have a very robust relationship with someone you're working with.

*How do you know when you've done a good job with an adolescent client?*

It's a bit like a play centre when a child fits that last, this is very moving and because I've had children, a child fits that last puzzle piece in and they don't say a word. They just run their hand over the puzzle and they look satisfied, it's just the most beautiful image. It's like that with good therapy, you come to the end of a session and they look happy, pleased, settled. I had one last week and I just felt so pleased at the end of it. The girl went off and I thought that was real counselling, it was really gritty, she's got quite a tough issue. It's not as if we waved a magic wand or anything like that, but it was just good counselling. It's like the child running her hand over the puzzle piece and okay we've had a good discussion, she knows where she's going to next, she knows what will happen next. That's such a lovely image, that took me by surprise. No word is spoken.

***Feedback***

I would sometimes say, "Was that useful for you?" Or I would get the kids to fill out a little slip if I'm getting towards the end of the year and I'm doing my appraisal. I do those as well and I solicit those from parents and teachers and others.

***Clear boundaries***

Yes, I'm getting a bit desperate and I had to do something to protect myself because it's not as if they comprehend what I do they don't really care about the pressures on me. I've got to look after myself and that suddenly came to me at the beginning of the year when they

were making demands that were quite over the top. I found myself saying, no, I'm not willing to do that and I thought, that felt good.

### ***Strength-based counselling training***

*What training have you received in the strength based counselling?*

I did a yearlong course through the professional development seminars. We looked at solution focused and narrative. We had fabulous, booklets full of articles, which I consumed. It was quite a sound basis and I think coming out of it the interest I maintained most actively was the one in the work at the (unintelligible, 0:22:34.4) Centre in South Australia Michael White and David Epston and admired their work tremendously so I carried it on. I continued reading in narrative therapy. I'm very keen on mediation and there's a book written by John Winslade about using narrative methods in mediation. I set up mediation systems in various schools. I must say that I would never say that I'm a pure narrative therapist, I've always had a broader view of it than that and I'd say I'm more solution focused orientation myself.

### ***Modalities***

*Is there any instance that you think strength based counselling would not be appropriate?*

If you think of the opposite of strength-based, which is problem-focused I wouldn't ever do that. It wouldn't matter how serious the case, I would never ever go back to the problem, picking the problem apart, spending time of it, feeding it. I'm experienced enough that I recognise quickly if there is a serious problem and I'd move into problem solving mode fairly quickly. I'm not saying that I'm unsympathetic to problems.

*What makes strength based counselling different from other approaches?*

It's not problem focused, it's not negative, it's not energy draining, it's energy giving. It keeps things light instead of getting too heavy. It helps you to make interventions that are time limited. It builds towards something. If you're being positive in a strength-based approach that implies that you're heading in a certain direction which is a positive direction. If you're coming out of a place where things are not so hot and you're developing that strength-based approach, you automatically head somewhere that's going to be better. Where you'll be more effective in your own life.

### ***Practice***

*Could you tell me about a recent counselling experience where you used strength based counselling?*

An Indian / Fijian girl 13 years old having difficulty with sexuality issues. When I say difficulties, she is not really, she's fine about her sexuality, her problem arises with her parents and their attitudes. We had a wonderful session. The essential thing of the session was that it became normalised in terms of our interaction with each other and it became only part of her story. Because she was so impressive and there was a lot to learn about her apart from her sexuality. She was a young person with tremendous strengths and talents and a real presence. I was reflecting back what I saw, how I experienced her. She was worrying about the effect her sexual choices had on herself and I was in a position of saying, "But look at the person you are." She's very intelligent, very successful in her school work, a very successful sportswoman so all of those things came out in the counselling session. I think by the end of the session I'd have to say, she had a fuller picture of herself. It wasn't problem focused, I certainly didn't have a problem focused view of her at all. The later part of the session was very much practical. It was, "Okay so you're going on this holiday with mum, you know already that she's going to nag you silly about your sexual choices, how are we going to handle that?" We did some strategising about how she would manage ten days with her mother.

*What would you say stood out for you most about that counselling experience?*

It was a happy experience; we just got on like a house on fire. She left with a big smile on her face. It wasn't a story of deficit at all, it didn't remain problem focused.

*What is your best experience of using strength based counselling?*

We have a lot of scholarship students here and it's difficult for them here because they come out of a different culture into this culture and there are multiple stresses on them. They might have a different ethnicity; their community might be radically different from the community that most of the girls here belong to. In addition, they might have some extra pressures on them like perhaps a very religious family, many demands for church going (unintelligible, 0:31:40.0) community. She was a girl like that who was acting out quite badly and doing things that would have eventually got her expelled. Strength-based



counselling kept the thing central that she was here for a reason; she had won a scholarship so she was obviously intelligent and she had the ability to make it if she chose to. There was a moment in year ten where it hung in the balance and she was really deciding whether she had the strength of will to hang in here and conform to the school's expectations and not be asked to leave. She got a terrible fright when one of her friends was told that her scholarship was terminated. A lot of that was really sitting with all the things she experiences, not, no (unintelligible, 0:32:43.0) not (unintelligible, 0:32:45.6) you're just listening to how hard it is for them staying with that. Making sure that they see you as an ally so that whatever they do, however much they go off the rails they have someone in the school that they can come and tell. Because a lot of the things she wouldn't have (unintelligible, 0:33:02.3) without being stood down straight away, or get into trouble with her parents. It's having the perspective that, that's temporary. Those behaviours are brought about by discomfort with the school culture, the demands of changing yourself and who you are, pressures from home, perceptions that you aren't well liked by your own parents (unintelligible, 0:33:24.8). It's a matter of staying with a position view of the young person as they go through all those issues. Meanwhile you are doing positive interventions like maintaining contact with the family, problem solving as you go so that they don't get tipped over by having too many problems all at once to try and solve.

### ***Suicide***

I do lessons in Year 11 on change, loss and grief and sometimes on body image. I respond to need, if they can find a timetable niche and they invite me to do that, I do. However, I'm terribly careful about what I do. I don't see myself as a teacher at all. I always ask for a specific room and I get the kids sitting in circles on the floor. I try to make a real difference between everyday teaching and what I do. Last year for example when I did the change, loss and grief lessons, it was very worrying because we'd had a lot of student deaths. There were some tragedies and I was closely associated with another school and the families involved, and I was professionally involved. That was a difficult year and I was conscious that that particular year level was affected. The so-called lessons took a completely different form, very gentle and responsive to need.

I don't want to be seen as a teacher. I listen carefully to the feedback that the students give me. They're very sensitive to those topics and they really want a person to

treat them with sensitivity. For example, one year there was an image we used. Other health teachers and people who work in change, loss and grief told me was a wonderful diagram it was. It was a waterfall of grief. Fortunately, I run a mediation programme in the school and the girls from my mediation group came and saw me. They said, "Miss that was awful we hated that." I was co-teaching with another teacher and they said, "The other teacher didn't look as if she cared, she just sounded like a teacher to us." I got that direct feedback it made me realise it doesn't matter how good your material is, you've got to look at it as a counselling interaction because of the subject matter. You've got to look at the relationship you're creating with the students and the way you interact with the material. You can't go in and think, I'm just going to teach this lesson on change, loss and grief and we'll have something up on the board and we'll have a few overheads and they'll have some exercises to write on paper and away we go. It's not like that at all. So, I try to do it differently and I'm listening to them and saying all the time, "Well how's that for you, and was that okay, did anyone feel uncomfortable when we were talking about?" I think it's a bit of a dangerous thing to do, to go into a whole class group and in most other schools I wouldn't do it now. But our girls are very polite and friendly and as long as you treat them with respect they give you the feedback as to whether this is comfortable for them or not.

*What first attracted me to strength-based counselling?*

Um, energy. (laughter) My own energy, (laughter) and their energy. It just doesn't work if you get bogged down (unintelligible, 0:59:18.5) stuff. It doesn't matter how true it is, so if you are covered with pimples it still doesn't matter how true that is, there's still a lot of other things in life and so keeping up their energy for life.

***Techniques***

*Any kind of tools, or techniques that you find helpful, so resources that you use, or that you give to the students?*

I respond to individual students as he or she comes in terms of their personality and the issue. I use a lot of CBT, which I find helpful, and then of course you're giving them homework, giving them stuff to read, you're giving them little exercises to do. As well as stuff like breathing and relaxation, mindfulness techniques. We have a lot of anxiety, it seems to peak at year six level and then there's a lot of year seven level girls come in new,

there's a lot more year nine girls and there's a lot of anxiety over exams and performance later on. If I think about those girls CBT is just fabulous with anxiety. It's so useful and a lot of girls are quite bright so they seem to learn the techniques very quickly and generalise them. I would say that would be my main set of tools.

Mindfulness is a lovely technique. With anxiety people do the what if's, they worry about things that haven't happened and then they also look back and worry about things that have happened that they could have done better. With mindfulness, you practice being present in the moment. You might do an exercise with them where they're sitting in the chair and you just get them to relax totally and think about what kind of day it is. How does the air feel and how warm is it, or cold is it, and how their feet feel on the ground and what do their shoes look like. You just focus and focus and focus and talk to them about that until they're totally present in the moment and not thinking about anything else. I also get them to do that if they're having trouble going to sleep at night. Just completely melt down into the bed and feel how soft the pillow is and then we develop strategies like being mindful out in the environment. If I say to them, "What's the most helpful thing?" They'll say, "Nature." I'll say, "What do you mean by that?" They'll say, "Oh just the other day I sat under this tree and it was so lovely and I was just looking at the leaves." They give you examples themselves of how they've learnt how to be present in the moment and notice how beautiful the world is. It's simple but it takes quite a lot of practice to learn.

The purpose of the mindfulness technique is to stop them worrying (laughter). I talk about a worry habit and I say, "We need to get a grip on this worry habit." We'll do some exercises on the board and they'll have, what if, what if, what if and I'll say, "What do you notice about that column?" They go, "All what ifs." So, we look at that and they're essentially worrying about something that has never happened and might never happen.

I also use narrative, especially if it was something like an eating disorder. So you externalise that disorder and talk about what it is, how is it affecting your life, (unintelligible, 0:40:24.7), what is it robbing you of, what is it taking away from your life. I try give them a sense of this is not them, this is something that's happened to them. Yes, I use many cognitive techniques. If I get a girl with an eating disorder I also counsel her friends, because otherwise they're unconsciously reinforcing the negative behaviours. Like, "Oh you've lost weight; you look great in that dress." And also our girls worry, oh I'm so worried about my friend, what if, etcetera. I'll usually get the friends in and I have a model

that I've developed about eating and it's very cognitive and I show them what's happened to your friend and this is what will happen to your friend and at this point there'll be some change and this is how we're going to support her. This is how to react to her, this is what you can do, these are all the things you can't do. Try to get them to realise that there's a limit to what they can do. It's very useful because the friends, almost never develop any kind of eating disorder themselves because once they've been through that cognitive model they've already got an understanding of how this happens to someone.

### ***Referrals***

You can't counsel students who don't want to be counselled.

With serious cases, I refer to the Adolescent Centre, which is our mental, child and adolescent mental health unit. We're terribly lucky we have a particularly good relationship with them and they pick up our referrals quickly and they liaise with us and we work together. They might ring me up and they might say, "Oh this girl's doing well but she's having trouble with her friendships and we wonder if you could?" So, off I go, I pull the friends in and they understand this is happening and we can work together.

I might refer if it's depression. I look at whether it's a reactive depression like say someone's died. It's a little bit like a sum. Like stress is a sum. If you pile up a certain number of factors, it starts to feel dangerous. It's a bit like that with depression where, if they're becoming catatonic they can hardly speak, they're voice is diminishing to a whisper, they have no energy, no investment, no *schwa de vive*, all those criteria I would refer immediately. The same day I don't waste any time at all in cases where they're feeling suicidal. I might not even do a suicidal assessment. I might just say this is a seriously depressed child and the Adolescent Centre usually sees them. I've had several girls seen on the same day if I think it's a really dangerous case, or the next day, it's just fantastic.

If I've done an assessment and they're having suicidal thoughts that's an immediate referral as well. Eating disorders is trickier because they have to be quite advanced before they're accepted by the eating disorder service, but they might already be depressed and have been referred to the Adolescent Centre. Then it's just a question of whether they go upstairs to the eating disorder service or not. But I have had girls that I have referred to eating disorder services. If I think about my model of eating disorders, I can tell immediately if they can't fight it anymore and I would refer at that point, or refer to their

family doctor. There's a lot of resistance. Parents are upset to hear that their child might have a problem. Then you start getting parents coming around and noticing and watching all the behaviours and realising there is a problem. You really have to get going with it and get them on a waiting list. I would quite frequently get permission to ring the family doctor, whatever is necessary.

### ***Good things about strength-based counselling***

Strength-based counselling it's terrific. I think you'd get exhausted if you didn't use (unintelligible, 0:29:52.5). I can't even imagine it. I used to be like that when I was a young counsellor, I recall working in another school with girls with depression and feeling just exhausted and I just don't experience that anymore. Some of it's just experience, being confident, all these different aspects of the (unintelligible, 0:30:16.4) function. I guess having a much broader view of, sure they might have a depression but it's part of a much wider picture and they'll probably recover. Knowing what to do to help them. If I had gone on like that [using a deficit model] I don't think I would have survived it, I'd get burnout very quickly, mm.

I'm most proud of my work with individual students. That feeling that you've done a good session and helped a young person to see themselves in a new light, helping them to move forward, helping them to see the solutions. It's very rewarding.

*What makes my relationship with adolescent work* is total attendance. Before there was so much theory around, I was thinking about theory and developing theory myself. So a core issue in my counselling and a mark of my success is that total attending. You're totally there listening, watching, picking up all the cues and just being completely present for the student.

*What are some of your own strengths that help you in your role as a school counsellor?*

I think my experience of life, which is unfortunately very broad (laughter). Sometimes I joke and I say just about everything I counsel kids for I've had happen to me myself (laughter). But that, it hasn't sunk my boat. I'm still a very positive person leading a wonderful life. So, I think it's a strength, I think it's good. It's made me. I don't get upset about anything, it's made me very accepting. I'm very non-judgemental. I don't have those bits in me. I'm always curious. Okay what more is there in this story? What more do I have

to learn to understand this young person? Oh yes okay, now I get it... It's wonderful to have had enough experience of life... They don't have to say very many words before I think, "I know where you're coming from, I understand." Having said that, you do have to learn to be humble and always listen because their story is always different, it's always unique. I've got caught out by that before and I've thought, "Oh I know what's going on for you," and then the more I listen it's really quite different. And having that teaching background was very valuable for school counselling. Experiencing my own children was wonderful, that was helpful. Counselling was helpful for me in raising them as well.

*My counselling philosophy?* I like young people. I am positive. I really like my work. I would never go through a day, as long as I do some counselling, and come out feeling that it wasn't worthwhile, or feeling negative, or going off and complaining to people about my job. I really like the kids. They are endlessly interesting to me. I've never ever felt, "Oh I've heard this all before," I just don't feel like that. Even when people, say that to me about group work, "Oh aren't you sick of all these friendship issues?" Well the answer is no, I'm not.

*The best advice* I could give other school counsellors is it will take time. You need to practice and learn and then practice and learn some more and just make sure those two things come together. That's the way you grow. You do a bit of practice, you evaluate your own practice and you find the gaps, the needs (unintelligible, 1:51:27.5) and you do some professional development, or learning, or something and then you try something else. You're always developing, never ever sitting still. I think bringing those things together is important. I can imagine if I was just learning theory all the time without having that practice that worries me actually. When I stop working here and don't have as big a case load, I'll be in private practice, I think, "Well what will I do without this constant stimulation that kids bring me. Will I get out of touch with the modern world, will I not know what the jargon is, and will I not know what the issues are?" That worries me a little so practice plus professional development.

### ***Drawbacks of counselling***

Strength-based counselling does not work with some things that are just so urgent that (unintelligible, 0:55:27.9) time. Let me think of an example. A little girl came in and she was just about catatonic. I can't imagine how she got into that state without people

noticing. I referred her to the Adolescent Centre and we fiddled around with it for a little while because the parents were really upset and didn't want her to be referred but it was just staring you in the face. She was almost unable to speak, she couldn't finish a sentence, she couldn't decide so that was just a matter of supporting and talking to the parents. Getting them on board (unintelligible, 0:56:06.1) and then getting that underway. Then ringing the Adolescent Centre finding how it was going.

*The skills I use most?* Mm, you've got to juggle, all the demands at school, the administration, relationships, meetings, how you're perceived by others, relationships with parents and the actual business of counselling, keeping that straight, keeping that right.

### **The adolescent student**

Using strength-based counselling with adolescents is wonderful especially for school counsellors. We are not psychologists; we are not psychiatrists it's terribly important that we don't step out of our role. Bear in mind that a child steps out of our office into the school with teachers, with demands, with assignments that have to be handed in, things that have to be done in time, places they have to be on time, friends to relate to, difficult peer group interactions they've got to handle. You absolutely have to see them. You've got to see yourself as supporting, they are my students first and foremost. I'm very cautious about taking them out of class. We have to take them out of class at times, but I always say, "What are you missing, have you missed that before, don't miss maths." Now I'll say, "What are you missing?" They'll say, "Not maths Miss, I'm not missing maths."

You don't want to get so deeply immersed in your therapy that at the end of an hour they're feeling weird and disconnected to the school and a bit upset, or maybe this is an interaction that's going to have to go on for a series of sessions. You don't want to put them out in the school feeling uncomfortable, you want them to be a student who's come for some help and support. You don't want them to be someone in therapy who then has to go out into a difficult school environment. I think it's important to keep that in mind.

*Adolescent wellbeing* is about balance and having a long-term view that you know whatever discomfort you're suffering in the moment is not going to last. I think that is best supported by good family relationships I'm afraid to say. But I'm pimply, I'm spotty, I'm growing too fast, my ears are too big and my nose is growing faster than the rest of my face but my dad loves me (laughter). It's so complex at adolescence because they're in the

process of becoming. There is all the stuff about, what can I do, what am I good at? The self-advocacy going on, there is what's happening to my body and how do I look.

I think strength based counselling contributes to adolescent wellbeing by giving them a positive view and in maintaining a positive focus; you make progress with their issues. If you do strength-based counselling kids romp into counselling with a smile on their face. They expect to go away feeling okay about themselves. They don't come in thinking, "Oh my God this is going to be so embarrassing I'll have to tell her about. And I'll probably finish up crying and then people will ask me what's wrong."

*What part of strength based counselling do you think adolescents value most?*

I think adolescents really (unintelligible, 1:00:08.8) who they are and they look to us to be a kind of mirror to reflect back things about themselves. And that's why they'll say, "Oh so and so tells me I'm this." And let's say it's a negative thing like, "My grandpa told me I'm really selfish." Okay so you say, "Well do you think you're really selfish?" And they go, "Oh I suppose I must be," just accept it at face value. And I will say to them, "Well have you ever done anything that wasn't selfish?" "Oh yes." "So tell me about something that you did that wasn't selfish?" "Oh I volunteered to collect for the local fire brigade." "Gosh that was marvellous, how did you get on?" That sort of thing. I think that they need us to be a mirror to reflect back a wider picture of who they are. It would be a very confident young person as an adolescent who just felt totally positive about themselves or have a fixed idea about who they are.

### **The school context**

It is a very different school this. It has a church on site.

I get asked for a lot of advice by senior management. You see their name on the phone and you, "I have to pick up for this person." But actually no I don't, I'm here to counsel the students so I just take the phone off the hook now, it's really good.

### ***Tension between teacher and counsellor***

Senior management don't understand... they don't see the girls grow and change. They make it difficult for me, because they're taking girls out of the programme without letting



me know. I'll turn up, half of them are not there, and I go, "What's going on?" "Oh we've been told we've got to do this." It their worldview about what they see as important.

Strength based counselling is supported within the school. I've talked to them a lot about it, I share a lot of what I learn and do and read and each year I organise a dean's training day and so whatever's the flavour of the moment I'll be trying to share that. I've (unintelligible, 1:08:50.0) talked about positive psychology and I'm (unintelligible, 1:08:52.8) quite a lot. I usually get a speaker to come along. I got someone to talk about CBT to the deans and I'm explaining that I think we need to be doing more work with our parents. We've got a wonderful guy in to talk to the deans by morning tea time we had a much bigger crowd. They were so interested in learning about brain development; we're getting him back again. Every single year with the deans, I get amazing speakers who add significant amounts of knowledge for our deans. I just wish I could do that more broadly with the whole school.

Essentially what drives relationships in schools are the power relationships. Students are here, they are the kids and we're the adults, and they're going to be marked by us and a report is going to be written by teachers about them and they're going to be disciplined by teachers. I don't think you can get around that, even teachers who are really well versed in counselling issues and backgrounds. Occasionally that will go horribly wrong because of course she's still a teacher, she still has to exert authority and she might do it in a way that is insensitive. The student's developed a hope about how they're going to be treated by that teacher and then it's just (unintelligible, 1:11:42.3) for them. It's a bit dangerous really.

You almost need to shift everyone's consciousness not I'm adding on a bit of positive to what I'm doing already, but as a whole mental shift of viewing young people in a positive light.

What you hope to do is build trusting relationships with teachers so they value you, you value and respect them, and then you start getting trust. Then they'll give you a bit of leeway. They'll make a charitable assumption about you and what you're doing with this child who's out of class. Mm, tricky.

A strength-based approach is not simply a teaching technique, they have to have buy-in and actually believe it themselves. They have to have an understanding that they are not here to catch kids out. I'll say, "Well this is a child that's really doing her best, she's not

a child of (unintelligible, 1:16:13.9) she's really struggled." "Oh well I don't know about that I think she's just malingering." It's hard to get them away from that cynical point of view. I'm thinking of a specific case. This teacher doesn't comprehend that if she sat down with the child, listened to the difficulties she's having with the subject, and understood her, that would do more than all the negativity, all the cynicism, all the "she's not even trying." They could actually make their own job much easier. I don't know how to shift people like that? She's a lovely woman and a skilled teacher but it's not useful having a negative view of that girl, because that girl is doing her best.

*At the heart of successful school counselling*, you have to be conscious of the specific role of school counselling. You are here to support students as learners. You don't want to do anything that disadvantages them or develops a split. Everything you do should be building a (unintelligible, 1:44:47.0). You don't want to encourage them to think that their teachers are all horrible. You don't want to listen too intently to stories of deficit in the classroom. You want to support the institution as well as supporting the child. It's not helpful, if you go, "Yeah that teacher is a so and so and I wouldn't have done that." If you support any notion at all of deficit and criticism what happens then? The child goes back into class and they think, "I'm not going to listen to you, you're just a xyz." You can't do anything like that, you have to be mindful of your role in the school, so that's probably the heart of it.

### **The family and community context**

I like having the opportunity to see a parent and child together to build a relationship between them. The business of building family relationships that's basic to my counselling. I've heard other counsellors say things like, "Oh well if they could talk to their mothers, why would they talk to us." I don't agree at all. Their relationships with parents are forever, those relationships are permanent and whatever I can do to build a parent/child relationship I do. That is part of building strength. Wherever I get the opportunity to get mum in, I do. It's always worth it. Sometimes you get both parents and that is a bit (unintelligible, 1:04:13.9) because you might get two parents that are radically different in their view of the child. It's hard to hold both those different views and keep it positive for the child. If you've just got one, it doesn't matter what they come out of in the family you walk towards a more positive relationship.

## **Appendix R – First attempt categorical-content interpretation:**

### **Hamish's narrative**

*Counselling in its nature should be positive, it should be strength based.*

*It should be – 'I am going to see someone because I want a different outcome and you would hope that the outcome is a positive one.'*

See fifth version of story-map grid for categorical-content in chapter 8, section 8.1.4.

Researchers questions are indicated in italics. Hamish's transcript was organised according to categories that I noticed in his narrative. A few select verbatim quotes are included under each of these categories to illustrate how this was done. However, during the interpretation process all relevant quotes were considered.

Four role-players were recognised in school counsellors' narratives: The counsellor, the adolescent, the school context and the family and community context. These role-players were used as categories for interpreting school counsellors' transcripts.

#### **The counsellor**

*What made you decide to become a school counsellor?*

My decision was made in my third year of my studies at University, where I had a mentor... I had a good relationship with him, I ended up being an assistant for him in the final year of studying at University, and he encouraged me to take up the counselling part of it and not go into clinical psychology. When I arrived in New Zealand, I taught full time for two years until the position of counsellor became available and probably more through luck than anything else I suppose. It was not a conscious decision as a seventeen-year-old, "I'm going to do this." It was through experience and working with other people that it became a part of who I am now.

#### ***Strength-based counselling training***

At University itself, when we look at all the counselling modalities. I wouldn't say I had full time training but through professional reading, going over modalities again and just checking that they fit with the person that I am and the kind of approach that I would take in the counselling.

### ***Modalities***

I don't know what strength-based is specifically. I would say Rogerian, solution focused, Gestalt, Cognitive Behavioural Therapy. I will probably use the old eclectic umbrella to hide under and say, I think I draw from a variety of.

### ***Narrative***

We all have a story; I haven't had training in narrative counselling. I am quite keen on doing a bit of professional development on narrative. Because when a client sits down with you they want to tell a story and their story is, their story regardless of what it is that they tell and it's important to them.

### ***Self-awareness/self-disclosure***

How appropriate is revealing something about yourself? The answer inevitably is always if it's something that will help the client understand the situation better, or make a better choice, or have a better alternative, then self-disclosure is used and then my own narrative comes into play.

### ***Practice***

#### ***How would you define SBC?***

I would say a strength based counselling approach is where the counsellor is someone that is aware of his or her own strengths and is therefore able, from a position of wisdom, to impart better options, or provide better options in order to work towards a positive outcome.

#### ***Tell me about a recent counselling experience where you used strength based counselling?***

I probably use it every day. I use an analogy of we can't change the past. I ask the boys, "What did you have for breakfast this morning." And they would say, "Weetbix." I would say, "Okay, can you change that?" And they go, "No I can't do anything about it." Same with your problem, it is there, and then we might move away from that and look at the problem as a stepping stone to reaching different outcomes.

*Is there an instance where you think strength based counselling is not appropriate?*

Anecdotally I would say no, because I think there is always a positive. Counselling in its nature should be positive, it should be strength based. It should be – I am going to see someone because I want a different outcome and you would hope that the outcome is a positive one. I know it does not always work that way and you do get things that don't work that well, but I would say yes, I can't think of a case where it wouldn't be positive.

*What do you think about using strength based counselling specifically with adolescents?*

Very powerful. Why do I think it works with adolescents in particular? Children are very resilient and in their development phase they start looking towards the future and strength based counselling has a huge impact there. Because I think it is important to be positive with them, regardless of the situation they find themselves in, you have to look forward. Because if there is no hope.

*What first attracted you to using strength based counselling?*

Probably my own spirituality which provides me with hope, even if things go horribly wrong, there's always something positive to look towards

*Do you find yourself acting as a mentor to perhaps any of your students, the staff?*

I'm quite physical in my, 'cause I think boys need physical, I mean I'd go in the playground and just grab them around the neck and sort of put my forehead against him and just say something, like how are you doing? It's just, I think there's a lot to be said for physical, social interaction between boys and older mentors. And you've got to remember that I'm talking purely from counselling boys primarily, adolescent boys that social/physical interaction I think is very important.

*Do you think physical interaction, or some kind of physical activity for boys contributes towards a positive outlook in life?*

Yes, definitely. I think they need to know their own strength, their own weaknesses. As part of their adolescent growth, they do want to show off their skills and for them they need to know that it's in a safe, positive environment that they can actually explore that. Because physically they are stronger than others, they are stronger than women, but they need to

know that that strength is something that should only be used for protection purposes I suppose. Not to hurt or harm anybody in any way shape or form.

*Do you think the gender of the counsellor makes a difference, depending on what gender you're counselling?*

No. Some people just choose for whatever reason to go to either male or female, I don't think it makes a difference, but I do think that boys do need significant males in their lives. Whether it's me as a counsellor, or whether it's a teacher, hopefully it can be their father but I know that quite often boys do not have significant males. But they do need them for guidance, to look out, to act appropriately in society.

*In what instances would boys seek out a female counsellor?*

From my experience, it would be when they have, I wouldn't say significant, but if they have difficulties with the significant males in their lives, whether it's a step parent or not. Whether they have an issue with the father figure and they would see me as a representation of another male that talks to them or does it in a different way. Or I might be a representative of another dominant male which they are trying to get away from.

*What times would they seek out a male counsellor and avoid going to a female counsellor?*

If they need the guidance of a male, if they need a person that they can relate to because there are certain things that they cannot talk to a female about.

*What do you think makes strength based counselling different to other counselling approaches? Is there a difference?*

I would think that strength based counselling is largely positive so it ultimately leads to providing them with hope and a sense of optimism that there is something that I can work towards and achieve better outcomes. This is about getting a better alternative but I suppose because I don't, I probably said that I only use strength based counselling approaches after this whole process.

*Do you think counselling by its nature is strength based?*

Probably, I would think so because look at the directive behind counselling is to provide people with different alternatives then I would probably say, I would think so. (the nature of counselling is strength based.)

*Do you do any group work using strength based counselling?*

I use the restorative justice process where there has been an incident where a person was the victim of whatever has happened. The example was a student hacked into a teacher's Facebook page and had commented on pictures, or had done something with the pictures and the teacher was obviously distraught about the fact that the student had gained access. And the restorative justice approach is where the victim can have a full go at the perpetrator and tell him how this has affected them, etcetera, etcetera and it's to try and restore, not completely, but have the relationship restored in some respects. And I was actually quite apprehensive of trying that approach but it was unbelievable the impact on the perpetrator.

The perpetrator at the end can then either apologise, or say what had sat behind his or her motives or intentions. And you try to move towards an outcome that suits both parties. I'd say, your question was mediation, not quite but it has sort of a mediation outcome where there is common ground where they either agree to not talk to each other again, or there is a way for people to apologise and give the victim the opportunity to vent their anger. Because quite often they don't have an avenue and quite often they wouldn't have the strength to confront the perpetrator. The idea is generally to try and have a positive outcome yes.

*What part of your role as a school counsellor are you most proud of?*

Probably being seen as someone with experience and expertise in being able to deal with boys, not deal that's a horrible word, being able to work with boys in a positive manner to effect outcomes, positive outcomes.

*Which of your skills as a school counsellor are you called on to use most often?*

Effective listening. Yes, and probably the ability to provide alternative positive outcomes.

*We've touched on this, but how do you know when you've done a good job with a client?*

I've actually, (laughter) in the last year I've realised, 'cause when I sit down with a student for probably the last seven months only I've got a chair that goes up and down and I've brought myself down to their level and that work that I've done have been a lot more intense I think. How do I know that I've done a good job? Oh probably the feedback from the students when they're saying, "Thank you very much that's really helped." Or ones that I have seen that I'll then run into in the playground and I'll say, "How are doing?" And they've said, "I'm really good thanks it was really good to talk with you." I get emails from boys, I do get letters, the odd letter from boys. I've had the odd comment from within the community and from outside agencies that said, they might make a comment about the work that I do, so in that fashion. Oh yeah I get comments from the teachers, yeah.

*Is there any formal way that you assess whether the counselling process has worked?*

Yes, we do have feedback sheets from the students, but the boys are quite reluctant to fill them in. It's there and we make them aware of it but they don't generally want to put their names to paper.

*What do you think is at the heart of successful school counselling?*

The kind of person you are. If you're warm and caring I think it's probably the person that you are more than having qualifications. Oh most important thing is if they know they can talk to you without it going anywhere, otherwise you can close your door.

*What makes your relationship with your adolescent clients' work?*

I can relate to them on their level. I'm out there, I joke with them, they see me all around the place, it's not that I'm some super aloof person, I think I'm, see I see them in and around the school ground, I go watch their sports so they know that I'm there and I take an active interest in what they do.

*What strengths do you have that you think best help you with your role as a school counsellor?*

My faith, experience of living in two countries having immigrated because we have a lot of immigrants within the school, the fact that I've played a high level of sport, that I can relate



to that, I understand where they're coming from and the fact that I've worked with boys for twenty years.

*How would you describe your counselling philosophy?*

That every person is unique, that every person has the ability to make positive choices that will enhance their lives and that every person should be treated with respect regardless of race, religion, gender. I'll have to get that from the transcript again. (laughter)

*If I came back to visit you in five years' time, how do you think your counselling practice would have changed?*

I was probably deep in my understanding I would probably have done some professional development on narrative. I think counselling itself, the kind of person you are, focus shouldn't allow for too many changes in terms of philosophy and who you are as a person. I probably have five hundred times five, two thousand five hundred hours of more experience and understanding human nature. It's a very continuous learning curve as it is every day I think. The beauty of being in a school is that your clientele changes every year. If you are in private practice you could potentially see someone for twenty years. Whereas in school it's a constant, constant change.

*What is the school roll?*

2200. The magic number from the ministry is one for every six hundred. So if you work that out, we should have three and a half. It's a guideline, it's not cast in stone, it's not a directive, but I know why the school think they can get away with it. They have two deans at each year level, they have senior management at each year level which they think takes care of the pastoral care in the school. That's an interesting topic for discussion, what is pastoral care, how should it be done? They do it their way and I'm a part of the machine, part of the system.

*If other school counsellors wanted to learn from your experience, what's the best advice you could give them?*

Be yourself, be authentic because they see right through you. If you try and, the only word I can think of is the BS one, if you try and waffle your way through things they're catch you

out like that and they won't see you, you'll have an empty office, you won't have kids coming to talk to you.

*Do you think being a parent helps you in your role as a school counsellor?*

You can relate to things that your son does which helps with, 'cause you can say, I understand my son is thirteen he does this, this and that so I understand what it is. Each boy is different of course, but it gives me a different perspective, it's different, I think I don't say you have to be a parent to be able to counsel, but it helps because you go through certain experiences and no kid is perfect. I mean my kid's going to do things, I hope he does, (laughter) that gets him in trouble.

*From the questions I have asked, is there anything that you think I should have asked that I haven't?*

No. It's quite good and it gives me an opportunity to sort of review my own practice. It'll be helpful to see the transcript in the end to see how that could, helping my understanding of my own practice.

### ***Suicide***

The thought in my head and I know it's a touchy subject at times and there's a whole raft of literature about whether you do approach suicide with boys, or talk about it and/or are you going to heighten the boys that are vulnerable when you mention it. But, for myself, suicide and this is personal, I can't see how things can get so bad that you'd want to take your own life. I know it happens and I know there are reasons for but I, I mean for me a counsellor's worst nightmare is if a client of yours commits suicide. Because the inevitable questions will be, what have I done wrong, why could I not help, why could he or she not talk to me, why did they have to go to that length? That's probably, where I think if it's that bad there must be a positive, so I think counselling in itself ultimately is for the person to have better alternatives.

New Zealand unfortunately sits high up in the OECD with youth suicides, especially males between the age of eighteen and twenty-five. That makes you wonder then, what happens between eighteen and twenty-five that makes it so hopeless that they do end up committing suicide at such an alarming rate. Whereas, if they finish with their

adolescence why is there no hope, or is there no support for them once they leave school and that gap, where do they get support from? Just thinking about it, I can tell you why because they have no family support, because like I said, 85% of the, from us is blended families and a lot of them are isolated, they don't feel wanted. They had the support in school for thirteen years they belonged to a certain organisation, they had support with counselling within the school and then they leave school. And in that gap there because it costs to go and see a counsellor and in that gap they find now they can't afford it and there's no one they can talk to. They've already been ostracised from home because some of them probably get told, go out and work, or go fend for yourself and they can't. I've never thought of that; I've just had a brainwave.

*Do you think that if they had been exposed to strength based counselling during their school years as adolescents, they'd be able to draw from those resources in young adulthood?*

If you think about it, school is a constant, always. It starts at a certain time, ends at a certain time, the teachers are always there, they know they can go to the counsellor when they want to, they can draw from that. Once they go away, that support is gone.

*So, it might then be important to ensure that in the gap years, so between leaving school and perhaps starting work, that there is some kind of support in place?*

I am just thinking back when I was at University, you have gone from being at school, for me military service and there were chaplains and it was mostly based on religion but you could go and talk to someone. Then I went to University and we had counsellors at University, so those gap years for me were filled in, they were filled in by people that could support me. But it's not here.

### ***Other issues dealt with***

The way the world has changed, I would say at least 85% of the clients that I see are from blended families and most of the issues that we deal with are relational. With either a stepparent, or issues at school that come through the stuff that go on at home.

*What could prevent suicide?*

Because of the secular nature of New Zealand secondary schools, we are not allowed to broach the subject of spirituality unless the student opens up that avenue, or asks questions. But I definitely think it's important. I think it's important that there is spirituality and that's why, from my perspective, a lot of the students have no hope long term. That is it, when my seventy years are up, I go in the ground and there's no hope where people have no religion or spirituality. When they do, they have something to hold on to that makes it easier for them to cope with. It does not make life easy, but it gives them something to hold on to.

*Are there any specific instances you can think of where you use strength based counselling and it didn't work?*

Yes, I'm dealing with a client now that has sexual identify issues where I think the fear, or the shame, or the embarrassment of talking to his parents about it, is becoming a hindrance. I have seen him for two and a half years now and it took him that long to fully trust and to say this is what is going on. He is not seeing the positive outcomes. He is almost torpedoing his own progress by not speaking to people close to him, by not having the courage to discuss that with his parents.

### ***Techniques***

I've a young Cook Island Māori boy who has had some run-ins with the police with theft and issues within the school with lying and theft at school. And he now has paid his dues to society, he's got some community service and he's done all the discipline issues from within the school and now he's with me trying to look at ways to move forward. Looking at short and long terms goals and when I talk short I'm talking short, like week to week. What sort of things are we going to try to get to the end of the week? I'm going to try to stay in class and not do this, or not do that and it's working now.

*Would any of the goals be around managing his emotions?*

Yes, I think the most important one there is in terms of strength based, and again I can only relate to the teenage boys and trying to speak their language, is to just give yourself ten to fifteen seconds to stop and think about what the possible impact could be. And what that would do to you at that point in time. I make them close their eyes and count fifteen

seconds and they go, “Wow that’s pretty long.” I will say, “Okay if I tell you fifteen seconds, you go oh it’s a long time, but if you stop and think about the possible consequences it could be life altering. If you give yourself that opportunity to think on a variety of levels, physically, emotionally, spiritually, sexually, what impact it could potentially have.”

Going back to your question of how do we use narratives? They all watch movies and the best example is when in Shrek ... Donkey says, “What are ogres like?” And he says, “Oh you’re like chocolate cake.” And Shrek says, “No we’re like onions, we’ve got layers.” And people are the same and part of my responsibility as a counsellor, is to try and peel the layers away to find out what sits at the bottom. And that takes time. Sometimes it takes a long time to get there and I might not get there, I might just be a part of the process. Another counsellor might unlock it. I can just be a part of setting that process in motion.

*Best experience you had of using strength based counselling?*

I’d probably say, I use a programme which is strength based, it’s a programme called Future Selves which was developed by a clinical psychologist and an IT guru in Wellington which looks at four aspects of the client’s life. Which is lifestyle, career, skills and there is one more that I’ve forgot. So they fill in a bank of questions which is how they see themselves in the future. Do you see yourself playing sport? How likely are you to do it? Those sorts of things and the programme generates a report of about ten pages which helps you engage with the client. That’s strength based in terms of looking forward a little bit.

I do progressive muscle relaxation. I sometimes take forty-five-minute sessions with the students once they learn how to do progressive muscle relaxation, which reduces anxiety, helps a bit with creativity. They can then do it on their own.

I use breathing, relaxation techniques, visualisation that actually came through my original fascination with anger management, the breathing, the visualisation, counting backwards. Putting yourself, mentally in a different position.

*Do you use mindfulness with students?*

Not consciously but probably through discussing with them and asking them questions. What’s happening now, how does that have an impact on what’s going on?

The one thing about boys, a lot of it's in the here and now they can't see further, it's quite about me at the moment and how I've got to deal with things. So probably just through general discussion it is about what's going on at the moment, what are you thinking at the moment?

I have the emoticons about how you feel. There are about a hundred and forty different emotions. To ask them, "How many emotions do you think you have?" "Oh maybe about twenty, Sir." And then I give them the sheet and they go, "Wow." So again, they can't verbalise it but they can look at the picture and say maybe that's how I feel, or how I am at this present time. But they do struggle to verbalise what's going on for them, so for boys, mindfulness, probably not a lot.

### **Referrals**

I'm not a magician, I'm not a mind reader. The other difficulty and this, probably where the strength base comes in is that many of the boys at times are referred by someone and it's not, they don't come under their own volition which makes it difficult. If you've got to try and look at positives, the reason you're here is not that you're in trouble, it is actually people are concerned about you, they think there's something we should be working towards which opens up the potential to work with them. But it doesn't always work, they don't want to be there, sometimes we win, sometimes we lose and if we lose they are just going to walk out. It doesn't make you feel good but it happens, well if I walk out and say I don't want to talk to you that's it, then they walk out you can't do anything about it.

*What do you like best about strength based counselling as an approach?*

It's positive, it focuses on the positive, it gives them something to work towards. And it also allows them to do a bit of introspection, it's not about me, it's not about, I can't live their lives, I can't make decisions for them. I can only give them suggestions and to go and try out. And sometimes they come back and say, "Yes that worked." "No, this didn't work," which helps me going forward. Each client is unique but at times there might be similarities that you can sort of draw strength from.

### ***Feedback***

It could be completely random. Last week going to supervision I had to stop at a dairy to top up my Vodafone mobile and as I was walking out of the shop I heard someone call me. I sort of always freeze 'cause you never know what's going to happen. There was a boy who's now in Singapore who's here visiting his parents and he said, "I still remember you told us that we had one chance to make a first impression and that's the thing I now do with my clients that walk into my practice." I know I get one chance to make an impression.

### ***Confidentiality***

*At what point do you decide to breach confidentiality and bring the parents in?*

When safety is at risk. When there is a risk of suicide or self-harm, some of the boys do cut themselves and if there is harm to others. Probably the best example would be drugs. If I am aware that a student is using and providing then we must get the parents here because they are possibly going to be harmful to other students, or a danger to them. That is the only breach of confidentiality.

Through NZCCA there's also informed consent. There might be times where safety is not necessarily an issue and I would talk to the boy and say, "Look what you've told me is X, and I think it would be important that either your teachers, or your parents know." But they must consent to me providing information. Because quite often they're boys with difficult circumstances at home, it might be illness, it might be financial and it has an impact at school. And I say, "It's good if your teachers know just to make them aware." And they go, "Yeah let them know," or they say, "No I don't want anybody to know," depending on the circumstances.

### ***Drawback of counselling***

The only drawback and again that is something that is being discussed in supervision is, how do I know that I've made a difference? They walk out of the office, you have spent a session with them, and you just don't know. You get the odd one that comes back and says thank you but you get the ones that go away and you don't even have a clue whether you've had any impact at all. And that's, again that's probably more about me as a person, whether I am effective or not than the student. Sometimes you've just got to let it go if they walk out then they've walked about.

### **The adolescent student**

It does at that age, and I'm talking he's fifteen and a half, very difficult. Nothing I can say, or his parents will say, or at this stage have a massive impact, his peers are critical to him in this stage of his life, which is understandable. And we can only hope that the seeds that we plant in terms of moving forward will have a bearing.

*What do you think adolescent wellbeing is, how would you define it?*

Adolescent wellbeing would be to negotiate safely all the changes that the adolescents go through, physically, emotionally, sexually, spiritually. And to have a safe environment where they have people they can trust to safely get through it, because it is a difficult time. There are so many milestones, rites of passage and things they must reach. If they don't have someone to help guide them through it, they could potentially fall off the rails.

*In what way, if any, do you think strength based counselling contributes towards adolescent wellbeing?*

I think it provides them with a glimpse into how they see themselves, building self-esteem, knowing that, with help of people around them, they can reach those milestones. It's important that there are significant adults in their lives that can help them and provide them with guidance to reach those goals.

*In terms of strength based counselling, what part of the counselling process do you think adolescents value most?*

Privacy, they are very aware of their bodies, the changes in their bodies, how people perceive them and for them to know that they can go and talk to someone without it going anywhere is important. And the fact that it provides him with different options that are positive. Because quite often, and again going back to the blended family, sometimes it's difficult they don't get the appropriate responses or feedback from the significant males in their lives and I can provide that in here. But we also provide them with a female counsellor, so they have the option of talking to a man or talking to a woman.



## **The school context**

### ***Fix or help***

Because it's a helping profession, it is a helping profession. The danger of working in an organisation where you are constrained by the requirements of, is that sometimes the students are sent to me to fix. Counselling doesn't fix people they are there to help them through and to navigate difficult circumstances.

### ***Tension between teacher and counsellor***

I quite often use Maslow's hierarchy of needs for the students to have a look at, or the teacher says, "Oh person so and so is not working." I'm like, "Yes but he's sleeping in a shack, he's not warm at night why would he work?" Because he has not fulfilled that need, therefore, there is no chance that he is going to get up there and I think there is a lack of understanding at times from teachers. When they have sent someone and he has seen the counsellor so he should be fine. No, because I see him in the office, and he goes back into an environment that's not positive and it's just impossible for them to have any other ideas of self-esteem, or self-actualising, or achieving anything. I think if your basic needs are not met it'll be very difficult to do anything else.

*Would you say that the use of strength-based approaches is supported within the school environment?*

Yes, I would think so. If you look at the sort of definition of educating boys it's looking to create men that can take a positive role in society, therefore all the teaching is about being proud of who you are, what you want to achieve and obviously to function within society and adhering to certain rules and regulations.

*Do you use strength based approaches in your teaching?*

Yes, in my teaching, yes. Yeah looking at positive outcomes. I mean I've looked, you can take that out, I had a look outside my window the other day, a teacher was doing a performing arts class with his third form and it was fascinating to watch. He had a pirate hat on, the kids had hats on and they were just having a whale of a time pretending to row their boat, it was just incredible to watch, it was just like, that was good to see. So I know people that will use it yes.

*Do you think strength based counselling, sorry a strength based approach should be used in the classroom?*

Yes, especially with boys, it should be positive; they should feel good about themselves. They are absolutely hammered in the media about how behind they are in goals, how horrible their behaviour is. I think it's important that they know that they are okay.

*How do you think a strength-based approach could be introduced into schools if it's not already there?*

I think it should probably be done at Teachers College, that people that know that they could potentially go into teaching boys, that there should be an aspect of their education training that should be incorporated.

*And if that's not the case and you want to introduce it into a school, where would you start?*

Probably professional development, to make them aware of this as an approach that works with boys. I think it happens at the school. They get PowerPoints where it's good to be a boy and this is how you treat the boys and this is how it should work in a classroom.

*How is counselling in a single gender school different compared to a co-ed school?*

Personally, I don't think there's much of a difference because we provide both male and female. I know working closely with a girls' school that they are, they deal with different things and a lot of the boys' problems seem to be quite intense. But I mean for instance a boy would ask to see me and it would be hectically busy and I would see him two or three days later and he'd say, "Oh no the problem's solved itself." So, it's quite intense but quite often it's short lived.

### **The family and community context**

The difficulty is, you can work in the school but the environment outside is a very difficult one. And once they go and live their lives you can only hope that your influence, or the things that you try and make them work on is something that they will use outside. But the influences of their peers are unfortunately very strong and the peer group that he is mixing with outside school makes that difficult.

## **Appendix S – First attempt categorical-content interpretation:**

### **Angus's narrative**

See fifth version of story-map grid for categorical-content in chapter 8, section 8.1.4.

Researchers questions are indicated in italics. Angus's transcript was organised according to categories that I noticed in his narrative. A few select verbatim quotes are included under each of these categories to illustrate how this was done. However, during the interpretation process all relevant quotes were considered. Four role-players were recognised in school counsellors' narratives: The counsellor, the adolescent, the school context and the family and community context. These role-players were used as categories for interpreting school counsellors' transcripts.

#### **The counsellor**

I am intrigued to co-discover with you where this might go.

*What made you decide to become a counsellor?*

I had some time off teaching. I had time to think through where my time would best be served and upon contemplation felt that I was spending four hours for lesson preparation, planning, and working for tests to every one hour of teaching. I was not the best use of my time. I thought things through and was led towards counselling.

#### ***Strength-based counselling training***

I am a counsellor but I have never heard anyone call themselves a strength-based counsellor, nor have I ever actually used that.

If you are asking people who've come from Unitec, or Waikato, or others who have done solution focused, or collaborative therapies, or narrative, it's only when they leave the training and do placements within institutions that they're getting more into strength-based approaches and those sorts of ways of working.

*So you were exposed more to a strength-based model?*

You could actually hear the deficit approach from other professionals and we would say, ‘I am sorry but we are a strength based agency here (laughter) and if you are going to tell me what is wrong well then could you tell me when it is that things are right.

When I’m thinking of strength-based counselling I think of it as an umbrella for a narrative approach, a person centred approach, a positive psychology approach and a solution focused approach. Those approaches lend themselves to a strength-based position. Would you say strength-based counselling stands alone or is it a framework?

I think of strength-based practice as being influenced and intersecting with narrative approaches, collaborative therapies and positive psychology, which comes from person-centred ways of being. I know that the psychology profession is wielding more voice and power within GSC educational circles and a strength-based approach would be (laughter) a useful framework. (laughter). I am conscious that there are educational institutions and places like the DHBs that won’t recognise the quality of the training that I’ve done because it doesn’t fit in with a deficit approach, they haven’t had that specific training and experience.

### ***Modalities***

*What strength based approaches do you currently use?*

I think strength based approaches are more of a framework. That can sometimes guide a process. I am trained in collaborative and narrative therapies so I use narrative ways of being, regularly. Sometimes I might use solution focus approaches, other times I might use person centred approaches, child centred approaches, sometimes expressive or creative therapies.

I am interested in who is sitting in front of me, and what it is they are asking of me.

### ***Narrative***

With many boys, I am discovering who is saying what about them in a way, that affirms and encourages behaviours that the school would like to see. Being a curious enquirer, asking them to tell their story of what is happening in their classrooms, what is happening on the basketball court, what is happening elsewhere and what they are hearing from people, which seems to strike a chord for them? Then documenting on a whiteboard who is

saying what which is encouraging in terms of growth and self-development. It shows that people like and care (laughter) for them.

*What effect does that have on the boys?*

It affirms and demonstrates that their actions are seen by others in a certain light and if their actions are noticed, it can influence them. This could come forth through teachers' smiles, from words like, 'you're doing really well.' There is a, I haven't used this word for a while, there is a bit of cause and effect, in that they're in a relationship which could actually work for both them and for the teachers, or other adults in their lives.

### ***Practice***

In a guidance counsellor position, you are under a strength-based framework or ideally, you would like to, but you are called on to be eclectic in so many different ways.

I sat down thinking about the issues that this family could be facing, I thought about what would help their adolescent girl, and what resources and exceptions to the rule would be possible. They were Māori so when they came in it was important to work through a process of whakawhanaungatanga. They had hoped that I would tell them the answers and I clarified that I'd just met them today. So to start off with it'd be good to find out, if there were any issues for them that would be important for the school to understand.

*What stands out the most from the counselling experience?*

That they thought that I would have the answers for them. I was more curious as to what has supported her in other environments that could be useful in this new environment. I worked with the parents to compile, a wider set of shared understandings that might have an impact on how things are for the young lady at school.

*What do you like best about a strength-based approach as opposed to a deficit based approach?*

It builds a platform that is solid, a base that you can really grow from. It seems to be particularly effective at focusing on encouraging things. It recognises things that may not be prominently in the deficit-focused world that we occupy.

*What then would a strength-based approach be to you, if you had to give me a definition?*

A recognition of the positive, or the affirming qualities of human nature that sustain both growth and relationships that inspire you to get up when the chips are down, or when times are a bit tough. The word, resiliency pops up in my head and self-awareness. I guess you could say mindfulness of the way you want things to be rather than a focus on the deficits that others outline.

*What do you think of using a strength-based approach particularly with adolescents?*

I think it is quite relevant if the language you use is adolescent centred, or is not adult like. It could include jargon, it could include a whole range of cultural aspects, which would resonate with and may speak to adolescents. So, provided you had the language or jargon right, a strength based approach would be suited to adolescents? But, in terms of the outcomes beyond the counselling room, that would depend on the audience that you support to receive any potential changes or effects that could come from strength based approaches.

*Can you think of any instances, any specific instance, where you used a strength-based approach and it was not successful?*

When you have either adolescents or parents who may come in and they already have a label, and it is a deficit approach. They already know what the issues are and this is how it is. In that context, I would be more of a curious enquirer about what the issue is. Listening to the telling of their story and their sense of identity or identify claims. What are they saying, or telling me? These little questions are in my head about why someone would want to tell me about that. Thinking about it from a caring, compassionate position because whatever I do sometimes just caring and listening with is the best approach, rather than a strength-based approach or a narrative one. There is no one size fits all, particularly when you meet people for the first time and you don't know them.

*Would you say that counselling in general lends itself towards a strength-based approach?*

I have been thinking carefully about that word guidance counsellor. When is there the school counsellor and when is there someone who provides guidance? Because there are many ways, that you can provide guidance and to enable or increase the range of options,

like a good counsellor should be trying to do, for whoever comes through the door. But generally you would hope that all counsellors are caring and compassionate and good listeners - at least for the first half of the term. (laughter)

What I call myself depends on who the audience is. For you I would put down counsellor, member of NZAC, because I am a full member and this is who I am with five years' experience. In the school environment, I put school counsellor. If I am replying to a deputy principal, I put down guidance counsellor. It really depends on the audience. To students I am a counsellor. I think narrative can fit in with strength base and strength base can feed narrative but unless the conversations around strength-based approaches are nurtured through regular peer supervision, or regular training it can actually wither and die.

*How do you prevent it from withering and dying, you mentioned training and peer supervision?*

I am working hard to get together with fellow practitioners who do practice from a strength-based point of view. So, I'm hopeful that that might be supportive. There are places that do give regular training and quite knowledgeable practitioners like Mathew Selekman, or Janella Bird who've had decades of experience in working in a strength based way which are quite supportive. I would be lying if I did not say that I am quite intrigued by our conversation, to see how this might reinforce or affirm a strength based way of working.

*With regard to strength based counselling, which part of the counselling process do you think adolescents value most?*

Showing that you [the counsellor] get it. That you hear or see and take seriously the issues that adolescents are facing and that you are standing alongside them and actively participating to enable or support them through the present moment towards what they would rather have in the future.

*What makes strength based counselling different to other approaches?*

You do not have to go back to the deep dark times of childhood. There isn't a need to go back into history to traumatic moments. You don't need to know all of someone's life story of the past twelve years before they came in through the door. If someone wants to bring up

something that an issue it's only within the context of what may be supportive of a future to come, or may bring about a solution, or something they would prefer to focus on. I haven't heard any adolescent wanting to go back to their childhood and tell me all that has actually happened. It's more in the here and now.

*Can you tell me about an instance where you used strength based counselling in conjunctions with other counselling approaches?*

Yes, I think it works reasonably well when you're working with families. We're taught as adults by other adults to utilise strength based approaches and the people who are generally calling counsellors they're not adolescents, they're adults. A strength-based framework supports an information gathering exercise to find out what the issues are and provides a framework that could guide the strength-based process. Then if you ... discovered that the adolescent is very creatively based and artistic then expressive, creative therapies could be a modality, which might resonate with the individual.

*So you would say then that strength based counselling is compatible with other approaches?*

Strength-based counselling is a framework that fits with, or could be used over the top of, other approaches. I could employ a strength-based framework, but in terms of the therapeutic application, I could use either child-centred play therapy based on the language an adolescent is using, which may tell me about their emotional maturity, or the language that they have at their disposal, or the issues they are facing. Or if I have someone who's in the top stream who is quite expressive and seems to have a large vocabulary and is wanting to just blah and tell you all of that, well then, the more talkative solution focused, or narrative therapies could be more appropriate.

*Do you do any group work using strength-based approaches?*

In my last place of work, we were using strength-based approaches for the delivery of parental programmes. You should work quite carefully. I don't presume to assume that it could be this or that with adolescents because I don't know their parents and I only know a little bit about what intermediate school they have come from.



*What makes your relationship with adolescent clients' work?*

Not tell them off (laughter)! Hearing what is important and why adolescents want to share it with someone like me. To be curious but also, I guess you could say mature, to be solid, stable, and aware of current issues that are meaningful. Being up to speed about things that adolescents are interested in, whether it is media, music, or sports, or whatever.

***Safety issues/suicide***

I try to enter the adolescence world based on what they are bringing, unless there are issues of safety, or ideas of self-harm, or queries about some mental health discourses. Then there are safety plans. There would be some assessment processes to deem the adolescent's level of safety and the need to consult elsewhere. I ask a friend quite regularly. (laughter)

***Techniques***

I use the four-column approach. The first column looks at the issues that the family may be facing as well as some potential constraints that could be getting in the way. Their future picture would be the second column, the third column would be resources that they already have at their disposal and possible exceptions to the rule. The last column would be where to from here, what is a potential starting point from this conversation, what can be done in the now? This approach is useful in that you had both the framework to guide the process as well as flexibility to ask questions to flush out a few more details about when the issues are occurring, or are there any times when there aren't any issues at all? Those questions flush out exceptions to the rule.

I use whiteboard quite regularly. The narrative and solution focused approaches are quite talking orientated. Sometimes I would use some child centred play therapy approaches. Other times the pad comes out and we might do some expressive drawing therapy.

*You mentioned a little while back about mindfulness and resilience and self-awareness, do you use any mindful techniques in your counselling?*

I am a narrative practitioner, I am someone who meditates, and there are a number of people who actually come in at this point in the year who are stressed and feeling anxiety over exam time. So I'm very conscious of positive affirmations as well as little memory

hooks, 'it's okay this too shall pass.' I am conscious of their usefulness for many people and I am curious as to whether the students coming to see me have this sort of resource at their disposal.

*You've used the term inquiring mind a few times, does that refer to any particular approach, or is it just your way of viewing the process?*

A curious enquirer is a narrative approach so that comes from not assuming that you know how it is. Because how could I know what they are going through at my age of when someone who is fourteen has come to see me?

*You mentioned briefly about Incredible Years, do you use that at all?*

I have been trained as an Incredible Years facilitator. So, I may bring out some of the evidence-based practice in conversations with deans and teachers and possibly with the odd parent. I have a chart for a couple of students but they would have to do with issues of attendance and truancy.

### ***Feedback***

*How do I know when I have done a good job with an adolescent client?*

We, have evaluation forms that we are supposed to give out quite regularly. Some students, when I remember, do get the evaluation forms. Some students do not because I have forgotten or I have gone through them.

### ***Most proud of/skills***

I am proud of when I arrive at school at eight in the morning! (laughter) I am most proud about how I attempt to engage at the level of whoever walks in the door. I am really interested in who the individual is. I speak other languages when I think of whoever an adolescent might be. I don't presume to assume that I would understand a twelve-year-old girl. But I'll be really interested in learning from her who she is and why she has come to my door.

*Which of your skills as a school counsellor are you called on to use most often?*

I would say person-centred approaches, child or person centred approaches. In terms of skills awareness as to where the adolescent may be coming from. As I get to know more of the deans and teachers, I think the skill set of communicating to adolescents what might be supportive or encouraging of behaviours that deans or teachers might like to see more of. (Counsellor seems to be working for the school and not for the adolescent)

*What do you think is at the heart of successful school counselling?*

Successful school counselling is about having a heart. It is about giving a voice to students and for students, within different management levels of the school. Truly being able to respond to the needs of students as they come in and then to give them a voice in response to these needs. I think having that voice is crucial.

*What strengths best help you with your role as a school counsellor?*

Being primary trained is helpful. I have understood the educational experiences these students have come from. Knowing the adolescents have come from a family, or a cultural framework. Being interested in what that means and how that is for adolescents. Being able to support them.

With adolescents, in New Zealand you can be straight up. They know where you are coming from because there are many Kiwis in their lives who are straight up. But being straight up in a way that they understand that you're providing them with information so that they can make good choices. You are certainly hopeful they will make choices that are good for them and their family as well as their school and everything else. Providing a bit of a framework or scaffolding so that you can support adolescent wellbeing.

*My counselling philosophy* looks through a primary teacher's eyes at meeting, or understanding, or supporting, or being there for the individual needs of the child. Anyone in my counselling practice is someone's child and I really think about what is being asked of me, how may I be of service, or how may I be of support. What is of most use in the time that we spend in this room, either for the adolescent or sometimes for a dean or a teacher, or a parent? Those internal questions are important.

*If I came back to visit you in five years' time, how would your counselling practice have changed?*

I hope that the completion of a Masters may enhance my counselling practice, or counselling outcomes. I think it might change in that I may have a lower case load that could be focused on narrative or strength based approaches. We work in organisations and institutions that are influenced enormously by cultures and discourses as well as systems of thought and organisation. I cannot help but be intrigued about the effect and impact that has on groups of people and the issues that are coming forth that require them to go to [counselling].

*If other school counsellors wanted to learn from your experience, what is the best advice you could give them?*

Know where you come from and know the people who have had the greatest impact on who you have become. Be aware of contextual influences that were speed bumps but helped to shape who you are. Positive psychology gets me thinking about, "Always look on the bright side of life." (laughter) People seem to respond in a certain way to smiles and to reaching out with care and compassion. Think carefully about what pushes your buttons and what puts a smile on your dial and think of the impact and potential effects that you could have on adolescents and those who are in your care.

### **The adolescent student**

The adults are the ones who think there are issues because this young lady seems to be really enjoying her year and everything seems fine. (laughter) She is who she is.

*What is adolescent wellbeing, how would you define it?*

I don't know how you could define it. I picture a rainbow in my head and a huge spectrum. I believe there are many adolescents who ... seem to be quite resilient and truck along. Then there are others who are somewhere in the middle who feel lots of life's ups and downs as I remember myself going through. I think of it as a huge spectrum. Sometimes you are buoyant and up and over the moon and then other times you might hit exam time and you're studying Cambridge and you don't have a lot of supports and you might need a bit of a helping hand. Well-being? It's not one size fits all.

*Do you think strength based counselling can assist them in establishing a sense of wellbeing?*

I think strength-based counselling could support adolescent wellbeing by providing a base of knowing where they stand, that there are contacts for support. That there are times and are places that we must navigate through and that there were times before when things were fine and they'll hopefully be times in the future when things will be as they would like them to be. I think adolescents can teach us so much in if we are curious and are engaged in a co-discovery framework with them. We don't presume to know how things may be.

### **The school context**

*Are there any instances where you think strength based counselling is not appropriate?*

I am not sure that if you get into school board of trustee disciplinary processes, if those disciplinary approaches would appreciate strength-based ways of working. They tend to focus on the facts, on the issues, on the offences, which are presenting. The weight of evidence has already been gathered against adolescents in those forums.

*Do you think there is a place for a strength-based model within that approach?*

I do. The current Ministry of Education guidelines looking at encouraging pro-social behaviours and positive behavioural approaches could provide a framework. But, the school would then have to be a brave school and one that's interested in innovation and doing things that a little differently from other schools.

*If you were to introduce a strength based approach initiative within the entire school, where do you think would you start?*

You would start within your current cohort of counsellors. No, you would start in your own counselling room looking at the ways in which you are working with clients and the outcomes. ...I think you would start small (laughter) with groups of ten and perhaps do some publishing of the effects of these practices with your colleagues. You could say sharing stories of success, mm.

*How do you ready the audience for, as students come to you for strength based counselling and you put them back out into the world and they're received by this audience, is the audience prepared for the changes in any way?*

I'm new at this school and I have the sense that the relationships that I form with the deans of these students are crucial to the acceptance of strength-based concepts that may be supportive of what we all hope for the adolescent who's been referred to me. I must be conscious of that and be supportive of the teacher's reception of restoring an adolescent's position. I'm tentative at the same time I will bring in an outside experts evidence-based views of what may be supportive of behaviours. I am not in an expert position speaking over. I am in a collaboration with the teachers so that it is a partnership that could support the reception of strength based approaches, and other ways of looking at things.

*Is it about changing the culture of the school?*

Well it is about supporting at a micro level some changes that with the right climate could impact at a macro level.

*Is the use of strength based counselling approach supported within your school?*

It is within the guidance department, within the larger school framework - that is currently inconclusive. (laughter) The teacher is the boss and the person at the top of the hierarchical structure is well and truly the leader.

*So, school environment isn't a collaborative environment as it were between teachers and students would you say?*

It depends on which school environment you are talking about. Some school environments are very collaborative, others are more traditional and there could be collaboration taking place in certain areas but not in others. We would collaborate quite actively with the deans within our school environment.

*Do you think strength based approaches should be used in a classroom setting?*

That's a tough one, I'm unsure. Maybe if students could be compliant. (laughter) If they could even be collaborative, there could be hope. (laughter)

*How do you think strength based approaches could be introduced school wide?*

It would have to come from the top. Through the principal's meetings, some linking in with them, but the potential for strength-based approaches and its usefulness could be supportive.

*It has to have buy-in from management?*

Oh whole-heartedly. It is like restorative approaches and practices if there is no buy-in from management you could only work at a micro level, which could have an impact on both the individual as well as with small groups, or the odd classroom.

*If it is, was not possible to introduce a strength based model school wide, can it still have an impact at a micro level?*

It can have an impact at a micro level, because, as a practitioner within a school, you can engage in collaborative practices with outside agencies, or build up support systems with groups of people within the school, whether they are teachers or other adolescents.

*How would you say counselling in a co-ed school compares to counselling in a single gender school?*

It's much more exciting and I think you are called to activate a wider skill set.

In terms of adolescent self-development, there are all kinds of issues around sexuality, pregnancy, relationships and getting along with others. The disciplinary system in a secondary school environment comes down hard on adolescents for behaviours they are showing. It almost seems like there is a greater audience that is witnessing these behaviours. In large schools, you cannot assume that even their teachers know them because they don't see their teachers that often and there's a class of thirty, thirty-five.

### **The family and community context**

From a strength-based perspective, there are exceptions to the kind of the behaviours that are fraught with the issues. Whanau are a great resource so are past aunties and uncles and teachers and other environments, health professionals and friends down the road and friends at school. Wondering about if there are issues, who is supportive of when those issues are not found, or are there times when those issues are not present?

## Appendix T – Second attempt categorical-content interpretation: Counsellors’ practice

During the second attempt of the categorical-content interpretation I decided to structure the interpretation by pulling excerpts from across all the school counsellors’ narratives and placing these quotes under the appropriate category headings (See Chapter 8, section 8.2.1). I present the category: The counsellors’ practice here as an exemplar of this process.

### Research questions:

- What discourses (meta-narratives) shape school counsellors’ views about strength-based practice?
- How do these discourses (meta-narratives) promote or restrict a school counsellor’s practice?

### Counselling Philosophy:

#### My notes

A counsellors’ philosophy makes a difference to their practice because...

- *It is a part of the counsellor’s discourse*
- *Choice of words*
- *Attitude*
- *Choice of advice or not giving advice*
- *Positioning of self and client*
- *Efficacy*
  - *All the above – practice + language = discourse*
- *Where is the stress place - on you (autonomy) or “feel” – affect*

#### A few select excerpts from transcripts to demonstrate the process:

*My philosophy is about supporting and encouraging young people to believe in their abilities, to minimise the impact of distress I encourage them to tap into their support systems [school and family], into their own inner strengths and resources (Pam).*

*I have a real heart for this place. The girls know I have a really big heart for them. I have a responsibility to support them to have the best story they can, to believe in themselves, to learn and to be happy. Those are my beliefs but I don’t impose them on my kids (Jessica).*

*I like young people. I am positive. I really like my work. I would never go through a day, as long as I do some counselling, and come out feeling that it wasn’t worthwhile (Valerie).*



## What is strength-based counselling?

*What first attracted me to strength-based counselling was energy (laughter.) My own energy (laughter) and their energy. It does not work if you are too bogged down (Valerie).*

*Strength-based approaches are a recognition of the positive, or the affirming qualities of human nature that sustain both growth and relationships that inspire you to get up when the chips are down. The word, resiliency pops in my head and self-awareness. I guess you could say mindfulness of the way you want things to be rather than a focus on the deficits that other approaches outline (Angus).*

*Strength based counselling is having the belief that my clients have the strength to deal with their own problems and not looking at it from a deficit perspective (Gabrielle).*

*I am not convinced about strength-based alone. There needs to be some understanding of the source of the issues. It is not just looking for strengths and going with that because I think that's good short term in a crisis but it doesn't deal longer term with the issues. Along with strength based, you need to be aware of what has created the situation (Thomas).*

## Power/influence of the counsellor

*I'm interested in their ideas and I privilege students' knowledge over my own. I consult with them about what they think is best. Honouring what a student knows about what would happen if we intervene (Jessica).*

*I would say a strength based counselling approach is where the counsellor is aware of his or her own strengths and is able, from a position of wisdom, to provide better options in order to work towards a positive outcome (Hamish).*

*Strength-based counselling is about working together. It's not here's some pills and away you go and that'll make it better. I am not the expert. It's quite freeing to know I'm not the expert. I am not completely responsible, it's not up to me, it's up to us, it's a shared thing (Gabrielle).*

*Since I started practising, I have become more aware of the complexities of counselling and a major element is an awareness of power relations. Even when you think, you're not in a position of authority, of power you are. Becoming aware of that in a deep way is very important (Thomas).*

*We [counsellors] have knowledge about what helps people, through our reading and our knowledge around resilience, and they don't have that knowledge, so I feel hugely responsible for representing that wisdom in my work. That's being a master of what you do, rather than a novice (Jessica).*

## The deficit vs. strength discourse and the underpinnings thereof

### My notes:

- Medical model – say they use strength but based on a deficit tradition
- Overt strength
- Hidden deficit
- Very important section to support thesis – relates to research questions

*Strength-based counselling is not about pathologising. It focuses on young people's strengths and what they are doing well. It is very much a focus on a glass half-full, rather than deficits and pathologising. It is non-blaming. Kids get on board quickly (Pam).*

*Strength based counselling is about recognising the good things in their life. If I had someone come with their problem saturated story, I'd want to know. "What's actually going well for you at the moment?" It's not often that I don't hear something that's going well (Jessica).*

*I looked at her strengths and not her weaknesses. I couldn't wave a magic wand and change her parents. I did my best in that regard; I had people in for meetings and referred her to professionals. But the essence of it was never letting her see herself as a failure, never letting her see herself as someone who didn't have the resources to survive, because she's an incredibly talented girl (Valerie).*

*Counselling in its nature should be positive, it should be strength based. It should be – 'I am going to see someone because I want a different outcome and you would hope that the outcome is positive' (Hamish).*

## **The strength and weakness of strength-based counselling**

### **Benefits of strength-based counselling**

#### **My notes:**

- *Free associate – let myself go a bit – use lots of quotes*

*I am most proud of how I attempt to engage at the level of whoever walks in the door. I am really interested in who the individual is. I speak another language when I think of whoever an adolescent might be. I don't assume that I would understand a twelve year old girl. But I'll be really interested in learning from her who she is and why she has come to my door. So the skills I use most often would be awareness as to where the adolescent may be coming from (Angus).*

*The skill I use most often are Friendship skills, friendship break ups that's what they, you can call it bullying, you can call it what you like, hence the video that I showed the other day. But a lot of its friendship problems as I see it, up until even Year 7 and 8 there's been a home room teacher who, the adults have sorted out most of the friendship problems. Once they get to Year 9 they have to start sorting it out themselves and they make a hash of it. (laughter). A lot of them, not all of them but they'll be groups that will continually make the same mistakes and because they're just caught up with themselves (Gabrielle).*

*I don't consider myself an expert. I consider the student to be the expert in their own lives and they must find an answer that's going to work for them. I don't lecture them. Sometimes I say, "I'm just putting on my mum's hat for a moment and I'm just going to tell you how important breakfast is and it'll only last a few minutes." Or I might say, "Well did you know I'm the breakfast police in the school?" But we do it in a funny way (Abbigail).*

### **Drawbacks (Appropriateness) of strength-based counselling**

*Strength-based counselling always has the potential to strengthen the work that I am doing, particularly with older kids. I might not necessarily start weaving it in straightaway. For instance, if a student is coming to me in absolute crisis or absolutely falling apart because of some significant loss, initially there might not be a significant strength-based focus, but absolutely it would eventually be a part of the therapeutic process (Pam).*

*Strength-based counselling does not work with some. Let me think of an example. A little girl came in and she was just about catatonic. I can't imagine how she got into that state without people noticing. I referred her to the Adolescent Centre. She was almost unable to speak, she couldn't finish a sentence, she couldn't decide so that was just a matter of supporting and talking to the parents. Getting them on board (Valerie).*

*I'm dealing with a client now where strength based counselling has not worked. He has sexual identify issues where I think the fear, or the shame, or the embarrassment of talking to his parents about it, is becoming a hindrance (Hamish).*

## Appendix U – Second attempt categorical-content interpretation:

### Adolescent student

During the second attempt of the categorical-content interpretation I decided to structure the interpretation by pulling excerpts from across all the school counsellors' narratives and placing these quotes under the appropriate category headings (See Chapter 8, section 8.2.1). I present the category: The adolescent student here.

#### Research questions

- What are school counsellors' constructions of adolescent wellbeing?
- In what way, if any, do strength-based counselling approaches contribute to adolescent wellbeing?

#### School counsellors' constructions of adolescent wellbeing

##### What is adolescent wellbeing?

##### Select excerpts from transcripts:

*I consider their emotional, social, spiritual and physical health. Also under the social umbrella, there are family and wider social systems and my belief is that if those areas are in harmony that helps strengthen adolescent wellbeing. Adolescent wellbeing is to me a young person's sense of mastery of that stage of development. It is their ability to manage the challenges and to come away from those challenges feeling positive, like they have grown on their journey towards young adulthood (**Pam**).*

*Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity. Adolescent wellbeing is multi-layered. Having a positive connection with family, friends and themselves. Being successful in their learning, feeling safe, having the ability to bounce back. Being allowed to have fun, knowing how to take care of themselves, getting the right amount of sleep, eating the right food. Adolescent wellbeing is being able to stand up for yourself, to step into your own integrity, to make choices for yourself, to be reflective. To have some ideas about spirituality and who they are and what they want to contribute to the world. Having a voice, being honest, having the ability to express themselves - that's a sign of wellbeing. I look at wellbeing and resilience holistically. Resilience is the ability to bounce back, to have resilience you must have a lifestyle of wellbeing (**Jessica**).*

*Adolescent wellbeing... they are a moving target for themselves. I always think how I would like it if I woke up every morning and my body was a little different (laughter). I think wellbeing is trying to keep abreast of their development. Change is important and I think maintaining momentum is important, so they keep on going with their life plan and not being bogged down. Adolescent wellbeing is about balance and having a long term view that you know whatever discomfort you're suffering in the moment is not going to last. I think that is best supported by good family relationships. I'm pimply, I'm spotty, I'm growing too fast, my ears are too big and my nose is growing faster than the rest of my face but my dad loves me (laughter). It is so complex at adolescence because they are in the process of becoming (**Valerie**).*

*Adolescent wellbeing would be to negotiate safely all the changes that the adolescents go through, physically, emotionally, sexually, spiritually. And to have a safe environment where they have people they can trust to safely get through it, because it is a difficult time. There are so many milestones, rites of passage and things they must reach. If they don't have someone to help guide them through it, they could potentially fall off the rails (**Hamish**).*

## Adolescents and strength-based counselling

### Does strength-based counselling contribute to adolescent wellbeing?

*I think strength-based counselling could support adolescent wellbeing by providing a base of knowing where they stand, that there are contacts for support. That there are times and places that we have to navigate through and that there were times before when things were fine and they'll hopefully be times in the future when things will be as they would like them to be. I think adolescents can teach us so much if we are curious and are engaged in a co-discovery framework with them. We don't presume to know how things may be (Angus)*

*I think it strength-based counselling gives them the belief in themselves and helps them have that ability to come back and try again (Gabrielle).*

*Strength-based counselling contributes to adolescents' wellbeing by inviting them to look at the way they approach their life from a strengths base. They might start to approach it that way more in their own life rather than when they are having counselling (Thomas).*

*Strength-based counselling contributes to adolescent wellbeing in body, spirit, community and family wellbeing. Spiritual is a bit harder in a school setting, especially in a government secular school situation. I had one practicum placement in a Catholic School, which was lovely because you could bring in the spiritual aspect and you could pray with students. I have prayed with students, but only Māori students (Abbigail).*

### Counsellors' experiences of using strength-based counselling with adolescents

*I wonder with them about spirituality and why they think we're here. When kids believe in God, which a lot do here, asking "what does God think about that, what would God want you to think?" that's a strength-based question... It aligns them with their values and they want to step into that. (Jessica)*

*Here the girls don't come to mediation, they're too shy, they're too embarrassed, and they're too worried about their confidentiality. In other schools, I've had a situation where students would apply for mediation. They would pick their own mediators. Mediators work in pairs and there would be a private place where they could do that. I would be there as a supervisor they could freeze the action and come and consult me if they needed to. (Valerie)*

*Strength-based counselling with adolescents is very powerful. Adolescents are very resilient and in their development phase they start looking towards the future and strength based counselling has a huge impact there. Because I think it is important to be positive with them, regardless of the situation they find themselves in, you must look forward. Because if there is no hope (Hamish).*

## Counsellors' positive reflections on the strength-based counselling process with adolescents

### Doing a "good job" with adolescent clients:

*How do I know that I have done a good job? The informal feedback from students. "Thank you very much that's really helped." I will run into them on the playground and I will say, "How are doing?" They say, "I'm really good thanks it was good to talk with you." I get emails from boys. I've had the odd comment from within the community and from outside agencies (Hamish).*

*If adolescents are interested in engaging in a process that might be supportive of their goals, their hopes and their relationships, and if they have the sense that you are interested, the counselling process can work (Angus).*

*When they come back! (laughter) I mean you don't want them to come back and if they smile and say hello and sometimes you get a note. That poem up there with the stars on it, somebody put it under my door but didn't want to own up to who she was but it's precious (Gabrielle).*

*What is the nature of the problems they have, have they changed? Are they starting to act for themselves? Do they have personal agency where they did not before (Thomas).*

## **Making the counselling relationships with adolescents “work”**

*If a young person feels comfortable and feels they can trust me. I think using a strength-based approach helps to make things work. It enables kids to engage and not feel judged, to feel hopeful and to invest in the process (Pam).*

*I build strong relationships and my approach is youth centred. I negotiate with them, “What is it that you want to learn today?” It is the relational engagement that I have in that moment (Jessica).*

*What makes my relationship with adolescent work is total attendance. Before there was so much theory around, I was thinking about theory and developing theory myself. A core issue in my counselling and a mark of my success is that total attending. You are there listening, watching, picking up all the cues (Valerie).*

*I’m quite physical. I think boys need physical engagement. I would go onto the playground, grab them around the neck, put my forehead against his, and say something, like how are you doing? There’s a lot to be said for physical, social interaction between boys and older mentors (Hamish). (Touch physical contact compare to Gabrielle/visibility of counsellor).*

## **What adolescents value most about strength-based counselling?**

*Showing that you [the counsellor] get it. That you hear, see and take seriously the issues that adolescents are facing. That you are standing alongside them and actively supporting them, through the present moment, towards what they would rather have in the future (Angus).*

*The relationship... that they know there is somebody that cares is important. I think that what the kids want most of all is that they want to know that somebody cares (Gabrielle).*

*The part of the strength-based counselling adolescents’ value most, from a narrative point of view, is the relationship. The whole basis of narrative is the place you stand relative to the person you are working with. Narrative is about valuing them completely (Thomas).*

## **Strength-based counselling with adolescents and suicide risk**

*If there’s issues related to mood I am regularly assessing that with the young person and safety. We’ve had two suicides, it’s heart breaking. So, I feel there is such a need to focus on more resilience based work (Pam).*

*A fundamental requirement in counselling practice is to ensure the safety of your clients and to be as sure as possible that they are not a suicide risk (Jessica).*

*I look at whether it’s a reactive depression like say someone’s died. It’s a little bit like a sum... If you pile up a certain number of factors, it starts to feel dangerous. It’s a bit like that with depression where, if they’re becoming catatonic, they can hardly speak, they’re voice is diminishing to a whisper, they have no energy, no investment, no schwa de vive, all those criteria I would refer immediately. The same day. I don’t waste any time in cases where they’re feeling suicidal. I might not even do a suicidal assessment (Valerie).*

*It’s a touchy subject and there’s a whole raft of literature about whether you approach the topic of suicide with boys. Are you going to heighten the risk for boys that are vulnerable when you mention it? I can’t see how things can get so bad that you’d want to take your own life. I know it happens and I know there are reasons but for a counsellor, the worst nightmare is if a client of yours commits suicide. The inevitable questions will be, what have I done wrong, why did they have to go to that length? Even if it is that bad there must be a positive. Counselling is ultimately to provide the person with better alternatives (Hamish).*

## Appendix V – Second attempt categorical-content interpretation:

### Counselling context

During the second attempt of the categorical-content interpretation I decided to structure the interpretation by pulling excerpts from across all the school counsellors' narratives and placing these quotes under the appropriate category headings (See Chapter 8, section 8.2.1). I present the category: The counselling context here (this includes the school context and the family and community context).

#### The school context

##### Research questions

- How does the school and/or community context promote or restrict a school counsellor's practice?

##### Strength-based counselling in schools

##### Strength-based counselling and school environment

Pam:

*Having teachers on board can help to reinforce things for students sometimes. The beauty of working in a school is I can check in with teachers. I can read their latest school report and see if they are making progress. ...We regularly liaise with the deans. Sometimes they know the students we are working with because they have referred them to us or a student has been happy for us to talk with them. The deans will often flag us if something is not going well, or if they have noticed some improvement. I regularly ask parents for feedback as well. I am lucky I have many different sources to go by.*

Jessica:

*I am a leader, I input into other people's development, deans and teachers. I support them into their potential and their strength. Supporting teachers who feel quite downtrodden by parent complaints or teacher complaints. I do that because I genuinely care about them and they know that.*

Hamish:

**Would you say that the use of strength-based approaches is supported within the school environment?**

*Yes, I would think so. If you look at the of definition of educating boys it's looking to create men that can take a positive role in society, therefore all the teaching is about being proud of who you are, what you want to achieve and obviously to function within society and adhering to certain rules and regulations.*

Angus:

**Is the use of strength based counselling approach supported within your school?**

*Some school environments are very collaborative, others are more traditional and there could be collaboration taking place in certain areas but not in others. We would collaborate quite actively with the deans within our school environment.*

### **Strength-based counselling and teachers:**

Valerie:

*I think there are quite a few teachers who use positive approaches, in a private school you are enjoined to do your best for every single child, and teachers really do, do their best. But, they come with their own personalities and training backgrounds and have different abilities. Where you've only have a little bit of this and a little bit of that, like you might have a little CBT and a little narrative therapy, or a little positive psychology, it's not that effective. Because in a way it gets the students hopes up and then the teacher is not versed in the whole philosophy and they are likely to do something that the student sees as being contradictory.*

Hamish:

*I use a strength-based approach in my teaching. Looking at positive outcomes. I had a look outside my window the other day, a teacher was doing a performing arts class with his third form and it was fascinating to watch. He had a pirate hat on, the kids had hats on and they were just having a whale of a time pretending to row their boat, it was just incredible to watch, it was good to see. So, I know people that will use it [a strength-based approach].*

Gabrielle:

*I imagine most of the teachers in the school would use a strength-based approach within their teaching it's something that's really emphasised. It's part of the ethos of being a Catholic School. It's part of the principal's ethos too. That does not mean everybody is using it because I certainly get to know who the kids feel aren't. (laughter)*

Abbigail:

*Teachers absolutely use a strength-based approach in their teaching; especially in maths, it makes a huge difference.*

### **Strength-based counselling in classroom:**

Pam:

*Incorporating a strength-based approach into the curriculum is a work in progress (laughter). I am not aware of teachers who specifically use strength-based approaches in their teaching. But, I can't really comment a lot on the style of teaching, because I'm not a teacher and I'm not spending a lot of time in the classroom.*

Jessica:

*[A strength-based approach should] definitely [be part of teaching]. They [Teacher and students] start with a classroom treaty, what is our treaty for how are we going to be together? Those are positive things that get put down. Sometimes when we have problems, we have circle time where people sit down and talk about how to solve the problem. To have solutions you have to be strengths focused, solution focused, otherwise you're just going to run around in the problem.*

Valerie:

*Yes, a strength-based approach should be used in a classroom. I'm thinking of lots of examples of kids who had some little things said to them that completely crushes them. It's probably not fair, the teacher probably doesn't feel that negatively about them and they wouldn't be aware that what they said is so devastating. Kids are so sensitive, they just are.*

Hamish:

*A strength-based approach should be used in the classroom especially with boys; it should be positive; they should feel good about themselves. They are absolutely hammered in the media about how behind they are in goals, how horrible their behaviour is. So I think it's really important that they know that they are actually okay. (Under counselling and deficit).*

### **Strength-based approach introduced into schools:**

Angus:

*To introduce a strength-based approach within the school you would start with your cohort of counsellors. No, you would start in your own counselling room looking at the ways in which you are working with clients and the outcomes. You would start small with groups of ten and perhaps do some publishing of the effects of these practices with your colleagues. You could share stories of success, mm. It is about supporting at a micro level some changes that with the right climate could impact at a macro level.*

Gabrielle:

*You could introduce a strength-based approach teacher by teacher, but I think it probably has to come from the top. You have to get senior management to buy into it and then get those changes happening. If you haven't got it coming from the top it's not going to happen, it will happen in some classrooms but the whole tenor of the school would be quite different.*

Thomas:

*To introduce a strength-based approach it would have to get into the PPTA or into the school system through the proper channels and then filtering in through the mainstream. I can't see it coming in from the side. It would have to become part of the way things are done in schools. It needs to become part of the ethos of the school and the teacher training.*

Abbigail:

*To introduce a strength-based approach into schools. Let me go back to the early 80's. One of my sisters and I were both training to be teachers. I was training to be a primary school teacher. My sister was training to be a secondary school teacher. It was evident to my sister and me that I was learning how to teach children, my sister was learning how to teach her subject. I really think in Secondary Teachers College they need to have one year where they're learning to teach their subject and they need a second year where they're learning to teach children. Where they are learning about child development and how children learn, the impact of trauma on learning and how that affects the ability to do mathematics. They need to learn about the legal aspects of teaching, about social work organisations and the school's responsibility in loco parentis, all these things that come with teaching that my sister never learned at Teachers College. I really think another year is needed at Secondary Teachers College. The training is woefully inadequate.*

### **The "fix-it" versus "help" approaches to school counselling**

Valerie:

*At the heart of successful school counselling, you have to be conscious of the specific role of school counselling. You are here to support students as learners. You don't want to do anything that disadvantages them as learners or develops a split. Everything you do should be building them as learners. You don't want to encourage them to think that their teachers are all horrible. You don't want to listen too intently to stories of deficit in the classroom. You want to support the institution as well as supporting the child. It's not helpful, if you go, "Yeah that teacher is a so and so and I wouldn't have done that." If you support any notion at all of deficit and criticism what happens then? The child goes back into class and they think, "I'm not going to listen to you."*



Hamish:

*Counselling is a helping profession but the danger of working in an organisation where you are constrained by its requirements, is that sometimes the students are sent to me to fix. Counsellors do not fix people they are there to help them navigate difficult circumstances.*

Angus:

*Teachers may not put themselves in adolescent's shoes but I support adolescents to understand why teachers may be doing what they are doing and how that fits into the school framework. Outlining, in a very open way, how the system works. That if you don't wear your school uniform you'll always be on daily report. Do you realise that you can do something about this if you would like things to be better?*

Thomas:

*As a school counsellor, there are two core businesses. One is the school's idea of the core business, which is learning outcomes, which is valid for me too. The other for me is helping the student get to a place where they can meet life in a better way. There is a gap between the school and the counsellors because both are standing for different things. (Use as quote at beginning of section). The school's there for education and counsellors are there for the person. It is how to make that gap as small as possible or to have them both enhancing each other.*

### **Tension between school and counsellor**

Pam:

*Counselling takes time and I need to be aware of age and the fact that it definitely takes more than one session to introduce a new concept. (Put under adolescents)*

*The reality is that school counselling is different from being in private practice because sometimes there can be quite a lot of putting on Band-Aids. You can attempt to start a therapeutic process with the young person that you believe in, but something comes up and you might not see them again for several months. Sometimes it is difficult trying to see students weekly.*

Jessica:

*No one would really know what I do. I do relational restorative work. Those are the themes that I work with. But, it wasn't always easy with the person who's my senior.*

Valerie:

*Using strength-based counselling with adolescents is wonderful especially for school counsellors. We are not psychologists; we are not psychiatrists it's terribly important that we don't step out of our role. Bear in mind that a child steps out of our office into the school with teachers, with demands, with assignments that have to be handed in, things that have to be done in time, places they have to be on time, friends to relate to, difficult peer group interactions they've got to handle. You absolutely have to see them. You've got to see yourself as supporting, they are my students first and foremost. I'm very cautious about taking them out of class. We have to take them out of class at times, but I always say, "What are you missing, have you missed that before, don't miss maths." Now I'll say, "What are you missing?" They'll say, "Not maths Miss, I'm not missing maths.*

Hamish:

*I would like to see an extra counsellor in here, I don't think one and a half is close to enough. We are just dealing with sort of ambulance at the bottom of the cliff stuff. I would like to be proactive, I would like to go into classes to talk to boys about positive changes in their life, but there is not enough time. The health curriculum has watered down, they don't talk about bullying any more, and they don't talk about a lot of things that I think should be approached.*

### **Counsellor's positioning:**

**Hamish:**

*How appropriate is revealing something about yourself? The answer inevitably is always if it's something that will help the client understand the situation better, or make a better choice, or have a better alternative, then self-disclosure is used and then my own narrative comes into play.*

**Angus:**

*What I call myself depends on who the audience is. For other professionals I would put down counsellor, member of NZAC, because I am a full member with five years' experience. In the school environment, I put school counsellor. If I am replying to a deputy principal, I put down guidance counsellor. It really depends on the audience. To students I am a counsellor.*

**Thomas:**

*How will my counselling practice change in five years' time? My whole urge is for effectiveness. I have no idea what I will find more effective from now so it's hard to know.*

**Abbigail:**

*I think I have more confidence to ask nosier questions. I was probably a bit timid when I first started, trying to be extremely respectful and while I don't feel any less respect I also feel that I can ask deeper, more personal ... more challenging questions. When I first started, I was very meticulous about taking notes and leaving paper trails of everything. I will now if a student is suicidal, but often I'll ask students to take their own notes. I've never been a surfer but I've watched surfers, it's a bit like riding the wave and you're feeling the energy following along with it and seeing where it takes you. You might end up on a different part of the shore from where you thought you were going, but that is fine.*

### **Context:**

**Pam:**

*At the heart of successful school counselling, is being fortunate enough to work in a school where the management, the staff, and the parent community understand the importance of our role, value it, and support it. I think that is critical (laughter).*

**Jessica:**

*The ways that I work is about justice; it's about finding that connection across culture. The discourse is around forgiveness, and being in a Catholic school the way that we handle it as a school is about restoring the harm ... A lot of my strengths based work is restorative justice.*

**Abbigail**

*Accessibility is important, if students can't get to you then it doesn't matter whether you're a brilliant counsellor, or a dead beat. There's got to be accessibility. That means the school has to, to some degree, support students coming to counselling (Abbigail).*

**Valerie:**

*It is hard being a school counsellor because you are doing things that are fundamentally different to what everyone else is doing. I think of it, as being a goldfish in a goldfish bowl except no one is looking really, (laughter) it is a private goldfish bowl.*

## Power of the Teacher

Valerie:

*Essentially what drives relationships in schools are the power relationships? Students are here, they are the kids and we are the adults, and they are going to be marked by us and a report is going to be written by teachers about them and they are going to be disciplined by teachers. I don't think you can get around that, even teachers who are well versed in counselling issues and backgrounds... Occasionally that will go horribly wrong because of course she is still a teacher, she still has to exert authority and she might do it in an insensitive way. The student has developed a hope about how they are going to be treated by that teacher and then they are disappointed. It's a bit dangerous really.*

Angus:

*It is within the guidance department, within the larger school framework - that is currently inconclusive. (laughter) The teacher is the boss and the person at the top of the hierarchical structure is well and truly the leader.*

Thomas:

*A student who swears at the teacher, throws something at them, and storms out in anger. The teacher tries to get them in, they swear at them, and they are taken off to the Deputy Principal. If we explore that, we often find there was a real injustice. The teacher might say "You haven't handed in your book," and the student said, "I did. I handed it in yesterday," and the teacher said, "No you didn't," with the whole "You are lying," and later the teacher finds the book. It is a sense of injustice again. Underneath most of the problems students have is unfairness or perceived unfairness and perceived injustice or real injustice, either for others or for themselves.*

## The Family and Community Context

### Adolescent wellbeing and creating a community of support

Hamish:

*I work systemically [with the family]. He lives with his grandmother and grandfather, so it's a fractured situation at home. His grandmother had a brain tumour so the home system isn't the greatest. He gets quite emotional when he talks about his Nan. So, I mean that's the person that's brought him up, so I would say one of the core pillars of his world has been rocked.*

Angus:

*From a strength-based perspective, there are always exceptions to problem behaviours. Whanau are a great resource so are aunts and uncles and teachers and other environments, health professionals and friends down the road and friends at school. Wondering who is supportive of them when those problem behaviours are not found, or are there times when those issues are not present?*

Thomas:

*A lot of narrative is about looking for the community the person is in. I look for who else in their community, either near family or further, knows what things are like for them. Who can they talk to, who might they enlist to get help. I'm always looking at the wider community they're in for the strengths. It's a beautiful complex thing because it's not just who in your environment gives you strength and support but how can you help them with your strength and support. It's a mutual thing.*

## The importance of culture and context

Jessica:

*In terms of counselling outcomes, it is important to be realistic and aware of what is appropriate from one culture to the next.*

Valerie:

*Culture is very important with our scholarship girls, so I listen, but it's not so much holistic cultural things I'm listening for. I am always listening for their particular experience of their life. Their experience of being in this school, at this moment, in that family with that culture and the demands that that culture is making on them.*

Hamish:

*The way the world has changed, I would say at least 85% of the clients that I see are from blended families and most of the issues that we deal with are relational. With either a stepparent, or issues at school that come through the stuff that goes on at home.*

Angus:

*I sat down thinking about the issues that this family could be facing, I thought about what would help their adolescent girl, and what resources and exceptions to the rule would be possible. They were Māori so when they came in it was important to work through a process of whakawhanaungatanga. They had hoped that I would tell them the answers and I clarified that ... it would be good to find out, if there were any issues for them that would be important for the school to understand.*

## Parents and strength-based counselling

Pam:

*I find it fantastic that the parents feel comfortable about it [strength-based counselling]. Because a lot of the parents I work with understandably when they hear that I'm involved, or that there's a problem, they can become anxious or defensive.*

Jessica:

*My family work is very effective. I listen to [the situation] and there might be times when intervention isn't always effective. I just need to be with the student. That's not all I would want to do but that's what's most effective, because family are not going to necessarily be and do what I want them to do for the benefit of the young person*

Angus:

*At the same time if there are certain behaviours that a student may be showing at school ...you might inquire as to whether a bit of encouragement could be supportive of learning. It would all come from the issues that the parents are sharing with you and then lots of wondering with them whether being honest and to the point with their daughter might clarify the expectations that they have of her as parents.*